PERFORMATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE UK RESEARCH ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

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This paper uses data from the submissions to, and ratings from, RAE 2001 to reflect on shifts in public understandings of institutional research accountability over the past two decades in the United Kingdom. In particular, it looks at what has been described as a decline of professional and communicative modes of accountability in favour of more technical and managerial ones. This shift was accompanied by a conceptual change, from accountability as responsibility and communicative reason to accountability as hierarchical answerability (with corresponding changes in values, concepts of public good and hierarchies of knowledge). The paper argues that, post-RAE, neither the reinforcement of targets, indicators, standards and techniques of managerial accountability, nor the closure of academia to external scrutiny, are likely to be the way forward. Rather, what is needed is a restoration of discursive, democratic and ethical dimensions of the relationship between research, the public, and policy.

The Research Assessment Exercise

The UK Research Assessment Exercise, first conducted in 1986 (and continuing in rapid succession with the 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001, and 2008 rounds) played a crucial role in the dynamics of research and in public perceptions of research, including education research, in the UK, over the past 20 years. The exercise is organised by the Higher Education Funding Councils in the home countries of the UK. It involves a complex apparatus of subject panels and sub-panels, consisting of a mix of academics and users relevant to each field, who agree on subject-specific assessment criteria in light of generic guidance (including guidance on the general principles, standards, and criteria to be used across all panels). The panels and sub-panels peer-review the submissions made by institutions to reach an overall judgement of the quality of their research environment and of their research output.

In 1992, on a five-point scale, 60% of the 86 education submissions were rated 4 and above, and 20%, 2 and under (out of which, 7% were graded 1 and subsequently received no funding). In 1996, a harsher assessment or maybe just a larger field (103 institutions) and a wider, seven-point scale (1, 2, 3a/b, 4, 5/5*) returned only 29% departments rated 4 and above. In addition, this time around the departments rated 2 joined those rated 1 in receiving no funding at all after the exercise: a five-fold increase, from 7% in 1992, to 36% in 1996, in the percentage of departments left unfunded. In 2001 the situation was redressed partly, with 39% of the 82 submitting institutions rated at 4 and above and only 11% at 2 and under; however, a subsequent change in the funding formula meant that an extra 23% of institutions, which were rated 3b, were also deprived of funding (amounting to a total of 34% departments rated 1–3b and receiving no funding).

A relatively smaller field in RAE 2008 (still 82 institutions, as in 2001, but with 15% less active staff submitted, in full-time equivalent, and 20% fewer outputs submitted) returned 75% of the activity submitted across the entire pool of institutions as being of international standard (graded 2 and above on a four-point scale), over 40% as internationally excellent or better (3 and above), and about 15%, as world class (graded 4) (RAE, 2009). These figures are indicative of the current situation in the field, but due to a change in the grading system, and to a move from an overall rank to a profile, the 2001 and 2008 results are not directly comparable.

The Exercise was initially met with support by most of the various constituencies involved, as a potential solution to problems generated by the expansion of the higher education sector (which, the argument was, had made the earlier models of research funding, based on volume-related block grants and very low accountability levels, unsustainable). It was felt that the exercise brought the added benefits of:

- "put[ting] research firmly on the [public] agenda" (Rudduck & McIntyre, 1998: 10);
- stimulating the development of research cultures in post-1992 universities (Harley, 2002: 197);
- enhancing management practices and structures at the level of the research units (Elton, 2000: 277; McNay & HEFCE, 1997);
- increasing the attention given to human resources in research, and to the development of graduate schools;
- encouraging completion of research and publication (Harley, 2002: 196); and, as some argued,
- improving the overall quality of research and its international standing (McNay & HEFCE, 1997: para 123; AUT, 2002).

The initial support, however, soon shifted into concern for a substantial part of the academia. Puxty, Sikka and Wilmott (1994) and Humphrey, Moizere & Owen (1996) went as far as describing the RAEs as systems of "surveillance" that damaged autonomy of research, as well as collegiality. They argued that criticism of the exercise, rather than obedient participation by the researchers (which only made it seem more legitimate), was the only way forward. Although the RAE, and the research selectivity principle it embodied, were fairly readily accepted in higher university management circles, "academics on the ground [felt] themselves increasingly constrained to produce and disseminate that knowledge which ha[d] immediate value in terms of RAE rankings" (Harley, 2002: 188; see also Harley & Lee, 1997; Hare, 2003). According to survey data reported by Harley (2002), mid- and early-career academics reported feeling under the most RAE-induced pressure to perform and adapt to what were perceived as inappropriate criteria (pp. 195–196).

Criticisms of the RAE on technical and procedural grounds also abound. McNay (2003: 49) pointed out that "it [was] vital to separate the RAE as a quality assessment device from subsequent and consequent funding in any critique"; he then went on to develop a critique of the RAE as an assessment device, focused on the consistency of the quality criteria used and processes developed within and across panels. For example, in relation to the treatment of education research in RAE 2001, he noted several problems, starting with "boundary

issues" (e.g. between education research and higher education pedagogic research), continuing with ambiguities about standards (e.g. what should count as "national" quality), and ending with uneven treatment of different forms and modes of research (e.g. empirical research received better treatments than non-empirical; "academic", better than "applied" and "professional" work; research supported by academic funders, better than that funded by users; disciplinary, better than interdisciplinary, work). However, as McNay also conceded, assessment and funding have been inextricably linked in most people's reactions to the exercise, as well as in the strategic decisions at departmental level throughout the system: "those responsible for making submissions are still playing the game while seeing through a glass darkly" (2003: 53) (see also Lucas, 2006). For example, the RAE may have led to transfer of funds from teaching to research (McNay & HEFCE, 1997; McNay, 1997; Deem, 2006). Although assessment and funding can be separated for a more structured critique, they also need to be placed in their common context of research governance and public management.

In 2003–2004 I was commissioned by BERA to gather information about the distribution of educational research expertise across different types of institutions throughout the UK. The strategies for data gathering and analysis included a survey of education departments, review of media coverage of the exercise, as well as analysis of the authorship of academic journal articles after 2001, and analysis of the RAE 2001 submissions (from which the comments and data in this paper have been drawn). The work, though hindered by pressures of time and scale, produced a snapshot of the RAE 2001 submissions in terms of differences in staffing, income, and thematic interests. The following questions were addressed:

a How do patterns of staff selection for RAE submissions vary across different groups of institutions?

b. How does the distribution of income from different sources vary across differently-rated groups of institutions? What does this suggest about the potential of departments rated lower than 4 to attract alternative funding? What categories of funding seem to have a stronger connection with the 1996 rating, suggesting a possible impact of RAE?

c. How are research interests dispersed throughout the system? How does the distribution of research interests map onto the distribution of RAE ratings?

