

Guidance on RAE 2008

Introduction

At the end of 2005, AUT and NATFHE issued detailed guidance to local associations and branches on the RAE, including model letters, negotiators advice and a checklist of questions for individual members.¹ This guidance focused on the ways in which members could be protected from exclusion from the RAE and to see off attempts to alter contracts of employment. This circular updates local associations/branches on recent developments and flags up the main problem areas.

Exclusion from the RAE

Since the publication of the original advice it is clear that HEIs are adopting aggressive submissions strategies for RAE 2008. For example, the Times Higher has suggested that research-led universities are mainly planning to submit researchers who are, at a minimum, internationally recognised.² We have also received evidence that the level of selectivity is being raised in all institutions, including some post-1992 universities.

The UCU has continued to point out that an 'ultra-selective' approach is contrary to the official advice of the Higher Education Funding Councils. Earlier in the year we wrote to the RAE manager about this issue and were reminded again that the 2008 exercise involves *'positive incentives to include a very wide range of their staff'*. Also, we were told that the RAE panels have *'implemented a range of mechanisms to lessen any possible adverse consequences (in terms of RAE outcomes) of including researchers whose output may a lower quality than others'*. These include the new quality profiles, the rule on individual staff circumstances and the code of practice on RAE submissions (see below).

In terms of the quality profile, the decision to replace the previous RAE's single point scoring with a grade quality profile should lessen the consequence for institutions for including or omitting one or more staff from submissions.³ Unfortunately, there is widespread cynicism amongst institutions about the quality profiles. HEIs are sceptical that starred levels rated 1 or even 2 on the new scale will attract any funding. Also, because there is no plan to publish submission rates, excluding 'weaker' researchers will maximise the reported average grade and therefore push institutions up the 'league table'. In response to our letter, the funding councils acknowledge that *'the issues you report reflect real concerns felt by individuals'* but argue that the assessment criteria and working methods of the panels would *'allay many of these concerns'*.

This sanguine assessment is not matched by the experiences of members on the ground. Also, the RAE team fails to say whether they will do anything about institutions or departments that are flouting the guidelines. The problem is that the funding councils are extremely reluctant to

¹The AUT guidance, particularly LA/7669 (October 2005) can be accessed via the old AUT website www.aut.org.uk/rae2008. Similarly, the NATFHE guidance is downloadable from <http://www.natfhe.org.uk/?id=809&entityType=Document>

²Lee Elliot Major, 'RAE 2008: only the very best need apply', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 22 September 2006.

³See Annex 1 of the criteria and working methods (RAE 01/2006) available at <http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2006/01/docs/annexes.pdf>

get involved in the details of institutional submission strategies (*'Neither the funding bodies nor the RAE team has a role in telling autonomous institutions how to manage their submission strategy'*) and as a result 'games playing' is as rife as in previous RAE's. In our view, it shows that the faults of the RAE cannot be rectified by changing its methodology and that the system itself is fundamentally flawed. One of the critical tests for any replacement for the RAE must be the fairer treatment of staff, including a broader notion of what constitutes research activity. For example, there needs to be greater recognition of collaborative and inter-disciplinary research as well as forms of scholarship that concentrate on creating synergy between research and teaching.

'No detriment' procedures

Because of the growing pressures to exclude staff, we strongly encourage branches and local associations to agree institution-wide, 'no detriment' procedures. A number of former AUT local associations negotiated 'no detriment' statements in the run up to 2001. For example, in the run up to the 2001 RAE, Aberdeen LA was able to secure this commitment from the Senior Vice-Principal:

'Staff whose work is excluded from RAE 2001 are free to apply for research leave and funding support both from sources outwith the University and from University funds; and such applications will be judged on their merits, the applicant's cv, etc. Exclusion from RAE 2001 will not, in itself, affect either time designated for research when it comes to the allocation of departmental duties, or promotion prospects.'

