



THE BRITISH PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION

Newsletter 2004

Chair – Baroness Onora O’Neill

Secretary – Professor Jonathan Wolff

Treasurer – Professor Daniel Hutto

www.britphil.ac.uk

BPA Newsletter 2004

Welcome to the first BPA Newsletter. This will be an annual publication, giving an account of the activities of the Association over the previous year, and plans for the coming year, as well as providing information that will be of use to members.

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Purpose of the BPA

The BPA exists in order:

- to promote the study of philosophy, particularly within higher education but also in the wider community;
- to assist professional philosophers to carry out their teaching, scholarship and research in philosophy;
- to foster interest in and appreciation of philosophy in the wider community;
- to express the views of the community of professional philosophers in Britain to relevant bodies, both within higher education and beyond.

Higher education has received a remarkable degree of public attention in Britain in recent months. The issue of undergraduate fees could hardly have had a higher political profile, and the government's concern to improve the science base is leading to a wide reassessment of education and research. The place of the arts and humanities in this process has been uncomfortable. On the one hand, if we philosophers do not emphasise our role in the 'knowledge economy' we are in danger of remaining under-funded and under-appreciated. On the other hand, jumping on this bandwagon may mean deforming and corrupting the distinctive nature of our disciplines.

The BPA was founded so that the UK's philosophical community could play a more active role in trying to shape the forces that will determine our futures. The BPA's Executive Committee will report the views of its members to the various government agencies and bodies responsible for higher education. The Executive Committee's general strategy will also be to try to anticipate future developments and, where possible, to intervene at a stage where we might be able to make a difference, rather than merely react to changes imposed upon the British philosophical community by governmental or university policy.

This has been the first full year of operation of the BPA. Already the BPA has more than 200 individual members. The great majority of UK philosophy departments have taken out departmental membership in the BPA. More than a dozen learned societies have become corporate members of the BPA. There is much more work to be done. The BPA will be able to speak for the UK's philosophical community more effectively to the extent that *individuals*, as well as departments and learned societies, join up, and pass on their views directly to the Executive.

One of the first acts of the BPA has been to widen its membership criteria. At the first AGM a constitutional amendment was passed which will allow research students (at a concessionary rate) and teachers of Philosophy in schools and further

education to join as full members. We on the Executive Committee see this as essential to fulfilling the BPA's broad aims and plan a membership drive for these categories in the new academic year.

BPA Executive Committee

The first committee of the BPA comprised:

Elected Members:

Onora O'Neill, Cambridge (Chair)
Jonathan Wolff, UCL (Secretary)
Dan Hutto, Hertfordshire (Treasurer)

Helen Beebee, Manchester
Stephen Clark, Liverpool
David Evans, Queen's Belfast
Katherine Hawley, St Andrews
Brad Hooker, Reading
Dudley Knowles, Glasgow
Tom Sorrell, Essex
Roger Trigg, Warwick
Tim Williamson, Oxford

Co-opted Members

Robin Attfield, Cardiff
Robin Cameron, Aberdeen
Tony McWalter MP

Roger Trigg and Robin Cameron decided not to seek to continue after this year. Those remaining on the Executive Committee are immensely grateful to Roger and Robin for all the work they have done as, respectively, Chair and Secretary of the NCP and the transitional committee of the BPA, to help set up and smooth the path to the new Association.

For 2004-5 we welcome John Dupré, Exeter, and MM McCabe, King's College London, who were newly elected to the Executive Committee.

AHRB

The BPA has opened a constructive dialogue with the Arts and Humanities Research Board on two related matters. The first concerned the nature of the post-graduate scholarship application forms. Several BPA members complained that the forms imposed a disproportionate burden on departments this year, taking many hours to provide information that could be of no use to the assessors. The BPA Executive Committee were surprised to learn that we were the first organisation to question these forms with the AHRB, who were under the impression that they had been well-received by the community. The BPA suggested that, once this year's competition is completed, a meeting is set up between departments and assessors so that a more effective form can be devised in future years. The AHRB were happy to accept this idea, and a meeting is planned for early in the new academic year.