The first part of this paper will use examples drawn from the 2001 UK Research Assessment Exercise and from the analysis of the publication patterns in three major British education research journals to suggest that any chance that the exercise may have had (as some hoped) of becoming a professionally-led contribution to the search for excellence through research was undermined by the ways in which it was designed, managed, and implemented. While effective at screening out poor quality research (due to the peer review processes at its core), RAE 2001, and the subsequent funding decisions based on the results, may have also endangered pockets of expertise and emerging research cultures – for example, through the cutting of funds for institutions rated 3b (Dadds & Kynch, 2003). In doing so, it had consequences for the nature of the research being assessed and upon the behavior of researchers and of research units. As Gillies (2007) noted, drawing on examples from the history of

science, the RAE was aimed at eliminating wasteful funding, rather than at rewarding excellence wherever it was found (despite the rhetoric). In the process, some of the less conventional, though important, research and researchers may have fallen victim to the rigors of assessment and reward. This was seen by decision-makers as a risk worth taking, maybe on the basis of the hope that excellence will follow money and therefore concentration of funding would improve the field as a whole. The figures and charts in this paper illustrate this point with some basic statistics in relation to: external research income reported in RAE 2001; patterns of staff selection for inclusion in submissions as research active; clusters of research interests and expertise; and intended audience for research.

The stated purpose of the UK Research Assessment Exercise (now at its sixth and probably last edition) is "to produce quality profiles […] for each submission of research activity made by institutions" (RAE, 2005: paragraph 9) in order "to inform our [i.e. Funding Councils'] allocations of grant for research, and to support our shared policy of promoting continuous improvement in the quality of the UK research base and its economic and social impact" (RAE, 2004). For RAE 2001, the stated purpose had been "to produce ratings of research quality which [would] be used by the higher education funding bodies in determining the main grant for research to the institutions they fund[ed]", and to "inform policy development" (*Guidance for Submissions*, RAE 1999b). The "ratings of quality" changed to "quality profiles" in RAE 2008 (*Guidance for Submissions*, RAE, 2005).

The official RAE 2001 paperwork thus defined the exercise by its use and not by its quality or impact on the various research fields and communities (while in 2008 the impact on quality was explicitly included in the statement of aims). Perhaps more than all exercises before it, the RAE 2001 sparked heated, and sometimes bitter, debate about its potentially depressing consequences on an important proportion of educational research institutions, in terms of funding and resources, but also in terms of: the relation between teaching and research; recruitment of staff and students; staff mobility; continuity of research strategies; etc. Although some people did express reservations about the assessment processes, most of the objections raised were not about the quality of the peer reviewing. Rather, as noted in the opening paragraphs of this paper, most addressed the overall design and framing of the exercise, which presupposed: commensurability of research quality across sub-fields, types of institutions, and types of research cultures and communities; meaningful aggregation of quality at institution level; a direct connection between research concentration and research excellence; the value of competition and selectivity in creating quasi-markets of state-funded research; and the theoretical possibility of comprehensive assessments of submissions (as opposed, for example, to peer-reviewing a representative sample of publications, or to skimming through large submissions to gain a flavor of the overall "performance").

A side-effect of the RAE process was increased awareness of how high the stakes were in research funding, and increased anxious scrutiny of one's work and of that of one's "competitors", supported by an ever more complex administrative machine. The flurry of emails and phone calls, within and between institutions, following the release of the most recent RAE results illustrates this well enough. Being held to account for one's work on the basis on one's "research outputs" (and of the monies one attracted through grants etc.) is now part of the everyday routine of doing research. It seems quite unacceptable these days for researchers

to spend their time in reflection, critique, meaningful interaction with others, and long-term pondering of evidence, if while doing this they fail to keep up with the required cadence of publication and proposal writing. The final part of this paper steps outside the argument about the distribution of excellence and the aims of the RAE, to argue that, although it had some technical merits (e.g. by allowing for disciplinary sensitivity through the use of peer review, quite unlike most metric measures), the RAE model contributed to the routinisation of formal, bureaucratic accountability, and hindered democratic dialogue among the research, practice and policy communities concerned. A metrics-based model that keeps the RAE blueprint and simply skips its lengthier processes is unlikely to provide the solution to this problem (but possibly make it even worse). The final section of the paper will comment on the interplay of modes of accountability involved in this dynamic.

RAE 2001 – basic statistics

1. Patterns of research income in RAE 2001

Each submission to the RAE 2001 included a section reporting external research income received from different sources (for definitions see Appendix) between 1 January 1996 and 31 December 2000 (except for any research scholarships). The following figures were obtained by adding together the income from all submissions over the entire period under assessment, and then disaggregating them by sources of funding and RAE rating.

The distribution of income across differently rated groups of institutions favoured, as may have been expected, the departments with higher ratings (78% of the total income reported was from departments subsequently rated 4, 5 and 5*; 11% from departments rated 3a; and 8% in those rated 3b).

However, when disaggregated by source of income, the share of the 1–3a departments varied considerably, from 42% (of the funding received from UK industry and commerce), 26% (of the funding from European Union sources) and 23% (of the funding from UK charities), down to only 17% (of the funds from UK central governmental sources, the research councils, AHRB, JIF, and JREI funding councils – for acronyms see Appendix). Figure 1 summarises the proportion of income from different sources within each group of institutions,

Figure 1: Distribution of funding within each grade, RAE 2001

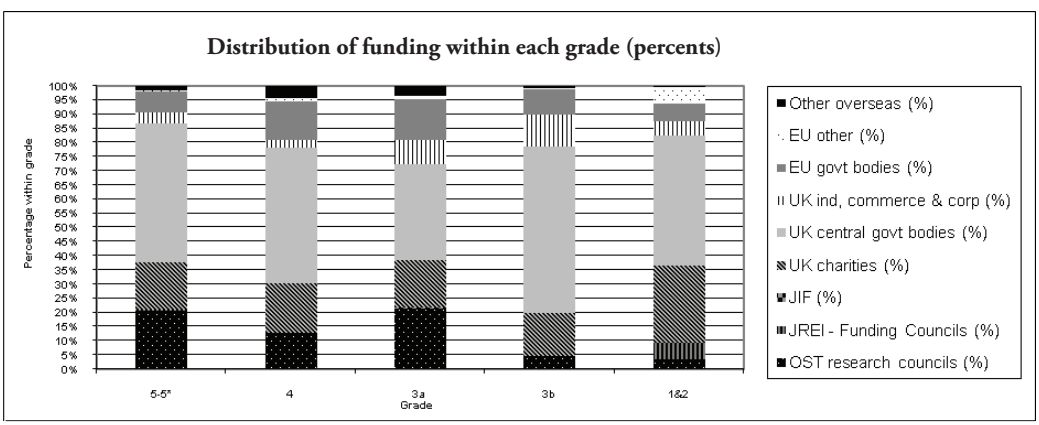
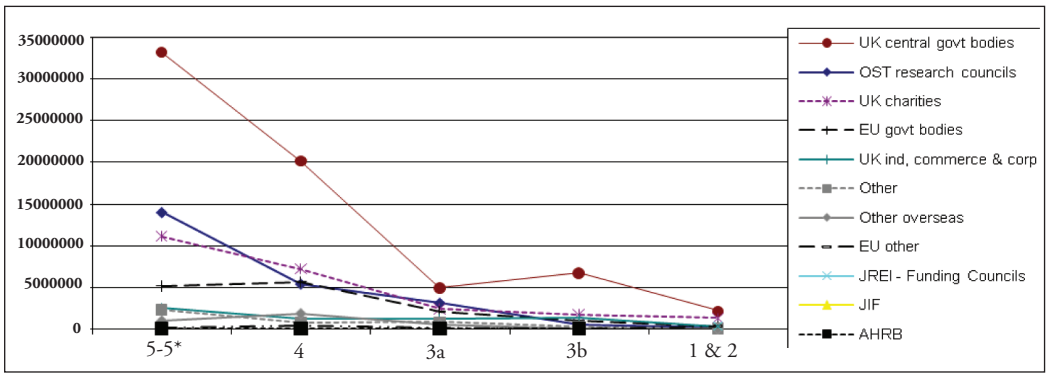


