

Agenda setting in Interactive Social Science

Research Note on 2001 RAE Results

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The interactive agenda setting project is concerned with the interactions between academic research and 'users' in a variety of contexts and locations, asking "where [do] social science research questions come from, and how are users involved in defining timely, worthwhile, innovative and relevant lines of enquiry? (Shove, 2004: 1)

The idea of interactive social science (ISS) involves research's users as subjects and beneficiaries in setting research priorities and in developing research strategies that address non-academic as well as academic issues. Inclusion of 'users' in terms of their involvement within research, or the 'value' of research outputs to non-academics has become a central part of applications to the ESRC for research funding.

However, it has been noted that these 'users' are more often a rhetorical device than concrete individuals or institutions; the idea of the 'user' "dominates the rhetoric but not always the reality of research life" (Shove and Rip, 2000: 176). If acknowledgement and inclusion of the priorities of 'users' are crucial to successful funding applications, and academic priorities more generally, a more robust and rigorous understanding of who and what 'users' are and how they influence discipline content and research activity is needed.

The project is based around six workshops on the theme of setting priorities, the first of which concerns individual and discipline based research agendas. The aim of this research note is to begin the process of selecting the disciplines that will be the focus of discussions and to use the RAE 2001 results at www.hero.ac.uk/rae/overview to assess, where possible, current trends within particular disciplines, as well as the extent of 'user' involvement in both research and the assessment process.

The RAE 2001 results web site has a range of information on the 2001 assessment; overviews of each discipline produced by each assessment panel, lists of institutions and their score in the assessment, summaries of the submissions of each department complete with research themes and priorities and panel membership (some of the panels had subsidiary user sub-panels also, consisting of several representatives from different sectors; public and private companies, government and so on). My intention was to use some of this data to produce a quick overview of a number of subjects in terms of themes, priorities, types of funding acquired and also include any discussion of 'users' within both submissions to the RAE and the feedback of the RAE itself.

Out of a list of 69 possible social science subjects I selected seven; psychology, sociology, politics and international studies, anthropology, social policy and administration, geography and education. These were chosen as a broadly representative sample of social science subjects, and to (hopefully) provide some contrasts; for instance social policy research is entrenched in policy and practice so

may have specific ideas of who their 'users' are; the identity of anthropology's 'users' is more problematic. With the RAE information several things can be done:

- We can use the overviews to assess;
 - research themes common across different departments for a particular discipline
 - trends or themes emerging since the previous (96) RAE
 - opinions of the panel (and any users on sub-panels) regarding strengths and weaknesses of a discipline, and its potential futures
- The results section allows the institutions within a particular discipline to be ranked into groups (of 5*, 5, 4 etc).
- The individual submissions to the RAE contain detailed information on research active within each department, enabling the themes being investigated to be compared across other departments.

After examining the overviews I used the results from three of the disciplines to pick three of the top-rated departments and then examined their individual submissions, This allowed the comparison of specific themes and priorities across a particular discipline. The three disciplines were social policy and administration, psychology and anthropology, although these are not necessarily the disciplines which will be discussed at the first workshop.

The following describes the outcome of this exploration of the RAE site. It is divided into two parts; the first looking at the overviews for each discipline, and the second at the ranking of institutions and comparison of themes for three subjects is set out. Finally, some concluding thoughts on the implication of these notes for the project are made.

Discipline Overviews

Psychology:

Subject Direction:

The psychology overview comments that

“growth has facilitated exciting developments within the discipline and at the interdisciplinary interfaces with other subjects, particularly with other neurosciences” (Psyc RAE: 1).

This interdisciplinary movement further complicates the terrain of psychology as a discipline; already its scope prompted the panel to divide psychology into eight broad themes for the purposes of assessment. The report is quite specific in addressing what it sees as the gaps within the landscape of psychology as a discipline; there are specific suggestions from the panel for research themes; this suggests that the panel spotted several areas for improvement, both in terms of the discipline itself, and in terms of increased components of interactivity. The report adds that

“in such areas collaboration between psychologists and other researchers is required, for example, with education, management, sociology, computing, medicine and ergonomics.”(6).

