

Times Higher Education Supplement

Thursday May 12th 2005 - Front page - 'On Her Majesty's scientific service'

TERRY PRATCHETT
NOT EVEN WIZARDS CAN MAKE
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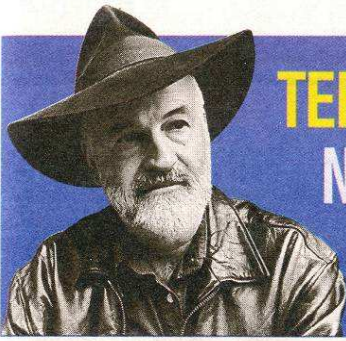
STAR TIMES
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RAE rating**

**On Her
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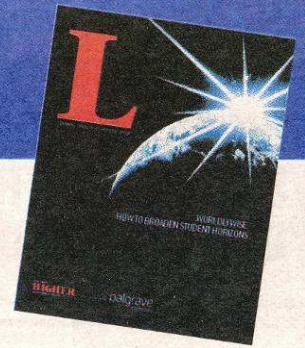
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THE TIMES

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Star staff cosseted in bid to up RAE rating

**Anthea Lipsett and
Katherine Demopoulos**

Top researchers are being given special treatment by their universities to maximise their chances of securing a new "stellar international" research rating in the run-up to the toughest ever research assessment exercise.

University managers are scrutinising the output of their elite academic performers as they finalise preparations for the 2008 exercise. Star researchers are being offered extra research leave, funds to attend major international conferences and relief from teaching duties. The new top 4* rating will differentiate between the best and very best researchers as never before.

"What we will see in future is a further subdivision within the research rich, the research very rich and the research very, very rich," said Philip Jones, deputy vice-chancellor of Durham University, which has recently undertaken a "review of research readiness".

He added: "While the current system differentiates between the Premiership, the Championship and Division One, this will differentiate within the Premiership between the Champion's League regulars, the Uefa Cup teams and the rest with a few scrabbling around the relegation zone. The Premiership remains a critical league to play in, but now it's all

about manoeuvring for position within a much more differentiated league."

As the stakes rise, academics claim that more institutions are threatening underperforming researchers with teaching-only contracts.

One source at University College London said the situation was worst in faculties that slipped in the last RAE or that rely heavily on research funding. "Heads of department are so obsessed with the RAE that no one is even allowed to criticise it. The stick they are using is 'if you're not returned then it's a teaching duty for you!'"

"Researchers are expected not just to publish papers but to publish them in competitive journals such as *Nature*. They are setting strange internal rules and benchmarks," the UCL source said.

A senior lecturer at King's College London said that although some academics were not officially being placed in teaching-only posts, they were being denied access to research facilities. "People are left in limbo. It's happening by stealth rather than directly."

King's will hold a mock RAE this month where academic positions will be consolidated. The battle for ratings has intensified as, potentially, this could be the last RAE, setting budgets for at least six years. Highest ratings will also be far harder to secure in

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RUSSELL SACH

On Her Majesty's scientific service

Anna Fazackerley

Over the years, secret agent and lothario James Bond has got away with some dodgy chat-up lines. But now, thanks to an Oxford University academic who has set herself up as a science consultant to Hollywood, he can no longer get away with dodgy science.

Fed up with seeing mangled science and inaccurate maths on the big screen, Lizzie Burns, a biochemist from Oxford, has launched Hollywood Math and Science Film Consulting in partnership with an award-winning Harvard University mathematician, Jonathan Farley.

Dr Burns, who is also the Medical Research Council's artist-in-residence, said: "In the last James Bond film, a guy was supposed to turn from looking North Korean to looking Western using gene therapy. That is fundamentally wrong. Why couldn't he have had a face transplant?"

The pair, who met at Oxford, hope to capitalise on the success of recent "academic" films such as *A Beautiful Mind* and *Good Will Hunting*. They have won the consultancy contract for the hit US television drama *Numb3rs*, in which an FBI agent recruits his mathematical genius brother to help solve crimes.

Dr Burns said: "It's not just the accuracy of the science in films, but also the portrayal of scientists, that's wrong. The hunchbacked mad scientist has got to go!"

Professor Farley said: "More and more Hollywood producers are seeing that the public does have an appetite for things as foreign as maths and science. If they are going to make these films, they may as well make them right."

He added: "I knew there would be movie stars such as Brad Pitt playing mathematicians one day — and I wanted to have the company ready."

Real-to-reel: Lizzie Burns is keen to help Hollywood shed its bad-science habits