Figure 2: Distribution of income by source, across ratings



whilst Figure 2 shows the patterns for each source of income across ratings. Despite their apparent competitiveness on the European market and on the UK non-governmental market, the departments rated 3a and under appear disadvantaged in securing governmental funding in the UK, with potentially depressing consequences on the emerging research cultures.

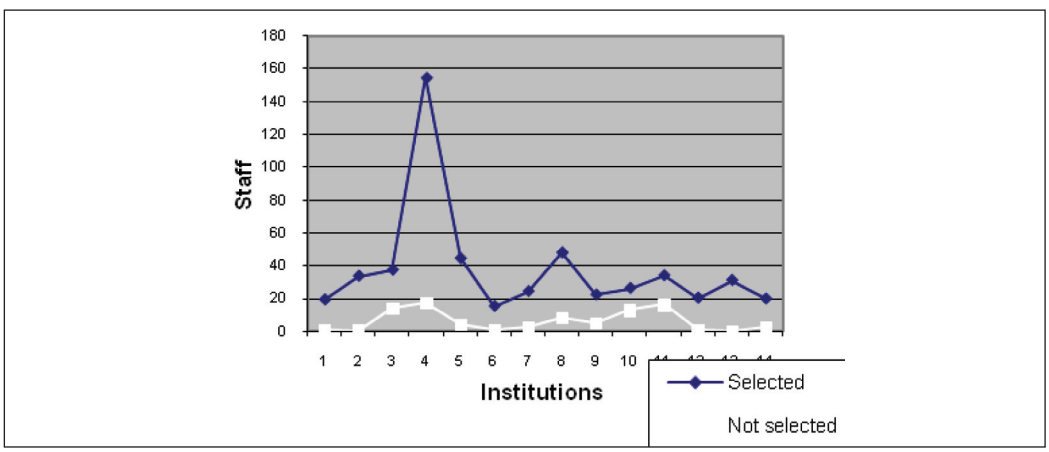
2. Patterns of staff selection

For RAE 2001, each submitting institution reported its total number of academic and research staff (in full time equivalent). The institutions rated 3a and under employed 50% of the total staff reported in the RAE 2001 (for definitions of the staff-related terminology in the RAE 2001 documents, see Appendix).

From this total, each institution selected a number of staff to be entered for RAE as "research active". The research active staff, based on the full-time equivalent figures submitted by the institutions, is the main focus of the diagrams below (Figures 3–6). About 34% of the total research active staff reported by all departments were affiliated with institutions rated 3 and under at RAE 2001.

The proportion of staff selected as research active for RAE 2001 exceeded the proportion of staff not selected in all 5 and 5* institutions (Figure 3 – the X axis plots the individual

Figure 3: A staff selected / not selected for RAE in 5–5* institutions



institutions). The pattern becomes less evident in institutions rated 4 (Figure 4), whilst among the 3a departments only about one third had more 'A' staff (i.e. those members of staff who had been in post at one institution for at least one year prior to the census date – 31 March 2001) selected than not selected (Figure 5). Finally, in 3b departments the initial pattern is almost reversed, with less than one fifth of the institutions having more A staff selected than not selected (Figure 6). About 35% of the total academic and research staff (in full time equivalent) employed by the departments rated 3 and under were entered as research active staff for RAE 2001, compared to almost 70% of the staff in departments rated 4–5*. This suggests that managerial considerations may have overridden professional definitions of research activity (and in particular of practice-based research) in preparing the RAE submissions.