In the absence of any significant change to the assessment rules, it falls back on our job as a union to minimise the negative impact on individual members. **Branches and local associations, therefore, are strongly encouraged to negotiate protections for academic staff who are excluded from the 2008 RAE along the lines of previous agreements. One possibility is to include 'no detriment' statements within the codes of practice on RAE submissions (see below).**

Code of practice on RAE submissions

One of the positive innovations in the current RAE is the requirement for institutions to publish codes of practice on submissions. The purpose of these is to ensure that RAE strategies comply with equalities legislation, particularly in relation to age, disability, race, religion and belief, sex, sexual orientation and employment status. Local associations and branches should insist on their involvement in the drawing up and monitoring of institutional codes.

Most of the codes appear to be following a fairly standard format, particularly in relation to RAE committee membership, the treatment of 'individual staff circumstances', monitoring and appeals procedures.

Some of the frequent absences include:

- No reference as to how the institution supports fixed term and part-time staff in the research process.
- No information as to how the institution will use equality profile data. For example, what are they going to do if inequalities in submission rates are identified?
- Lack of details about the dissemination process. For example, how is the institution going to make sure that the key individuals – such as heads of department - are aware of the special circumstances rule and the code of practice?

One of the key issues remains the basis of appeals procedures for staff who are excluded from the RAE. All codes of practice should include details of an appeals process. Most of these are confined to 'equality-based' appeals – although a small number of submission policies allow for appeals on procedural grounds. **UCU advocates the extension of appeals to include academic grounds, for example, where a member feels that their work has been unfairly excluded because of discipline-specific or methodological bias. Where it is not possible to negotiate separate academic-based appeals the opportunity to use existing staff grievance procedures should be made clear in the code of practice.**

Panels and maternity leave

In previous years, there has been a particular concern about the under-representation of women in the RAE. For example, among teaching and research academics, males were 1.6 times more likely than their female colleagues to be counted as 'research active' in the 2001 RAE. Evidence of women's under-representation could be found across all grades, job types, subject areas, age groups and institutions.⁴

A more recent analysis from HEFCE looks at the selection rates for women and BME staff in the 2001 RAE. The report argues that the lower selection rates for women and black members of staff are not the result of bias in the RAE process but largely due to the '*relative quality of the research output of different groups*'. It suggests that these differences in research output are probably caused by other factors, such as inequalities in grading, the research strengths of the departments in which different groups are employed, the different career patterns between men and women and so on, rather than the RAE *per se*. In conclusion, the report argues that there is a need to tackle the underlying causes for the differences in research output and therefore existing inequalities in research careers.⁵

One of the disadvantages of the HEFCE report is the way that it underplays the RAE's role in reinforcing rather than simply reflecting existing inequalities. For example, one of the concerns about previous RAE's relates to the treatment of women staff on maternity leave. In the 2008 RAE, main panels and sub-panels have produced guidance on how they will deal with personal circumstances, including maternity leave, that might have an effect on an individual's contribution to a submission. These are important potential safeguards for members, though there are variations between sub-panels as to how maternity leave, or other extended periods of absence, will be treated. For example, some panels suggest a mechanistic reduction of expected outputs, others would like to see 'individual circumstances' included under form RA5b. For information, a full analysis of the panel statements on maternity leave is included as annex a.

Place of publication

Finally, another recurring problem concerns the interpretation of the panel assessment criteria and working methods. For example, most RAE panels stipulate that the place of publication is less important than the work itself, with each piece submitted read and judged independently on its merits. Unfortunately we are continuing to receive reports from members about pressure to publish in particular journals. The problem is seen as particularly acute in the humanities and social sciences.

We have raised this issue with the RAE manager and have been told that '*most humanities sub-panels expect to examine in details virtually all of the cited outputs*'. Moreover, the RAE manager has stated that '*no panel will use journal impact factors as a proxy for assessing*

⁴AUT (2004) *Academic staff 2002-03 - gender & research activity in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise*.

