

**0266**

## **The Impacts of RAE 2008 on Education Research Units across the UK: Findings from the UCET/BERA Review**

Alis Oancea

*University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom*

### **Background**

The UCET/BERA review analysed the influences of RAE 2008 outcomes and processes on a) individual departments; b) different groups of researchers; and c) the education research field as a whole (as perceived locally). It considered the impacts of the RAE as perceived by different categories of staff and as evidenced by the available RAE-related data and analysis. It focussed on the perceived immediate impact; likely future impacts; and relative impact across different types of institutions and (sub)fields, and over time (including the specific impact of changes in the methodology adopted for RAE in 2008). The review addressed these issues in all countries of the UK.

### **Research Questions**

The following objectives guided the review:

1. To obtain and examine critically evidence on perceptions of RAE impacts over time on departments, researchers, and the field of education research as a whole.
  - To identify the aspects of the functioning of individual departments which are perceived by respondents as having been influenced by the processes and outcomes of RAE 2008.
  - To explore the perceptions of existing and likely impacts of RAE processes and outcomes on individual researchers and on the profile of education research as a whole.
  - To analyse the variation of (perceived) impacts across types of institutions, categories of staff, sub-fields of research, and across all countries of the UK.
2. To consider the nature of the processes by which RAE preparation, RAE panel decisions, and RAE funding outcomes have come to influence departmental practices.
3. To explore perceptions of the specific impacts of changes in the methodology adopted for RAE 2008, compared to RAE 2001, and the anticipated impacts of the REF.

### **Methods**

The review drew upon three main categories of data:

1) Survey data: all staff in 30 institutions (drawn from the 82 units that had submitted to the RAE 2008) were surveyed electronically in October 2009. In selecting the units the aim was to cover the range of institutions, in terms of their on the basis of their geographical location; historical type of institution; RAE 2008 outcome; and RAE 2001 outcome, if applicable. The response rate was 20%, slightly lower than the average for electronic survey. Nonetheless, the survey generated very rich qualitative data, through its open questions, and it also highlighted important issues to be explored in depth in the interview phase of the review.

2) In-depth interview data: using the same criteria as for the survey, a further 9 units were selected for interview-based case studies. 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of participants including: current and former heads of department (or their equivalents); directors of research (or their equivalents); mid-management staff (deputy directors, centre directors, directors of postgraduate studies, directors of teacher education - or their equivalents); other

academic staff (teacher education course leaders, research fellows); members of the RAE 2008 panel; departmental administrators; and university-level managers with responsibilities for research.

3) RAE 2008 and RAE 2001 submissions and outcomes databases: further evidence was obtained through analysis of the RAE databases, and also from departmental and public documents, and from a review of the literature on research assessment published earlier this year (Oancea, 2009).

## **Frame**

The evidence gathered was organised in three **categories**:

- evidence about the perceived (direct or indirect, short and long-term, positive and negative) impacts of RAE 2008 on individual staff work and careers;

- evidence about the perceived (direct or indirect, short and long-term, positive and negative) impacts of RAE 2008 on departments/ research units;

- evidence about the perceived (direct or indirect, short and long-term, positive and negative) impacts of RAE 2008 on education research as a field. This category also covered perceptions of the RAE itself, in the context of other factors affecting education research in higher education institutions, and also perceptions of likely impacts of the forthcoming REF.

In addition, the review distinguished between impact-related **themes** (such as positionality, research quality, or sustainability) and "**qualifiers**" (such as mediation, non-attributability, multi-directionality, context etc.) that were used by the respondents to elaborate on the constraints that they saw as limiting or contextualising their reported perceptions of impacts.

## **Research findings**

Some of the more interesting, detailed findings, organised around the categories, themes and qualifiers described above, will be outlined at the proposed BERA symposium. One important outcome of this RAE 2008 review is that it showed that the landscape of RAE 2008 "winners" and "losers" was actually far more complex than the figures alone on the distribution of mainstream QR among education departments post-2009 might suggest.

The findings so far seem to challenge existent wisdom about the RAE on at least two counts. First, the picture that is beginning to emerge from the investigation seems less evenly negative than that painted by some of the previous research on the topic (a fact which may have to do with changes in the RAE procedures and with the different kind of post-RAE 2008 settlement). Second, perceptions of the impacts of the RAE among the respondents seemed far more contextualised and mediated, thus less inclined towards direct attributions, than they had been made to seem in some of the existent literature.