Figure 4: A staff selected/ not selected for RAE, institutions graded 4

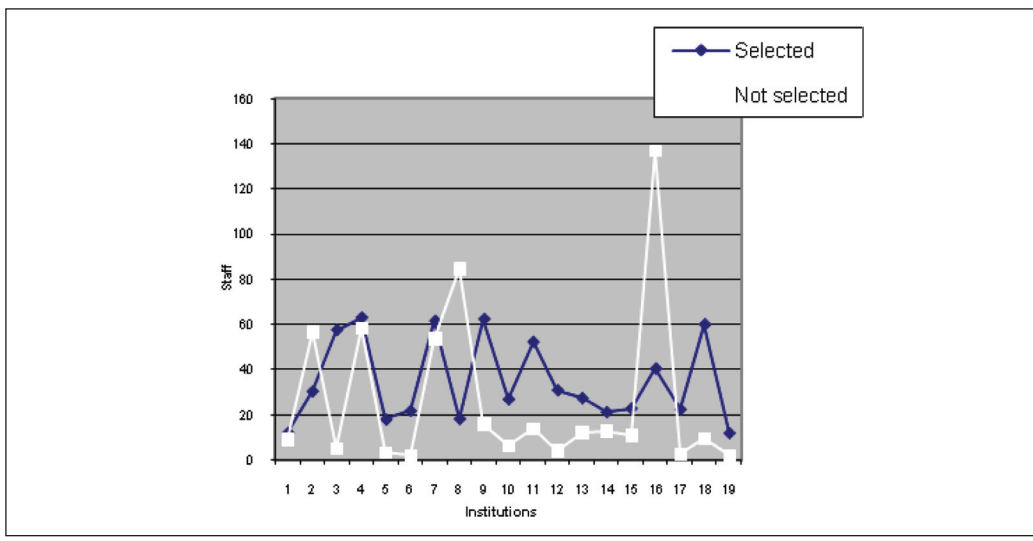


Figure 5: A staff selected/ not selected for RAE in 3a institutions

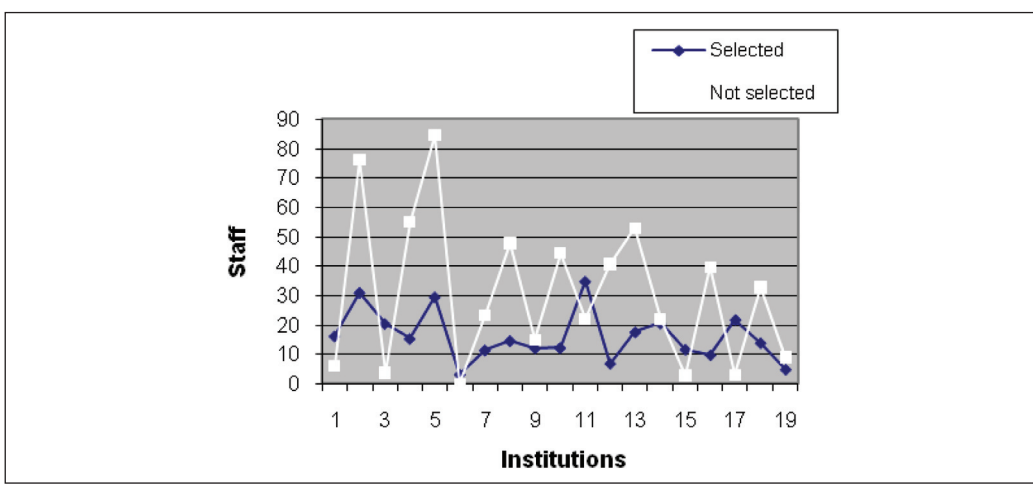
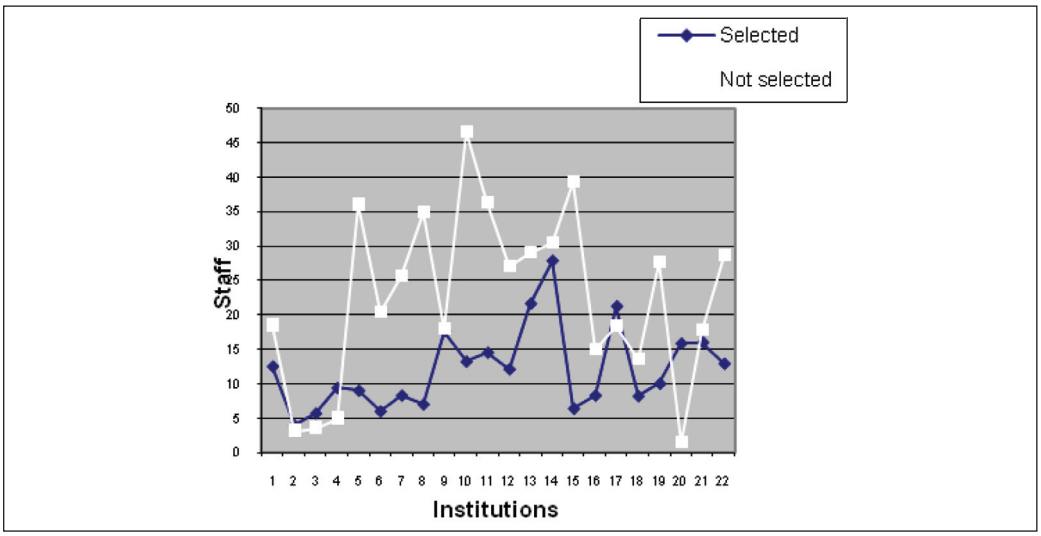


Figure 6: A staff selected/ not selected for RAE, in 3b institutions



3. Intended audience for education research submitted to RAE 2001

The following comments are based on the primary intended audience for every piece of research submitted to RAE 2001, as declared at the time of the submission. Such data were contained in form RA2 (Research Outputs) submitted to RAE 2001, which (following Pollard and Bassey's, 1999, recommendations) included information on intended audience for research, on methodology, and on the "educational significance" of fields of research or of individual items submitted (HEFCE, 1999). Data on audience were analysed using filters, rather than exhaustively, thus the findings need to be read with caution (also, as McNay (2003) noted, the descriptive fields in the forms had been interpreted in different ways across the submissions, and had been used inconsistently in the assessment). Table 1 summarises the results of the sampling and filtering by types of intended audience; it includes figures for researchers, teachers, policymakers, administrators, students, employers, general public and international

Table 1: Intended audience for research, by rating RAE 2001

2001 RAE rating	Intended audience for research								
	Researcher	Teacher	Policy-maker	Admin	Student	Employer	Public	Inter-national	Total
1	27	1	45	0	0	0	0	0	73
2	182	219	95	8	38	1	0	15	558
3b	693	618	423	13	116	1	1	9	1874
3a	1015	685	524	28	142	0	1	21	2416
Total 1-3a	1917	1523	1087	49	296	2	2	45	4921
4	2304	1573	1308	27	203	4	0	31	5450
5	1361	990	811	21	201	3	0	6	3393
5*	217	145	132	3	7	0	18	1	523
Total 1-5*	5799	4231	3338	100	707	9	20	83	14287
1-3a (%)	39%	31%	22%	1%	6%	0%	0%	1%	100%
4-5* (%)	41.5%	24%	24%	0.5%	4.5%	0%	0%	0.5%	100%

audience, but not for other types of audience, which may have been mentioned in form RA2, such as LEAs, media, professionals (nurses, artists, engineers etc.), librarians, and so on.

The overall pattern is similar for all groups of institutions (audiences formed dominantly of researchers, teachers and policymakers). Departments rated 3a and below had marginally more research directed towards a teacher audience (31% of all research reported by such departments) than departments rated 4 and above (29% of their research). The same applies in relation to an audience of students (6% in departments rated 1–3a, versus 4.5% in 4–5*s), school administrators (1% in 1–3s, versus 0.5% in 4–5*s) and non-British interest groups (1% in 1–3s, versus 0.5% in 4–5*s).

On the other hand, descriptions of research in departments rated 4–5* included marginally more mentions of an audience of researchers (41.5% in those rated 4–5* as compared to 39% in 1–3a) and policymakers (24% in those rated 4–5* versus 22% in 1–3a). Such findings might suggest that the departments rated 3a and under potentially fostered a research culture that favoured considerations of use and strong links with the teaching profession (with a view to development) – but the RAE data alone are not sufficient to support this argument. A possibly interesting line for further research into the RAE submissions could follow a more qualitatively-minded track, e.g. by looking at the strategies and rhetorical means that were employed in constructing and communicating an institution's image. One interesting question would be about the extent to which differences in ratings might reflect differences in rhetorical efficiency, as opposed to differences in research expertise, processes, and audiences.

4. Research groups submitted to RAE 2001

The RAE 2001 guidelines (RAE, 1999a) left the definition of "the research group that staff and outputs [we]re assigned to" more or less to the decision of submitting institutions, with the specification that "only one research group was allowed to be assigned to each research output and a limit of 26 research groups were allowed to be assigned per submission".

Research group data submitted to RAE 2001, on Form RA5, were not in numerical format, were not consistently structured across submissions, and varied considerably. A line-by-line coding was needed to summarize such data. There were 438 entries (an entry being defined by the couple research group – institution), counted after subtracting the double entries for institutions that had made a joint submission. Each entry was coded for as many categories as applicable, in an attempt to capture the detail. For reasons of space and confidentiality of data, the findings below are only drawn from an analysis of the research groups' names, as included in the submissions. They should thus be read bearing in mind that a finer-grained analysis would be needed to ensure an accurate fit between each group and the analytic category to which it was allocated.

