

RESEARCH REPORTS

The 1996 Research Assessment Exercise

DEREK LAW

Director of Information Services and Systems
Kings College, London

The 1996 Research Assessment Exercise has come and gone and now that the funding mechanism has been announced university departments can begin to assess the consequences of their ratings. This also seems an appropriate time to consider what was being assessed and why. There is a tendency to view the RAE simply in terms of publications. However, the handbook listing criteria also specifically mentions that other factors will be taken into account:

- a) extent of postgraduate research activity, as indicated by the number of research students and research studentships
- b) Evidence of esteem by external funders, as indicated by research income
- c) Evidence of vitality of the department and prospects for continuing development

The 1992 exercise caused some panellists some heartache, for it specifically measured a "snapshot" at a particular moment in time. The panels were forbidden to assess whether departments were on the way up or the way down or even stagnating. In 1996 however, we were enjoined to assess the research culture of the department/unit (in part this was aimed at countering the development of the so-called transfer market), its future prospects and also its ability to deliver ambitions and promises. Tellingly for some institutions, the 1992 forward plans were considered as part of the 1996 review and the discrepancies between what was promised and what had been delivered were considered. Although explained changes of plan or circumstances were taken into account.

The Library and Information Management panel for 1996 contained only two members of the previous panel. In 1992, media studies had been included but now had its own panel; one panellist was included to cover other areas such as business information systems, while the departments of library and information studies were more strongly represented. The range of submissions was interesting. As well as traditional LIS departments, a number of information systems departments chose to submit to the panel. Within submissions from previously submitting institutions, the growth of health information was very noticeable. In addition a large number of submissions were referred from the computing panel and the business studies panel because of their information content, while a few archive related submissions came from the history panel. It is probably correct to see this as a broadening of the information management base rather than a series of tactical submissions - but when a discipline becomes pervasive it also becomes diffuse and there are some

issues to do with the future of the LIS profession that probably need to be considered before the next assessment exercise.

One other issue remained (at least for the chairman) irritatingly unresolved from 1992; the propriety of or ability of part-time researchers who work in libraries to be submitted for assessment. A variety of contractual conditions and institutional practice mean that some are submitted and others not. The whole issue of whether practitioners are returned as Category A or Category C staff is very unsatisfactorily addressed by the exercise.

The panel followed the 1992 practice of ensuring that all submissions were looked at, by at least two panel members who attempted to read all the publications cited, while all panel members were expected to be familiar with all submissions at least in general. The word "attempted" is used deliberately. The ability of institutions to supply listed items was patchy. Some existed only as lecture overheads or manuscripts, some turned out to be unavailable private research reports and generally speaking the standard of bibliographic citation reflected badly on the one unit of assessment from whom perfection in citation might reasonably be expected. The importance of the narrative sections was critical, as in 1992. In 1996 the space allowed for the narrative was increased significantly and this was where a demonstration of the clearly signalled requirement to describe a research culture should have been emphasised. Not all submissions were persuasive in this respect.

Several panel meetings were held to discuss submissions. A first pass through them with very detailed discussion produced both a rough hierarchy of institutions (perhaps more accurately a series of clumps of institutions) and a series of questions which were answered over the summer while further reading took place. Immediately after the summer a further two day meeting was convened in which the precise ordering and ranking took place. There was a great deal of debate and detailed discussion, but remarkable unanimity over the final ratings, with only one or two exceptions. As with all such exercises many of the ratings seem very straightforward while a small number on the margin of two grades consume a great deal of time.

The panel was chosen for a breadth both of institutional knowledge and a range of knowledge of sub-disciplines of the subject. As a result almost no material was referred to other panels for comment, Celtic being the most obvious exception. That said, the overall quality of the submissions was important and, predictably, some were very good and some very bad. It was interesting to contemplate how far one could see this as symptomatic of the state of the institution. In the end, the view the panel took of research culture was probably the critical criterion along with an estimate of the credibility of the future research plans.

Perhaps one last thought. Where departments had made significant improvement it tended to be those who had acted decisively after the last RAE, thus allowing change to become embedded before submissions were made. If the next RAE is conducted in the same way we are already one year into the process and departments need to consider very carefully but very quickly how to shape their strategies for next time.

Grades awarded

Sheffield University	5*
City University	5*
Loughborough University	5

Salford University	4
Strathclyde University	4
Northumbria University	3a
Queen's University Belfast	3a
Robert Gordon University	3a
Brighton University	3b
De Montfort University	3b
Manchester Metropolitan University	3b
Queen Margaret College	3b
University of Central England	3b
University of Wales, Aberystwyth	3b
University of the West of England	3b
Bath University (UKOLN)	2
Leeds Metropolitan University	2
Liverpool John Moores University	2
University of Central Lancashire	2
University College London	2
Bath College of HE	1
La Sainte Union College of HE	1
Thames Valley University	1

IT POINT: A public library IT demonstrator project

NIALL MACKENZIE

School of Information Studies

University of Central England

IT POINT was a 21-month project that brought public access to information technology and networks within a public library. Chelmsley Wood Library, Solihull, West Midlands, hosted the project under the guidance of the Libraries and Arts Department of Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. The British Library Research and Innovation Centre (formerly BLRDD) funded the project.

The BLRIC-funded IT POINT project drew to a close on 31 March 1996. However, IT POINT is continuing in service for a further three years as a result of the exit strategies developed during the project by the Project Director Dr Bob McKee, then Director of Solihull MBC's Libraries and Arts Department.

Chelmsley Wood is an area of economic deprivation, where the local community could be expected to be 'information poor'. Chelmsley Wood Library was chosen to house the project as it also offered:

- an appropriate building