The second matter was to seek clarification on the training requirements that are required as part of a post-graduate degree. Many universities are attempting to impose rigid training requirements on post-graduate research students, without sufficient thought to the specific needs and nature of each discipline. Some universities have claimed that such requirements have been imposed by the AHRB. The BPA's Executive Committee asked the AHRB to clarify their requirements, which they have done, and they confirm that they do not insist on 'one-size fits all' training. Unfortunately, a further wave of pressure to conform is in prospect in that the Roberts Review of Science, Engineering and Technology has set out generic training requirements designed for research students in those areas. Despite its restricted brief, it appears that there is an intention to apply its requirements across the board. The BPA has been urging the AHRB to publish a response to the Roberts Review, pointing out its limitations, so that its requirements can be interpreted in a more flexible way for the Arts and Humanities.

In both cases communications from the AHRB were posted on the BPA website.

Better Regulation Task Force

The BRTF was set up with the brief of making recommendations to improve the quality of regulation in the UK. Although one may naturally approach any such organisation with apprehension, there is, in this case, some reason to be optimistic. The BRTF has guidelines for better regulation that are immensely enlightened, and can actually be of assistance in academic life. The first point is

that regulation should always be a response to risk. We must always ask: what is the risk if the activity goes unregulated? Until a risk is identified there is no justification for regulation. Second, does the proposed regulation actually reduce the risk? It is not uncommon for a regulation to be adopted on the grounds that 'something must be done', but sometimes the regulation will not address the risk. Indeed, it can make things worse. Third, is the regulation proportional to the risk? Regulations have their costs, and a decision needs to be made as to whether the cost is worth paying. Once positive answers to these questions are provided we can discuss transparency and simplicity. Unfortunately discussions about regulation often start here, at the wrong end, leaving out the three earlier stages.

In the light of these principles the BRTF published a report on regulation in higher education. This included the observation that it is astonishing that higher education has been subject to such a high level of regulation because it is traditionally considered a low risk sector. No university has ever gone bust, and no Vice-Chancellor has ever been fired for corruption (or at least not publicly). The QAA has not publicised a clear set of risks that it is addressing, shown how its regulations reduce those risks, or argued that the costs are proportional. Hence the BRTF has been vital in helping the universities argue for a lighter regulative touch.

Recently the BRTF published a report which suggested that their recommendations for simplifying regulation in Higher Education have led to a reduction in administrative burden. A BPA representative was able to attend a meeting with the BRTF to discuss this. While the BPA representative conceded that the burden on central university administration may have lifted, he argued that little of this had filtered down to departments. The problem is that although departments do not have to prepare for Subject Review, we are still required to put a great deal of effort into 'gold-plating' our procedures, just in case we are inspected at some future time. And as we are unsure of the nature of any such inspection, we have to be able to comply with the requirements of any possible inspection regime. So, for example, BPA members report that the approval procedures necessary to make modifications to courses provide a strong disincentive to do so, and so over-regulation is leading to ossification of the syllabus. It was suggested to the BRTF that more should be done to apply the BRTF's own principles to higher education, lifting the administrative burden on academic staff, by reducing the emphasis on regulation of process.

Learning and Teaching Support Network

The LTSN has been in existence for several years, yet its role is not well understood within the profession, and it is viewed with suspicion by many departments. The BPA has begun discussion with the LTSN to explore ways in which it can be of genuine value to the profession as a whole, especially in terms of finding funding for valuable activities that might not otherwise take place. The LTSN may be particularly important in providing opportunities for research students and new members of academic staff to meet various training requirements in a useful, subject-specific way. The BPA Executive Committee will continue to explore such possibilities, especially in the light of the emergence of the new Higher Education Academy, which will be launched this autumn.

AS and A2 Philosophy

AS and A2 qualifications have replaced A level. AS is the first year of post-GCSE study, and allows students to take a broader range of subjects than before. A2 is equivalent to A level. As a result of these changes to the school and 6th-form college curriculum, philosophy has become an increasingly popular subject. The BPA has begun to explore current AS and A2 provision, and is considering how it may help curriculum development and support school and 6th-form college teaching in the coming years.

Philosophy at Swansea

The BPA's Executive Committee learnt, with great alarm, of the intended closure of the department at Swansea, despite many previous assurances, leaving philosophy in Wales in a perilous state. The BPA engaged in a correspondence with the Vice-Chancellor of Swansea University and communicated with members of the department and students, offering advice and support insofar as we were able. Unfortunately, we cannot report success here, and it seems that the University is pressing forward with its plans. The lesson the BPA took is that, where possible, we should offer advice to departments to help enable them to remain in good standing in their own universities, and to try to prevent similar situations developing in the future. The BPA Executive Committee are very happy to offer confidential advice to any department that feels under threat in any way.