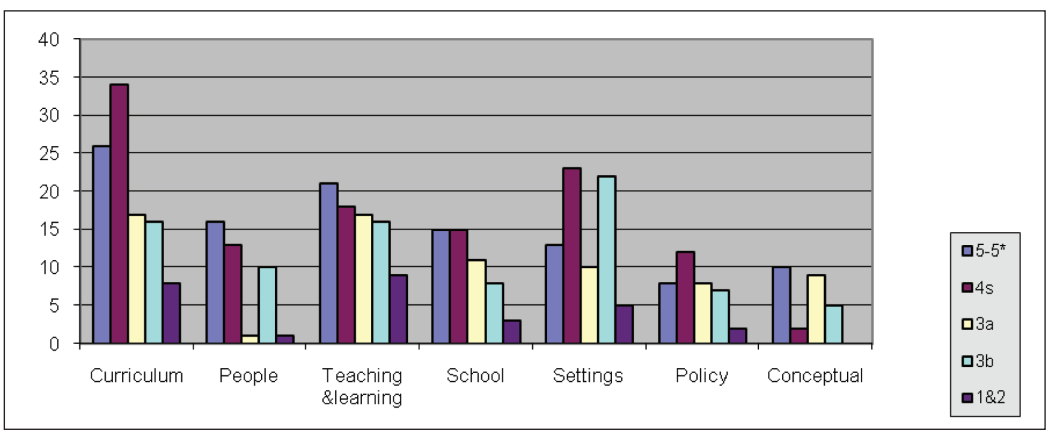
Some of the existent work on the distribution of research expertise in education, available at the time of producing the statistics presented here, had adopted a pre-designed analytic framework and/or content-analytic techniques; it had aspired towards a comprehensive coverage of the field, with non-overlapping categories of comparable weight – see Furlong and White (2001: 25–29), Kerr, MacDonald and Mathews (1998: 79–82), Bassey and

Constable (1997: 6), Nisbet (1995: 92), as well as the core keywords used in the EPPI-centre reviews (EPPI, 2003) and the field descriptors included in the RAE criteria (RAE, 1999a). For example, Bassey and Constable (1997) had looked at the distribution of the publications included in submissions to RAE 1996 across a diversity of "fields of enquiry" and found that fields of enquiry were differently connected with the RAE ratings of the institutions pursuing them. For instance, school/teacher/child issues, governance, disciplines in educational settings, and methodology featured more prominently among the interests of the higher-rated institutions, while curriculum issues, teacher education, and INSET were more likely to be pursued in the lower-graded departments.

Furthermore, a detailed report covering RAE 1996 by Kerr et al. (1998), commissioned from the NFER by HEFCE, aimed to "classify and map the research undertaken by education departments in England … and identify the concentrations or gaps in the research effort relating to particular themes". The outputs submitted to RAE 1996 were organised into six themes (with three eventually emerging as predominant: "education", "education policy", and "education management") and crosscut with several background variables (such as population characteristics, National Curriculum subjects, school type, "old" vs. "new" universities, etc.). The report found that the old universities had been awarded higher RAE ratings, and that the level of external funding correlated with the RAE rating. Also, the concentration of research on the three overarching themes seemed to be comparable across all levels of the rating scale, with the exception of a lower emphasis by the two 5* institutions on the theme of professional development.

Integrating such frameworks and testing them against the data may be a useful aim for future research. For the project on which this paper draws, however, identifying areas (no matter how specialised) where expertise/interest was unique and original was deemed more important than building an accurately weighted map of the field, which would have likely missed some of that detail. Therefore, a coding framework was generated from the data, comprised of six main areas: curriculum; students and teachers/education practitioners; teaching and learning; schooling, education and society; educational settings; policy, politics, and governance; conceptual, historical, and theoretical work; research methodology; comparative and international

Figure 7: Distribution of research groups – absolute figures

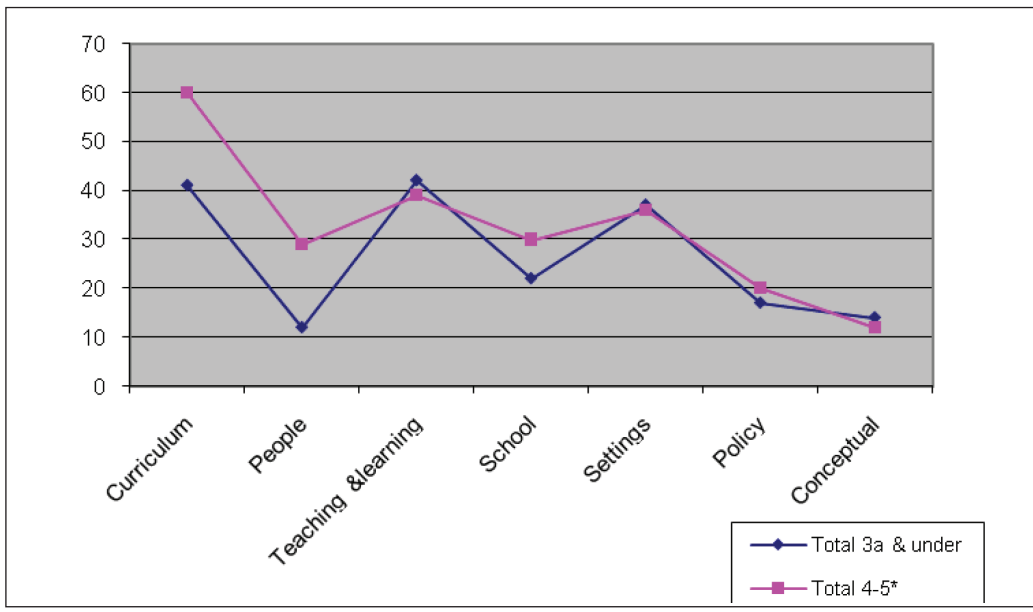


education; and "other" (a category that included unclassifiable items, as well as items that occurred only once or twice, such as "librarianship").

At a first glance, interest, and possibly expertise, in research on different educational settings (primary/secondary/tertiary, continuing education, work-based learning) appeared to be located within the 4 and under category, more than in the 5–5* institutions (Figure 7).

Even on aggregating 4 and 5–5*s, the proportion of those rated 3a and under still remained high in research on teaching and learning and research on issues specific to different educational settings (Figure 8). The extent to which this distribution connected with the teacher training/ research ratio or with methodological preferences (e.g. action research) and involvement with practitioner research in different groups of institutions would be worth further exploration.

Figure 8: Distribution of research groups – 4–5*s vs. 1–3a absolute figure



Some specialised areas of research seemed to be preferred differently by groups of institutions. For example, the contribution (proxied by the number of research groups) of institutions rated 3a and under appeared crucial/ unique in areas such as: teacher supply and retention; problem-based learning; learner-managed learning; secondary education; school-based learning; very able pupils; physical education; business education. Marginally more research groups were found in institutions graded 3a and under than in institutions graded 4–5*, in areas such as ICT, further and higher education, continuing education and lifelong learning, and action research. Once the RAE 2008 data are released, in April 2009, it would be interesting to see if higher-rated institutions have subsequently changed this distribution and assimilated these areas of research, some of which are currently well resourced.