⁵A summary of the report can be found on the HEFCE website at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2006/06_32/

quality' and that *'adherence to their stated criteria is of paramount concern to panel members, their chairs, the panel secretariat...and the RAE team'*. HEFCE emphasise that panel chairs and the RAE team have undertaken a major dissemination strategy with subject communities, including at conferences, seminars and 'town' meetings. The problem is that not all institutions or departments appear to be confident that the criteria will be adhered to by the panels and are therefore attempting to steer some staff towards publications in prestigious, 'high impact' journals. **Any members who are experiencing difficulties in this area, as well as problems regarding the treatment of pedagogical research or new emerging areas of research, should be reported to local UCU branches and local associations as soon as possible. If appropriate, the national union can raise our concerns with the RAE team on a confidential basis.**

Annex a: analysis of RAE panel and sub-panel statements on maternity leave

Generic statement

In the 2008 RAE, all main panels and sub-panels are expected to adopt a consistent approach to issues such as maternity leave and career breaks. The process is underpinned by a generic statement on criteria and working methods. This statement includes a list of individual staff circumstances that have had 'a material impact on the individual's ability to produce the expected volume of research outputs in the assessment period' (paragraph 39). Family and domestic matters are one of the key individual circumstances that departments are invited to describe, confidentially, on form RA5b. This includes absence on maternity, paternity, parental or adoption leave; part-time working or other flexible working arrangements and time spent as a carer. On form RA5b, departments are expected to provide information on the timing and duration of the absence and the extent of the impact of the absence on the ability to carry out research activities.⁶

Panels and sub-panels

All panels and sub-panels refer to and accept the list of individual circumstances outlined in paragraph 39 of the generic statement.⁷ However, most of the panels and sub-panels fail to specify a *pro-rata* reduction in the volume of outputs expected from staff on maternity leave and career breaks. The exceptions are panel A (medical sciences), panel I (economics, finance and business studies) and panel N (history, philosophy, theology). All of the proposed exemptions relate to the *quantity* – not the *quality* – of *outputs*, although panel M (modern languages) says that allowances will also be made in relation to the esteem indicators and contribution to the research environment. Overall, the most comprehensive approach is the one adopted by panel N. The full list of statements is as follows:

Panel A (Cardiovascular Medicine, Cancer Studies, Infection and Immunology, Other Hospital Based clinical Subjects and Other Laboratory Based Clinical Subjects).

Panel A says that any reductions in outputs must be proportionate to the amount of time absent from research. While they will consider each case on its own terms, the panels will 'normally expect and accept two outputs' from staff covered by the individual circumstances listed in paragraph 39 of the generic statement. Panel A also mentions health and safety restrictions imposed on pregnant and breastfeeding women that may have prevented them from undertaking some types of research during the assessment period (certain laboratory or imaging research).

Panel B (Epidemiology and Public Health, Health Services Research, Primary Care and Other Community Based Clinical Subjects, Psychiatry, Neuroscience and Clinical Psychology).

Unlike panel A there is no mechanistic reduction in the number of outputs. Panel B simply says that 'the number of outputs should be proportionate to the duration of the special circumstance that obtained during the assessment period'. They also say that 'where there is a justifiable reason, the absent output(s) will be disregarded but where there is no suitable justification the output(s) will be marked as Unclassified'. This is an approach shared by most of the other subject panels.

Panel C (Dentistry, Nursing and Midwifery, Allied Health Professions and Studies and Pharmacy).

⁶The generic statement on criteria and working methods is available on the 2008 RAE website at <http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2006/01/docs/genstate.pdf>

⁷The full list of panel and sub-panels statements are available at <http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2006/01/>

The guidance is very similar to the one in panel B, i.e. these subject panels will 'take account of' individual circumstances such as maternity leave. Discipline-specific reasons – including the added risk of exposure to hazards for pregnant and nursing women – will also be considered.

Panel D (Biological Sciences, Pre-clinical and Human Biological Sciences, and Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science).

*The guidance is broadly similar to panels B and C. However, they are more specific about the reduction in publications, i.e. **'the sub-panels will expect and accept fewer outputs'** as a response to the individual circumstances described in paragraph 39. Also, all these sub-panels include the following statement 'The total period when the member of staff was unable to produce research output should be stated, recognising the time taken to restart an active research programme after a long break'.*

Panel E (Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences, Chemistry and Physics).

