

# ***ONE VOICE***

## **An Arts and Social Science Response to Current Debates**

### **Introduction**

This document is intended as a campaigning document to be used by Arts and Social Science scholars inside their institutions; in public responses to the White Paper, the Roberts Review, and the Rhind Commission; in the Welsh and Scottish elections; and in lobbying Westminster MPs about higher education.

The questions raised in the Roberts Review's initial document have been overtaken by the decisions not to fund UoAs graded 4 in England, and by the proposals in the January 2003 White Paper. These decisions are predicated on a science model, of research groups using expensive equipment, which does not apply to Arts and Social Science disciplines. It is all the more important to combat its premises.

The document is in three parts: the first is forward looking, providing a set of points on which there is widespread agreement across the Arts and Social Sciences – it is a basis for active campaigning; the second provides evidence of the agreement from independent responses to the Roberts review of the RAE; the third explains the background to parts one and two.

## **SECTION ONE: CAMPAIGNING**

### **High Standing**

Research in Arts and Social Science in Great Britain is

- of a high standard, and is respected internationally
- a major attraction for international students to study in the UK
- is a strong economic driver
- is not damaged but enhanced by appropriate and robust assessment

### **The Model for Research**

The science model, which dominates thinking about research, is fundamentally inapplicable to research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Applied to Arts and Social Sciences, it distorts the outcomes and impoverishes the base of research.

The key differences are these:

- **Size:** research excellence in Arts and Social Sciences is not concentrated in a few universities, nor in long established universities. It is found throughout the UK, and across the whole higher education sector. Concentration of research resources will damage the UK's research in Arts and Social Sciences.
- **Method:** research in Arts and Social Sciences is not based upon a progressive accumulation model, but upon a dialectic model. It is for this reason that measures such as citation indices do not reflect standing, and the link between teaching and research is fundamental.
- **Research and teaching:** because of its method, in Arts and Social Sciences the links between research and teaching are fundamental. Moreover, increasingly there are complex links between research, professional practice and professional training, in new areas of particular significance for the economy, such as media.
- **Measures [a]:** historical performance is not a guide to future performance, and should not be a basis for funding in the future. As research is not tied to large groups or expensive equipment, it can flourish in many places and new centres arise quickly.
- **Measures [b]:** While algorithms and metrics are useful to, and accepted by, experts in engineering and science disciplines, there is research evidence that they are neither applicable, nor accurate, nor accepted by scholars in the Arts and Social Science disciplines.
- **Measures [c]:** while critical mass is useful, it is not an absolute requirement for good research. The lone scholar, or small group of two or three, have always produced valuable, ground-breaking and critical research.

## PART TWO: RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

This section presents the issues on which the overwhelming majority of subject organisations agreed, independently, in their Submissions to Roberts in November 2002.

- 2.1 The aims of the RAE should be to secure improvement in university research in the UK, ensure public money is well spent, and reward excellence wherever it is found.
- 2.2 The removal of funding from grade 4 UoAs in England left many research active departments high and dry: this is destructive of excellence in Arts and Social Science
- 2.3 Research excellence in Arts and Social Sciences is not concentrated in a few, historically elite, HEIs. It can be found in many kinds of HEI, and innovative work can develop in unexpected places.
- 2.4 Historical ratings are not useful as predictors of research excellence. Change can occur rapidly in the Arts and Social Science disciplines.
- 2.5 The RAE is undermining the 'altruism' on which academic life depends: being a referee, organising conferences, reviewing books, and working for the learned societies are all unattractive to younger scholars because they are not activities that 'count' directly in the RAE.
- 2.6 Reward should be given for appointing new researchers, and for returning those new researchers. The nurturing of the careers of future scholars - Capacity Building - should be a priority explicitly encouraged by the RAE, given the demographic profile of HE staff.
- 2.7 The precise format of Units of Assessment is less important than ensuring that disciplines are properly - that is robustly - assessed by appropriate peers
- 2.8 Self-assessment is not a credible alternative to peer review
- 2.9 Metrics and algorithms do not work in arts and social science disciplines: peer review of output, including narrative texts, is essential.
- 2.10 Larger generic Units of Assessment could be acceptable if there were small, specialist sub panels to provide peer assessment of small disciplines. Without this, there should not be a reduction in the number of Units of Assessment: indeed some of the existing units are not specialised enough
- 2.11 Greater transparency is possible and desirable; the system should not reward game playing and impression management, rather than actual research excellence.
- 2.12 All subjects should be assessed at once.
- 2.13 The current interval between assessments should not be shorter
- 2.14 Attention should be paid to comparability between panels: especially when some are more 'generous' in awarding many top grades than others, and there is no confidence that this accurately reflects the international standards in those subjects.
- 2.15 There is danger that textbooks and other materials for teaching are not being produced because such output is not 'returnable' in the RAE.

- 2.16 Devising an alternative system would be expensive and time consuming and would not necessarily bring any benefits.
- 2.17 The major problem with the current RAE is that the government will not fund its outcomes, not the RAE itself.

### **Disagreements**

However there were some areas over which the learned societies were not in agreement.

- 2.18 There is no consensus about whether or not all staff should be returned. This is the biggest area of disagreement.
- 2.19 There is no consensus on the best time interval between assessments from 5 to 10 years. No one wants less than 5, no one more than 10.
- 2.20 There is no consensus about the use of experts from outside HE.

### **PART THREE: BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 This document is a summary of the responses made to the call for submissions to the Roberts Review of the RAE in November 2002 by learned societies and defence groups in the Arts and Social Sciences. It has been prepared as the basis for an agreed manifesto to be used by all arts and social science academics inside their institutions, and outside them, in response to the White Paper, and the Roberts Review.
- 3.2 The points on which there is substantial agreement are presented first. Those on which there is disagreement are grouped at the end of the section. A list of those responses provided is appended: it is proposed that this list NOT appear in any public document, or use of these materials.
- 3.3 It is apparent that a good many bodies did not make a response. They are welcome to use it to make their cases.
- 3.4 Submissions made by multi disciplinary bodies (SCASS, the Academy, MURG etc.) have not been included in the summary. The SCASS submission can be found on the SCASS web site at <http://www.scass.org.uk>
- 3.5 Requests for copies of submissions have been sent to about 100 bodies: 27 had been received by 18/03/03. 16 organisations have confirmed that no response was made.