By contrast, institutions rated 4 and above appeared to harbour crucial/exclusive contributions in: longitudinal research; methodological issues; economics of education; politics of education;

educational psychology; learning out-of-school – learning and society. Marginally more research groups were submitted in 4–5*s than in those rated 3a and under in the areas of assessment, philosophy of education, special educational needs, comparative and international education, and child development. Analysis of the RAE 2008 data by Oancea and Bridges (forthcoming) further explores the case of philosophy of education.

For more conclusive findings, the above analysis would need to be supplemented with fuller descriptions of the research groups and with the detailed data collected through form RA2 (Research Outputs). There are also a number of caveats. The extent to which the declared research groups do in fact express the research culture of institutions across the board is questionable. In addition, research groups may not be the most appropriate indicator of research expertise in different fields and sub-fields of research. Finally, it is not clear whether further cuts in funding for certain groups of institutions would necessarily have affected the areas where they had more exclusive expertise, rather than those that were also covered in higher-graded institutions.

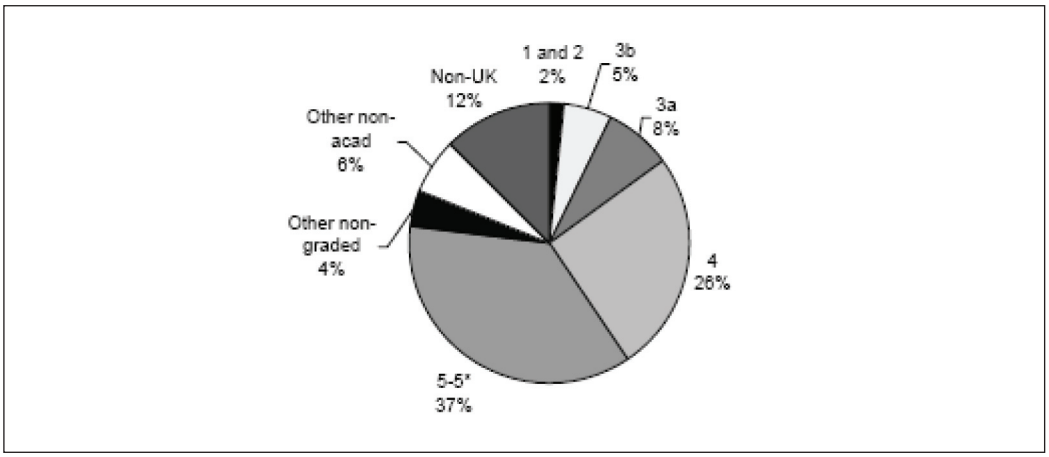
Authorship patterns in British education research journals pre- and post-RAE 2001

In the 2004 study, on which this paper draws, the above findings were complemented with a map of the patterns of institutional affiliation of named collective and individual authors of research articles in the *British Educational Research Journal*, the *British Journal of Educational Studies*, and the *Oxford Review of Education* from 2000 to 2003 (inclusive). The choice of the three journals was made on several grounds: (a) general in scope (rather than specialised) and targeting a wide range of audiences; (b) relatively high-ranking in international indexes – the three journals had been ranked 23, 32 and 38, respectively, by impact factor in the Social Sciences Citation Index 2002, and 18, 23 and 31 in the 2003 index; (c) accessible in electronic format. All articles published in the three journals from Jan 2000 (incl.) to Dec 2003 (incl.) – a total of 328 articles – were included in the analysis. The following items were omitted: book reviews (including thematic book reviews); editorials and editorial notes; notes on conferences, events, grants, prizes etc.; advertisements; obituaries. However, replies and rejoinders to previous articles and critiques were included. Three issues were left out altogether, due to temporary lack of access: *BJES*, 4/2003, and *OxRE*, 1/2001 and 2–3/2003.

The articles were coded for: publication date; author's declared institutional affiliation; and journal title. When an article had multiple authors, it was coded once for every institution involved (even if it had more than one author from that institution).

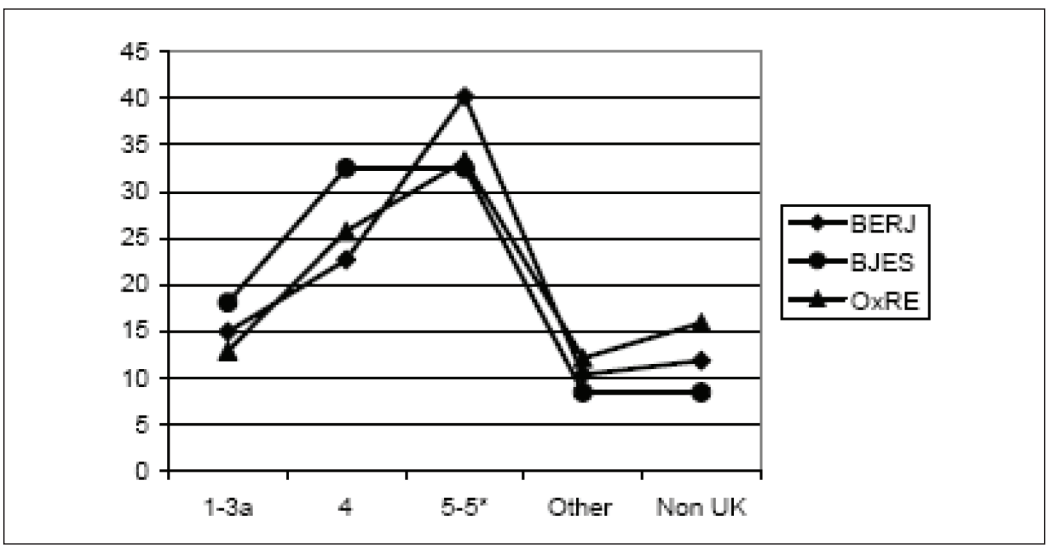
The departments rated 1–3a in RAE 2001 accounted for about 15% of the articles published; 4–5* departments, for about 63%; other UK institutions (i.e., non-academic or academic not entered for RAE 2001) accounted for 10%; and international sources, for 12%, across all three journals analysed and all four years considered (Figure 9). The number of publications from 1–3a and 4-rated departments declined in the years immediately following RAE 2001; the only steadily ascendant trends belonged to 5–5* and non-UK contributions.

Figure 9: Overall distribution of publications by type of institution



Over the entire period considered, *BJES* hosted the largest proportion of contributions from units rated 3a and under in RAE 2001, and a balanced number of contributions from 4 rated vs. 5–5* rated units. In contrast, *BERJ* had the highest proportion of 5–5* publications, compared to a very low proportion of 3a and under (Figure 10). The percentages in Figure 10 (i.e. the Y axis) were calculated within each journal, and not of the total entries analysed.