Success Stories

The BPA is looking out for 'success stories' of people who have studied philosophy to degree level in the UK and gone on to achieve at a high level in other walks of life, such as the comedian Ricky Gervais, and the recent head of the Inland Revenue, Sir Nicholas Montagu (not to mention Tony Blair and Oliver Letwin). These will be publicised on the BPA website. We would be delighted to receive any tips.

RAE

The RAE will be a major issue in the coming years. The BPA is co-ordinating a response on behalf of the profession. In the first instance this is a matter of proposing members for the Philosophy sub-panel. Later the BPA Executive Committee hopes to influence the way the philosophy panel operates so that it is properly responsive to the particular nature of research in philosophy.

Financial Planning Beyond RAE 2008

With HEFCE's consultation on panel membership for RAE 2008 now underway, there is no doubt that the academic community is switching into full RAE-planning mode, with perhaps just another 12 months or so in which any individual can produce work that stands a chance of publication in time. We already see some universities, and therefore some philosophy departments, following ambitious plans to improve their research ratings, and others suffering loss of staff and, perhaps, worrying that they may be running out of time to do much about it. Some departments will think they have a realistic chance of making improvements, and boosting income; others will count themselves lucky to hold on to what they achieved last time. Of course given that so many details of the assessment exercise are still unknown, it is not clear what we are planning for, but the general rule applies: the more people you have doing work of 'international' standard, the better.

No doubt many departments will be required by their institutions to make a prediction about how they will fare in the exercise. Quite possibly some will promise more than the RAE will eventually deliver. And the stakes are high. Two departments submitted in the last exercise - Keele and Lancaster - have since both been merged into larger units. Both received rather mystifying 3a rankings, and hence lost all research funding under the financial rules of the exercise, which, as

we all remember, were not announced until submissions had been made and assessed.

It is likely that more departments are hoping or planning to increase or sustain their research funding than is possible, given the total resources likely to be available. One response is to try to crack the whip even harder – to make sure that your department is one of the winners. But it is also sensible to think the unthinkable: what if we are not? How deep a crisis would it be if we lost some research funding? This will, after all, certainly happen for some departments.

This, then, requires an answer to a more general question: how do departmental finances work? There are probably as many variations as there are universities in the UK. Each university operates its own model, and these models commonly include such things as ‘top-slicing’, ‘cross-subsidy’, the placing together of disparate departments into a single ‘cost-centre’ and the application of penalties and incentives for particular forms of behaviour. This is the world of ‘management accounts’ where institutions can juggle their internal accounting in the attempt to achieve whatever goals they want.

Management accounts sometimes generate anomalies where it can pay to do badly. For example from time to time a university may invest heavily in a department if it has just suffered an RAE score below the norm for that institution. On other occasions a department can receive financial benefits by reducing the number of students it enrolls in particular categories. All of this reinforces the air of unreality which already clouds university finances.

Nevertheless there is an underlying reality, and the main outgoings and sources of income in real financial terms are very similar for the very great majority of university departments. A department’s outgoings are the salaries it pays, together with its incidental departmental expenses and an apportioned share of central costs. Currently income comes from:

- i) Home student fees (under-graduate, masters and research)
- ii) HEFCE teaching grant
- iii) High-fee overseas fees (including visiting students)
- iv) ‘QR’ (i.e. money based on RAE results),
- v) Research grants and contracts, including overheads
- vi) ‘Special initiatives’ – such as special teaching funds made available by HEFCE on a competitive bidding basis.
- vii) Donations, often small-scale and for special purposes, often generating administrative costs that need to be met from other sources.

If a department is not generating enough income to pay its salaries then it is in serious trouble. If it meets salaries together with its apportioned share of central costs then it will be in reasonable financial comfort. Many university departments, and philosophy is no exception, exist in the shadow-land where notionally they are in deficit but a different way of calculating central costs would put them in profit.

Not long ago, the HEFCE teaching grant for undergraduates in the humanities was sufficient to allow many philosophy departments to do very well financially. For some universities the philosophy department was, in percentage terms, among the most profitable of all departments. But some time in the late 1990’s HEFCE decided that it was paying too much for these students and reduced the per capita amount by 30% over three years. This has made a huge difference, and many departments have not been able to compensate for the lost income (in some cases departments have not even been told why their situation has deteriorated, and are encouraged to think that somehow it is their own fault). Hence there is a broad sense of financial difficulties, if not crisis.