Use and users:

This is the longest report on the site with the most on user involvement. Under the heading of 'social psychology' the overview comments that;

“encouragement to invest in this development can be found in opportunities identified by the User sub-panel, who noted several areas of interest which would be driven largely by social psychology (e.g. leadership, group processes, crowd behaviour).”

This is interesting as it represents an acknowledgement of the importance of 'users' in academic research; the panel's willingness to suggest areas for further research intimates that pursuit of such themes can more closely align research to the needs of users.

The following quotation provides a brief description of the benefits of interactivity and suggests an existing problem with producing user-oriented research that goes beyond consultancy. It is also interesting that the overview suggests some tactics for achieving this, through training and academic journals;

“users of psychology research are looking for work of academic excellence with sound theoretical underpinning, and that they value long-term research rather than short-term applied work which can be done by consultants. However, academics do not always promote work of potential User value. This may reflect uncertainty about the most appropriate avenues for communication or lack of training in how to develop a dialogue with Users. It would be possible to address this training issue through the transferable skill components of post-graduate training. There may also be an opportunity to develop an appropriate journal to facilitate transfer of knowledge from the academic to the applied arena. This raises broader questions about how fundamental research is disseminated”

This overview is distinguished from the others studied in its statement of user-oriented weaknesses in the discipline and steps to improve matters.

Sociology:

Use and users:

The sociology report comments that it is

“noticeable that the level and forms of user engagement follows no clear pattern. There is a spread of low and high quality user engagement across Units in very different kinds of HEIs. Indeed user engagement is sometimes high even where there is a limited research culture. The quality of user engagement is critically dependent upon the interests of staff and their willingness to build a user focus into their research strategy”. 2-3

The panel report contained little on particular themes; again the scale of sociology (which also includes women's studies) makes such an overview difficult and of questionable value. However, there is specific critique of the role of users in sociology research, with no clear pattern or long-term strategy for their inclusion apparent. The importance of users is also demonstrated by the positioning of the debate over users as part of a wider issue of research dissemination. Although user oriented research is going on, the overview suggests that there should be more.

Politics and International Studies

Use and users:

This panel also had a users sub-panel. One of the issues interesting them is the balance between academic rigour and user-orientation, but conclude that there is no trade off between academic quality and utility. Politics and related research is often designed with utility in mind, or at least carry implicit assumptions about their users, as it is concerned with, amongst other things, policy and practice within political spheres. However, the panel's report is careful to tie useful research to good academic research design and execution.

Anthropology

Subject Direction:

The anthropology report states that

“the research outputs submitted to the 2001 RAE confirmed an increasing focus on Europe, with work on Eastern Europe in particular experiencing growth. This trend favouring European research, which had already been identified more than a decade ago, is likely to be associated with the relative availability of research funding, and the panel expressed concern regarding the decline in funding for research undertaken outside Europe. As for work on non-European societies, the panel noted areas of decline, especially Africa and parts of Asia, as well as areas of expansion, such as Northern Asia.”²

The first thing to note here is the continuing trend of basing anthropological research within Europe; we are also provided some insight into why this is; the lack of research funding opportunities for work outside Europe. This is seen as a problem of the constriction of the discipline reducing the remit of anthropology.

Use and users:

Users are difficult groups to locate within anthropological research; it is much easier to imagine users of social policy or politics oriented research. The overview suggests that there are also more fundamental issues; it was noted in relation to social anthropology that the disciplinary experts' assessment of research priorities overlapped only in small part with the ESRC's identification of thematic priorities in research; .