As above. But note the following discipline-specific criteria for 'early career researchers': 'all specific circumstances will be considered on a case by case basis, but the panels note that given publication patterns in these disciplines it is anticipated that the vast majority of early career staff will be able to submit four outputs for assessment'.

Panel F (Pure Mathematics, Applied Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research, and Computer Science and Informatics).

This panel is one of the briefest; it simply says that the sub-panel will take account of the individual circumstances listed in the generic statement.

Panel G (Electrical and Electronic Engineering, General Engineering and Mineral and Mining Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Mechanical, Aeronautical and Manufacturing Engineering, and Metallurgy and Materials).

*This is stronger than panel F as it **encourages** departments to include staff whose quantity of outputs have been affected by absences from research, including circumstances addressed by equality and diversity legislation.*

Panel H (Architecture and the Built Environment, Town and Country Planning, Geography and Environmental Studies, and Archaeology).

*Sub-panels will **'positively encourage'** departments to submit those individuals whose volume of research output may have been limited for reasons covered by 'equal opportunities legislation'. The sub-panels will also be mindful of specific health and safety restrictions (such as those imposed on pregnant and nursing women) for laboratory and field research.*

Panel I (Economics and Econometrics, Accounting and Finance, Business and Management Studies, and Library and Information Management).

*This is one of the few panels to specify mechanistic reductions in the volume of outputs. In relation to maternity leave and other individual circumstances, the sub-panels' normal expectations will be governed by a **pro-rata rule** (i.e. staff available for 20-40% of the assessment period, one output; available for 40-60%, two outputs; etc).*

Panel J (Law, Politics and International Studies, Social Work and Social Policy & Administration, Sociology, Anthropology, and Development Studies).

All sub-panels will take account, **as a minimum**, of individual circumstances such as maternity leave. Where fewer than four outputs are submitted, the sub-panel will consider each case on its own merits (i.e. depending upon the evidence submitted by the department on form RA5b . If there is a valid reason for the submission of fewer outputs, 'only the quality level(s) attached to the submitted output(s) will be carried forward into the overall departmental profile'.

Panel K (Psychology, Education and Sports-Related Studies).

The main panel '**strongly encourages**' departments to submit those individuals whose volume of research output may have been limited for reasons covered by individual circumstances. In addition, all three sub-panels state that including staff who have taken career breaks are '**positive indicators**' in judging the research environment.

Panel L (American Studies and Anglophone Area Studies, Middle Eastern and African Studies, Asian Studies, and European Studies).

The sub-panels will take account of the individual circumstances listed in the generic statement. Where there are valid reasons for reduced outputs then they will have no effect on the overall quality profile. All the four subject panels say that there will be '**no automatic disadvantage**' for the submission of individuals with fewer than four outputs.

Panel M (Russian, Slavonic and East European Languages, French, German, Dutch and Scandinavian Languages, Italian, Iberian and Latin American Languages, Celtic Studies, English Language and Literature, and Linguistics).

Departments should use form RA5b to indicate any circumstances which have '**significantly affected**' an individual's contribution to the submission. This should apply not only to the number of outputs submitted but also, where appropriate, in relation to esteem indicators and contribution to the research environment.

Panel N (Classics, Ancient History, Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Philosophy, Theology, Divinity and Religious Studies, and History).

The main panel endorses and fully accepts the guidance provided by the Equality Challenge Unit and the equality briefing to panel chairs. It will also consider '**other mitigating circumstances**' (i.e. where equality legislation does not apply).

Moreover, the sub-panels will consider cases on an individual basis but in most normal circumstances the approach will be a **mechanistic reduction** in outputs based on time absent from research. For example, a staff member who has been absent for between 3-4 years can be submitted with one research output and will be considered without prejudice.

Panel O (Art and Design, History of Art, Architecture and Design, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts, Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, and Music).

The sub-panels will take account of individual staff circumstances that prevent researchers from submitting four outputs (in line with paragraph 39). Although there are mechanistic reductions in outputs for early career researchers and staff on fractional contracts, the sub-panels do not specify this in relation to maternity leave and other career breaks.