One response is to drive up staff-student ratios. In some cases this is done by employing more staff on casual contracts. Other departments have been able to increase income by raising their RAE score, recruiting more high-fee students, recruiting more research students, who bring in much more money than undergraduates, or gaining research grants or special initiative money. All of this, of course, is competitive and uncertain over the medium term. Best of all is an indulgent Vice-Chancellor who sees the value of a philosophy department and does not mind if it does not pay its way, given the arbitrary nature of university funding, but this seems something of a rarity.

It is not impossible that the higher education sector will see an improvement in its fortunes by the introduction of top-up fees. Vice-Chancellors have been playing down the importance of this development, saying that it will hardly go any way to remedying the underlying deficit that Universities have built up. That may well be true, but other things being equal, even an extra £1000 per undergraduate would make a huge difference to many philosophy departments around the country. Yet it remains to be seen how this will be dealt with by universities. Will universities be prepared to adopt a financial model that takes financial pressure off humanities departments?

The general lesson, though, is that relying on any single source of income – be it the RAE, or undergraduate fees – is a highly risky strategy. It may pay off, but if your department doesn’t achieve the income you assured your university you would achieve, what can you say to your Dean and Vice-Chancellor? If, in the meantime, your department has done its best to diversify its sources of income –

for example, adopted a strategy to recruit more and better research students or applied for research grants – you at least have something to fall back on. Even if financially this may not work out, it should at least buy your department goodwill within your institution. And this is something we all need, perhaps even more than financial success.

AHRB Research Grants

Currently the AHRB runs a number of grant schemes for which philosophers may apply. Yet philosophers have made relatively little use of many of these schemes. This perhaps reflects a belief that the schemes are not well-designed to support work in philosophy, and it is true that many of them are not schemes we philosophers would have devised ourselves (this is something the BPA would hope to influence in the future). However, with some imagination these schemes can often be used to our benefit and are worth detailed investigation through the AHRB website. This is what the AHRB say about four of their schemes:

- The **Research Grants** scheme provides a range of awards suitable for individuals or teams of researchers. Grants of up to £500,000 are available and can be held for a maximum of five years.
- The **Research Leave** scheme funds replacement teaching costs for three or four months so that scholars can complete a research project. We expect our contribution to be matched by the employing institution.
- The **Resource Enhancement** scheme supports projects aiming to improve access to and use of research resources and materials. Grants up to £300,000 are available and can be held for a maximum of three years.
- **Innovation Awards** are available to support research projects, which challenge existing models, perceptions or modes of thought. Awards up to £50,000 are available and can be held for periods up to a year.

Probably the best known, and certainly the most used, scheme is the Research Leave Scheme. In the year June 2003-4 philosophers made 101 applications of which 55 were successful. This rate of 54% is above the 'all subjects' rate of 49%. These grants are effectively 'writing up' grants, where one can be sure of an 'output', and where success is measured in terms of whether or not the output is produced. Applying for a Research Leave grant where the output is uncertain can be a recipe for misery.

The Research Grant scheme, which aims, on the whole, to support large-scale collaborative research, attracted 12 applications, of which 5 were successful. This success rate of 42% compares with a general success rate of 18% for the scheme. But our high success rate perhaps reflects the low number of applications, which is well below the level of applications in other disciplines. Given that so much money is available through this scheme it may be somewhat surprising that so few people apply. However, on the other side, there is very little benefit for the applicant, in that the Research Grant scheme allows no time off for the Principal Applicant, and so running such a grant is, to a large degree, self-sacrificing behaviour. Nevertheless, Heads of Departments may want to find ways of encouraging members of their departments to apply, as receiving a Research Grant to support a good project can be immensely beneficial.

In the remaining two schemes philosophers apparently managed a success rate of 100%: the Innovations Award scheme (three applications, all successful) and the Resource Enhancement scheme (one application, successful). These compare with general rates of 30% and 22%, based on a much higher number of applications. Yet when one looks at the award listings over the last few years, it seems that many of these philosophy awards are going to people who work in sociology, economics, politics and history but are applying for funds to support projects with some philosophical content. This should be worrying. It seems we philosophers are failing even to apply for funds earmarked for us. Both schemes provide important opportunities. The Innovations Award scheme is very flexible, and allows buy-out of time for the Principal Applicant, and so is well worth investigating. Resource Enhancement will be of particular interest to those working on scholarly and historical projects; for example, producing electronic versions of unpublished or scarce materials.

Over the coming year the BPA intends to put details of successful applications on its website (www.britphil.ac.uk) to show the type of project that has been funded.