

SCHEs Annual General Meeting, London 23.01.09**Address by Professor Mike Smith and Professor Paul Furlong on the RAE 2008**

In his introductory comments, Prof. Smith emphasised that the European studies sub-panel report presents an assessment of the quality of research in European studies “as represented in the submissions we had”; a lot of European studies research was presented elsewhere so it is not the whole picture.

Comparability with other sub-panels: it is difficult to compare with other panels which were a lot smaller, such as other sub-panels (SPs) in area studies (ES was as big as all the other area studies SPs combined, and the others were not only smaller but also more concentrated around a small number of elite institutions). Prof. Smith had compared grade point averages (GPAs) for ES to those of other SPs which looked similar in that similar institutions had submitted to both, and/or the submissions profiles looked rather similar, and/or where there was a certain amount of overlap and cross-referral: ie Politics/IR, history and languages. He felt confident that the standards used were similar across these areas. Also, where institutions submitted to two of these panels (e.g. LSE) the outcomes were similar. Therefore he felt the gradings were robust.

He agreed that there had been instances of “strategic behaviour” on two fronts:

- By institutions: particularly in terms of selection of staff to be submitted. There was not much of this in ES but it was in evidence in other panels;
- By panels/sub-panels: this had led to what might be seen as grade inflation (as discussed in the THE).

The results demonstrated the quality of ES research. 20 of the 27 submissions would have got at least 5 in the last (2001) RAE in terms of the proportions of their research rated ‘national’ or ‘international although of course there is not strict comparability.

Prof. Smith agreed there was a lower proportion of 3*s and 4*s in European Studies than elsewhere but felt there were reasons for this in the submissions themselves (he came on to this later in discussion, see below). A number of submissions were unconvincing in that the rationale looked post hoc. Even among stronger submissions, there was a lot of unevenness in submissions.

This may be linked to the observations in the SP report about the state of European studies which has undergone change and restructuring. There were quite a few new submissions (with the implication that some of these were weaker ones, with an unconvincing story about strategy) and generally a lot of movement in the field. A process of retrenchment was evident.

That said, the core is still there, that is, the “well found” departments.

A lot of “churn” (personnel turnover) was also evident. On the positive side, this meant a relatively high number of early career researchers. A significant number of submissions had very high numbers of Early Career Researchers (ECRs). However this was not without problems (“a key issue”) as it was not always evident that ECRs were embedded in departments. Both Prof. Smith and Prof. Furlong suggested there may be issues of long-term sustainability especially of

smaller, concentrated institutions with high numbers of ECRs (ie the suspicion that new staff had been bought in but that departments or research centres would not be able to provide them with a robust and sustainable research environment). ECRs were not always well integrated into broader strategies.

The ES SP had made heavy use of cross-referrals (and this is discussed in the report). The SP had worked hard to make sure that there were no discrepancies between SPs in this respect by checking grades against comments thoroughly. Also, the SP had engaged an international advisor (Alberta Sbragia) who oversaw the process and was asked to check across submissions (i.e. RA5s) to see if there was any discrepancy between the narratives and what was included on RA2s. She had identified no significant discrepancies, and had pointed to the strength of the submissions overall.

The SP continuously benchmarked its own gradings, it established key pieces which were set early as benchmarks for each of the four ratings and referred back regularly to these.

Prof. Furlong argued that the funding councils cannot simply allocate funding on the basis of the proportion of 3/4s, given discrepancies between panels overall, but thought this battle also needed to be fought at the level of institutions.

The SP had identified clear strengths in ES:

- there was reinvestment in the field (especially through ECRs)
- the rise in PGR (postgraduate research) students despite the severe funding constraints. However there was real concern here about the viability of institutional scholarships which provided a fragile basis for the future of the field. Would these be continued post-RAE and in the current climate?
- research income. There was a big gap between the top players and the bottom (less than 3K per head at the bottom, over 800K per head at the top, with most between 25-125K). The important thing was how the income fed into the research itself and particularly outputs. Otherwise there was a concern about the solidity of research strategies.

Discussion focused how the results should be presented to a wider audience and particularly to university management (comparison within the field, not across disciplines within the university; emphasis on the quality and credibility of the assessment); on definitions of 4* (agenda-setting); on 1* and unclassified submissions (often for technical reasons: repeated material; inadmissible submissions due to wrong or invalid dates or evidence for ECRs or special circumstances); policy-oriented material (which was admissible and ranked, but where assessment also needed to take account of impact in its widest sense, including the academic community); whether post-1992 institutions had borne the brunt of restructuring in the field (to some extent this appeared to be true in that many of these entered in 2001 did not re-enter in 2009, although there was no identifiable difference in outcomes between pre-and post-1992 institutions in outcomes amongst those which did enter).