Figure 10: Publications by journal and institutional affiliation of authors, 2000–2003



The proportions changed between the period immediately before the RAE (year 2000) and that immediately following the release of the RAE 2001 rankings. For example, post-2001, the *Oxford Review of Education* published more articles with international authors, the *British Educational Research Journal* published less articles from institutions rated 3 and under, and more from 5s and 5*s, and the *British Journal of Educational Studies* levelled out the input from institutions rated 3 and under, 4, and 5. However intriguing they may be, these changes in themselves do not offer enough grounds to warrant strong inferences about the impact of the RAE.

The figures presented above offered a descriptive account, to inform heuristically critical assessments of the RAE. Though a growing body of literature has found positive relationships between academic affiliation, research productivity and patterns of publication (see Long et al., 1998), caution is needed in interpreting these findings. Further analyses may suggest that the high concentration of publications rated 5 and 5* (and from English institutions) might not necessarily be a case of RAE-related "institutional oligopoly" (Hodgson & Rothman, 1999), but, rather, a by-product of other variables, more or less directly related to the RAE. Some of the possible correlates are: discipline; gender (Taylor, 2001); co-authorship (Fisher et al., 1998); citation frequency (Gu, 2004); academic position of authors, organisational factors and other factors of research productivity (Dundar & Lewis, 1998); membership of editorial boards or of professional associations (Campanario, 1996); academic origin, or institution where authors gained their doctorate (Long et al., 1998); overall characteristics of the national academic environment (Teodorescu, 2000); etc.

Changing modes of accountability

The observations and comments above were only tentative. The main reason for this was not the weakness of data or the fluidity of analytic categories; but, mostly, the fact that all submissions were ultimately artefacts, rhetorical constructions within the demands and limitations of the 2001 assessment exercise. Their interpretation as signposts on the map of educational research expertise in the UK is therefore limited by their discursive function in that particular exchange. Rather than straightforwardly mapping the education research landscape of the time, they seem indicative of the impact of managerial definitions of research and of practices of accountability in research reporting throughout the home countries of the UK.

The past two to three decades have seen significant changes in accountability structures, regulation, and mechanisms in the UK, across a range of contexts, from state administration, to education and research. Ranson (2003: 460) describes the recent changes in accountability regimes in the context of new public management systems as a "revolution in accountability" aimed at remedying the "loss of public trust" in society (O'Neill, 2002). Ranson's "revolution" involved a succession and partial overlap of no less than five modes of accountability (one professional, and four instrumental): professional (based on professional judgment and using specialist knowledge as criterion); consumer (market competition, consumer responsiveness, consumer choice); contract (competitive tendering, service efficiency, technical efficiency); performative (public inspection, product quality, national standards and targets); and corporate (business plan, control infrastructure, profitability) (Ranson, 2003: 463–464). The outcome of these changes was that accountability ceased to be "part of the system" and became "the system itself", the distinctive features of which – consumer choice, contract efficiency, quality, and capital ownership – had been introduced gradually since 1979.

Research policies affecting education research in the United Kingdom over the past decade seemed to exhibit a mixture of features characteristic of each of the above modes, with growing emphasis on the latter four. Recent research policies encouraged contractualism and client orientation on the part of research "providers", as well as a focus on measurable outputs (e.g. the volume of publications and of research income, as in recent proposals for replacing the RAE with a metrics system – Oancea, 2007). However, satisfying contract specifications, the needs of the client, or pre-specified standards of measurable output are not commonly

accepted measures of success in research, as they are both highly questionable from the perspective of the researchers concerned, and seen as merely a basic "minimum requirement" (thus not a reason for praise) from that of the commissioners/ contractors.

Harley (2002) argued that the RAE had a "dual nature … as both a system of peer review *and* a managerial control strategy" (p. 203). This dualism may be due to the fact that the RAE was an attempt to support the selectivity principle by developing a generally acceptable hybrid between *professional values and modes of accountability* (i.e., collaborative accountability that resides within education and research communities and relies on conceptions of intrinsic excellence, academic identity, and professional ethics – Winch, 2001; Henkel, 1997, 2000) and *managerial ethos and modes of accountability* (i.e. "corporate", financial and performance-driven concepts of hierarchical accountability and auditability, transposed to the context of professionals being held to account by third parties, such as government and administrative structures, or corporations – Biesta, 2004; Harley, 2002; Strathern, 2000). However, rather than enabling an accountability regime with wider legitimacy, it – and other initiatives along similar lines – has been criticised by commentators for having aggravated the "erosion of professional power from state governments and the corporate community" (Webb, 2005: 191). Despite the RAE intending to recognise and draw together the standards of excellence characteristic to the range of education research communities *and* the measures of performance favoured by state administration, arguably in the end the emphasis fell firmly on the latter, as the basic statistics presented in this paper seem to indicate.

To a significant extent, recent criticisms of educational research (e.g. Tooley & Darby, 1998; Hillage et al., 1998, on "value for money", "relevance", and "impact") were a reflection of this emphasis, as it had been legitimised by several different governments in the 1990s (and particularly during the 1997 shift of power from a Conservative to a New Labour government). They reconfigured the relationship between policy-makers, practitioners and the public, on the one hand, and education researchers, on the other, as one between "investors (in)/ consumers (of)" research and "service providers/ producers" of education research; the gates to managerial definitions of accountability were thus thrown wide open. Hammersley's (2005: 189) argument about critical research also applies to criticism of research: "continual criticism tends to undermine public trust in those criticised and opens the way to demands for 'transparent' accountability, the impossible requirement that everything be made fully explicit and thereby open to sound immediate judgement by anyone".

The emerging "performative accountability" regime featured, among other things: a focus on performance against externally-determined targets at various levels; ground-level units of accountability (institutions and departments); quality assurance strategies; inspections; multiplication of assessment categories (i.e. from pass/fail to expanded rating scales); audit and public reporting; and the attachment of consequences to performance levels. Policies affecting education research in the UK over the past two decades display similar features; for example: the ever-sharper focus on "performance" and performance-related funding; the focus of reporting and assessment on "research units", rather than on systemic indicators; the constant emphasis on "transparency"; the expectation that private sector-inspired strategic management practices were adopted at unit level; the expanding rating scale from one RAE to the next; the increase in public reporting of research outputs at national and international level (e.g. OECD); etc.

Far from being a discrete event, accountability as "formal answerability" became inexorably oriented towards routinisation, and thus it re-directed practice towards narrower criteria of performance, and towards externally-imposed targets and quantifiable outcomes as the acceptable means of improvement (Ranson, 2003: 469).

These changes often happened at the expense of traditional academic values and practices. For example, as Henkel (1997, 2000) argued, they challenged British academics' "epistemic" identity, which was supported by collegiate peer-review and disciplinary recognition, as well as the balance between teaching and research as components of their academic identity. To many academics, the central place of peer review in the RAE framework made it seem as if the balance would eventually fall in favour of professional, rather than external and managerial, control over research practices, structures, and outputs. They hoped that the advent of institutionalised research assessment might lead to improved screening practices that would ultimately whip into shape, or otherwise push out of the system, or at least badly dent their self-esteem, "mediocre" and "idle" researchers. However, the outcome of the exercise proved to be in many cases only increased divisiveness and negative feelings between groups and individuals deemed as more or less "research active" (Harley, 2002).