“in the interests of “joined up” thinking, the panel would suggest that the ESRC re-evaluate its own funding priorities in the light of the basic research demanded for the coherent disciplinary development of anthropology”

This prompts the question about how these research council priorities are selected; here it doesn't seem to be in response to or in collusion with the academic discipline. It also represents a discipline which seems to be at odds with current ESRC inspired indications of what the discipline should be doing, and to the benefit of whom.

This debate positions anthropology as a problematic, and hence rather interesting, discipline in terms of its (seeming lack of) alignment with non-academic concerns and interests. Aligning it with requirements of utility above and beyond the goal of

academic enquiry, or at least adapting research to address the themes and strategies of ESRC priorities seems to be a problem.

Social Policy and Administration

Subject Direction:

The overview positions social policy as a discipline 'on the move':

“over time, there have been some changes in the form and content of the discipline or subject area. There have been changes in its boundaries (in relation to cognate subjects) and there have been changes in the methodological approaches commonly adopted.” 2

This has led to change in the emphases of social policy research, with less work “on what used to be seen as core topics in Social Policy, for example on social security, taxation and public expenditure. Related topics now appear under broad themes such as 'poverty and inequality', 'social exclusion' or 'social protection”.

This can be seen as a move from evaluating administrative processes to preoccupation with deeper social issues:

“the shift has been from evaluating and improving administrative arrangements to focusing attention on underlying social problems and potential or actual innovative means of addressing these.” 3

Use and Users:

Social policy issues are positioned in this report as high on the agenda for government and for social science research. These issues are connected to the content of current research as an indication of its ability to address emerging or contemporary problems. This is not necessarily all good; one panel member commented on the heavily applied bias of research even at the top schools. The utility of research was considered high, and useful to a range of groups;

“researchers have produced findings which have been used by government and by community bodies. They have shown a capacity to work in partnership with relevant bodies outside the university environment. 2”

The positioning of the discipline in this overview moves away from heavily applied, policy style research to an exploration of the factors that contribute to social problems; so from government advice on new policy to developing an understanding of the social issues behind inequality. In this way it can be seen that the discipline is in fact trying to change the users it provides research for, or reconfigure them to look beyond contemporary crises to understanding long term social processes which lead to problems. This can be read as either a critique of the preoccupations of either social policy academics or of government 'users' or both.

Geography

Use and users:

The user sub-panel for geography distinguish between two types of users;
“the sub-panel made a clear distinction between innovative research that influenced user awareness and practice and routine consultancy”
This not only points out the importance of ‘users’ but also their heterogeneity.

Education

Use and users:

The education overview suggests that connecting to users, (or disseminating research) is problematic, the report stating

“some very good work was published in research reports to funding bodies although this was not always easily accessible to the general public.”¹

There were also other comments on education’s output, stating that there was too many ‘text-book’ style texts relying on secondary sources over empirical data:

“there is need for further development of research monographs and for research-based books that are aimed at practitioners”

This is interesting as it is not about academic content, but about research strategies (i.e. empirical research versus desk) and who research is directed towards. A gap between the work of education academics and what the RAE panel members want to see is apparent; not an issue of quality but one of exposure.

Institution comparisons: politics, anthropology, social policy

Three disciplines were chosen from the previous seven. The RAE results were then used to find three of the top departments for that discipline, and their submissions studied for information about research themes and content. This means that for three disciplines, the research priorities of three top departments can be simply compared. Below the themes are listed, with indications of which institutions are researching in each area.

Politics

Top 3 Institutions: Essex (5*), Oxford (5*), Sheffield (5*)

Themes:

- Political behaviour (Es and She with specific focus on political parties at both)
- UK politics (Es)
- Area and comparative politics (Es)
- International relations (Es and Ox)
- Political theory (Ox and especially discourse analysis at Es, ideologies, individuals at She)
- Governance (Ox)
- Methodology (Es)
- Political economy (She)
- Area and international studies in Americas, Europe, Africa (She)

There is little thematic overlapping of all three departments, but some continuity; a preoccupation with non-UK political activities (whether as part of a comparative study or not); also shared interest in political theory, but with diverse specialities such as discourse analysis at Essex.