The focus on visibility and high-stakes accountability systems also endangered capacity building processes, leading the system away from capacity "building" and towards capacity "trading", as may have been the case with researcher mobility in England over the past fifteen years, partly under the influence of the RAE. For example, Harley's (2002) respondents spoke of practices of "head-hunting and touting" (p. 199), and of "RAE appointees" (to mean "academics, especially in the new universities, … appointed to senior posts specifically to boost RAE ratings" – Harley, 2002: 193) (see also Elton, 2000; Kerr et al., 1998; NAPAG, 1996). Finally, as Deem, Mok, and Lucas (2008: 21) noted, drawing on Adams and Smith (2004), RAE-informed concentration of funding may have resulted in reduced regional research capacity and thus may have affected regional capacity for technological innovation and overall economic performance.[1]

Some have argued that, together with increasingly specific regulation, the internalisation of accountability as a constant routine rather than as a defined event amplified the risk of generating "fabrications of performance" and "constructions" of success and of good practice, based on "selective truths" that were likely to attract the benefits attached to the expected assessment of performance, rather than on honest, transparent and democratic accounts (see Ball's, 2001, systems of "performativity").

This is a problem that the switch to a metrics system of research assessment and allocation of research funding, as currently proposed in the UK, is unlikely to solve. The current reform proposals, aimed at replacing the essentially peer review-based Research Assessment Exercise with a metrics-informed Research Excellence Framework, have been surrounded with extensive debate, involving most key stakeholders, and including explicit criticisms from key organisations such as Research Councils UK, the British Academy, and the Royal Society of Arts. The criticisms prompted some revisions to the original proposals (which included excessive emphasis on bibliometrics, very little or no space for peer review in many fields, and a sharp divide between science, medicine, technology and engineering disciplines, on the one hand, and other fields, on the other). John Denham (Secretary of State in the Department for Innovation,

Universities and Skills) summed up the revised plans in the House of Commons on April 23, 2008 as follows: "we will move towards a single unified funding and assessment framework for all subject areas as originally planned, but within this, the balance of metric indicators, including bibliometrics, and light touch peer review will vary according to the subject".

In fact, the current proposals' emphasis on quantifiable models of evaluation (and of research quality) may push research assessment even farther away from a focus on internal excellence and critical deliberation, and towards one on external effectiveness and comparative performance; or, paraphrasing MacIntyre (1982), away from "the internal goods of excellence", such as epistemic honesty, benevolence, or virtuous deliberation, and towards "extrinsic goods of effectiveness", such as wealth creation, gaining and retaining power, or competitive advantage (Oancea & Furlong, 2007). All of the latter are recognisable as core values in the string of research policy-relevant UK White Papers and governmental documents stretching over the past two decades, as well as in the official criticisms of educational research in the late 1990s. They are also core values to what many have termed "managerialism", as opposed to "collegiality and professionalism" (Dearlove, 1997; Harley & Lee, 1997).

The differences between accountability as hierarchical answerability ("holding to account" for assessment purposes, followed by a distribution of punishments or rewards) and accountability as communicative reason ("giving an account" – producing and exchanging narratives that explicate the reasons behind activities and their normative grounds – Giddens, 1984) highlight the ways in which overly instrumental hierarchical accountability entails a denial of professional agency. As such, the mechanisms of "specifying performance and regulating compliance" (Ranson, 2003: 460), be they in the shape of externally regulated assessment exercises or in that of quantitative indicators of research performance, may lack legitimacy within professional communities. In the fast pace of today's academic life, it may be difficult to think of an alternative to "performative" accountability. Some have argued for a system that enabled discursive accountability, which would involve, for example, exchange of accounts, dialogue (Thomas & Martin, 1996), a focus on internal "goods of excellence" (MacIntyre, 1982), reasonableness of communication (Habermas, 1984), reflective agency, and synergies between modes of knowledge and their virtues (Oancea & Furlong, 2007). Although each of these suggestions is worth exploring, a coherent and powerful alternative to the current regime of accountability is still to be crystallised.

Concluding comments

Over the past few decades, research assessment has become increasingly institutionalised at the national and international levels, as well as more stratified (more than one assessment layer for each individual unit of research), and specialised (assessment requires specific expertise and is becoming more professionalised) (Oancea, 2007). At the same time, the actual practices of research assessment and of allocation of funding tended to rely increasingly on technical, bordering on instrumental, definitions and interpretations of research quality and capacity, as well as of the assessment process itself. Although the internal processes of the main performance-management mechanism for research in the UK, the Research Assessment Exercise, were based on the essentially collegial practice of peer review, the exercise, as well as the overall ethos surrounding it, were part of a different game, that of efficient concentration of resources through competitive allocation. Current proposals for reform of the research assessment system in the

United Kingdom have so far not signalled a move away from instrumental interpretations of research assessment and research quality.

Recent controversies about the role and quality of educational research in the UK were not necessarily the result of either policy-supported administrative close-mindedness, or a wholesale refusal of accountability on the part of the academia and of researchers. Rather, they may point to a clash of interpretations of accountability. Hence "corporate" answerability may be advocated in public management circles, but deemed dangerous and unacceptably narrow in academic ones; while "collegial" accountability may be perceived from outside the inner sanctum of academia as too weak and unstructured. If this is the case, the way forward is not the reinforcement of targets, indicators, standards and techniques of managerial accountability, nor the closure of academia to external scrutiny; but to strive towards restoring the discursive, democratic and ethical dimensions of the relationship between research, the public, and policy. Looking towards the future, this would involve reclaiming the ethical core of education research, scrutinising its epistemological basis, and reaffirming its internal standards of excellence.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on research carried out with the support of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). The suggestions and comments of colleagues, in particular Richard Smith, John Furlong, Richard Pring, Ralf StClair, and Ann Arscott, as well as those of two anonymous reviewers, are gratefully acknowledged.

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Appendix: RAE 2001–definitions

Research income sources:

OST Research Councils et al. – income from research councils covered by the Office of Science and Technology and the British Academy

AHRB – Arts and Humanities Research Board

JIF – Joint Infrastructure Fund provided from OST or Wellcome Trust

JREI – Joint Research Equipment Initiative

Research staff:

Category A staff – academic staff in post at the submitting institution on 31 March 2001, who were not transferred between eligible institutions in the period 1 April 2000 to 30 March 2001

FTE – Full Time Equivalent: the extent of the contracted duties of a member of staff at 31 March 2001, as compared to those of a typical member of staff in the same category, up to a maximum of 1.00 FTE per member of staff.

Selected staff – staff actively engaged in research who were chosen to be submitted by institutions to the 2001 RAE

Note

1. Contrast this view with Georghiou (2009) who argues that regional supply of skilled graduates and technology development equally important missions of higher education to research excellence, and that institutions embracing these missions should be funded separately. Developing a streamed funding system should take priority to "arguing how to compensate the also-rans in a race they never should have entered" (Guardian, 20 Jan 2009). See also Lawn and Furlong (2007).