Anthropology

Top 3 Institutions: LSE (5*), UCL (5*) and Cambridge (5)

Themes:

- Ethnographic fieldwork / primary research (LSE)
- Evolutionary anthropology (UCL) / human evolutionary biology (Camb)
- Human ecology, development and environment with links to contemporary environmental studies and policy oriented research (UCL) and developing countries also with policy links (Camb)
- Visual and material culture, including consumption, social construction of landscape, memory and heritage (UCL)
- Social and cultural anthropology including engagement with themes of local and global social processes, political, ethnicity and nationalism (UCL) but little further info from Camb.

There is again little overlap, and the themes demonstrate the variety of anthropological work being done, from studying contemporary 'culture' to environmental work with implications for policy. This heterogeneity suggests anthropology moving from traditional association with ethnographic fieldwork towards involvement with more contemporary and high-profile themes, such as environmental and political or social debates.

Social Policy

Top 3 institutions: LSE (5*), Kent (5*), York (5)

Themes:

- Social policy (at LSE including research centres for social exclusion and health and social care, also topics of inequality, education, welfare state, but concentrating on social groups and health; health and health care also prominent at Kent)
- Methodology (LSE)
- Comparative studies (mainly within EC at Kent, Europe, developing countries and Indian sub-continent at LSE)
- Social care, including old age care, the body and social policy at Kent; health, social care and disability at York)
- Social services (two research centres at Kent – 'market leaders')
- Policy reform and theory (at Kent based around themes of theoretical analysis and construction of social identity)
- Ethnicity and gender (Kent – similar to LSE's 'social groups', 'gender, ethnicity and older people at York))
- Poverty (York, mentioned under 'general social policy issues' for LSE)
- Housing / neighbourhoods (York)
- Social aspects of ICT's (York)

These themes may back-up the overview's assertion that social policy is moving from preoccupation with implementations of policy to engagement with deeper themes of social exclusion; both approaches are evident. They also demonstrate the alignment

between the themes of SP research and the involvement of 'users', from individuals to institutions and government.

Some Brief Observations On the Comparisons

These comparisons reveal a few interesting things. Firstly, there is little explicit interest in methodological issues in the three example disciplines; this could be considered problematic given that the goal of interactivity is to re-design research activities to incorporate user requirements and feedback. Secondly, the actual research activities are difficult to relate to simplified 'themes'; many themes overlap or differ in the levels of specificity they use, different institutions use different terminology to describe similar themes. More accurate mapping of the themes of work of different departments would require moving to a more detailed level of research content, but would strengthen this method. There are some interesting comparisons emerging; between anthropology and social policy, for instance, and the extensive use of the work 'user' within the RAE literature indicates the diffusion of and interest in, if not the detail of, the role of 'users' in social science research.

Types of user

In line with this repeated use of 'users' it is interesting to try and unpack what is being referred to when 'users' are invoked; a lack of consistency suggests multiple types of user. Within the psychology overview, the users on the sub-panel (who represented a number of public and private institutions) were interested in specific areas; an indication that they can 'use' relevant research to achieve institutional goals, and have some indication of what that might be. This positions the user as demanding particular services from academia; the psychology overview asks for research beyond the realm of consultancy, to more innovative work.

In anthropology a contrast between different users exist; between research councils as users (acting as a bridge between academia and the rest of the world through setting of priorities, allocation of funding and so on) and the users imagined by the anthropologists themselves; in this case future anthropologists, continuing the development of the discipline. The assessors' overview indicates a gap between research council priorities and their concerns for the discipline.

As well as users as 'clients' the policy and practice implications of some of the research indicates other types of user; those who interact with social institutions (political, social, economic) and who can be seen as both the participants and beneficiaries of research; social policy's work on exclusion and politics research on participation are examples.