

INTRODUCTORY EDITORIAL

The politics of research assessment exercises and accountability – an international overview

Richard Smith

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

ABSTRACT

This paper acts as an introduction to the individual presentations in this collection and to the underlying discourses of international research assessment exercises and accountability. It is now over two decades since the United Kingdom (UK) introduced the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1986. Since this time academic institutions, notably the universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have been subjected to five further RAEs, the latest of which occurred in 2008. Hong Kong, a former British colony whose sovereignty as a SAR (Special Administrative Region) was “returned” to the People’s Republic of China in 1997, had its own version of the RAE as early as 1993, and has had three subsequent evaluations since, the last one in 2006. By contrast the New Zealand equivalent research evaluation, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF), began in 2002 with a second and partial round in 2006, and the next full round scheduled for 2012. Unlike its counterparts in the UK and Hong Kong where the unit of analysis for evaluation is the academic unit (or department), Aotearoa/New Zealand academics are rated on an individual basis. Australian higher education is also beginning on a path for its own variant of the RAE/PBRF. Initially planned for 2006 then postponed until 2008, the then named Research Quality Framework (RQF), was abolished in 2007 by the incoming Federal Labour Government. The Kevin Rudd led government has replaced it with a new initiative called the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), scheduled to commence in 2009 (see Watson, 2008).

This double issue volume of *ACCESS* on the politics and accountability of research evaluation exercises reports on the impacts of such mechanisms in the countries noted above (except Northern Ireland). This volume builds upon a paper by Orr and Paetzold (2006) on the impact of the German system of research assessment reported in an earlier edition of *ACCESS*. The UK as noted above has a long history of research evaluations, which was then exported to Hong Kong and modified for local conditions. Many countries throughout Europe, especially those in Scandinavia (see Coryn, this volume) and the European Economic Union (EEU) devised their own systems responding to their own governments calls for monitoring of research funding and rewarding of research productivity (see von Tunzelmann & Mbula, 2003). Other nations around the world, from parts of Asia to Australasia, followed suit as a way of redistributing scarce research funding around the higher education sector. This volume has three distinct but inter-related sections. Firstly there are three articles reporting on cross-country comparative studies of research assessment exercises or various systems, which provide international comparative ratings of various universities (in the form of league tables) e.g. the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES), or the Jiao Tong University (see Marginson, 2007; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). The second part consists of two articles as

reflections of the experiences of two academics, the first from the PBRF and the second the latest RAE. The third section consists of a series of articles reporting on research assessment evaluations in the following specific countries: Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China (in the Asia region); Australia (two articles); and articles of the effects of the RAE in England, Wales and Scotland.

In 2006 in a previous issue of *ACCESS* (volume 25 (2)) addressing the issues of "Politics of globalisation, research and pedagogy", Elizabeth Grierson (2006) observed that we were witnessing increasing pressures on academics as educational work becomes evaluated and "managed" via structural reforms and policy drivers, which are pursuing evaluative performance and performativity. Notions of both the audit culture and audit explosions come to mind when noting these trends (see Power, 1997; Strathern, 1997, 2000). This volume addresses the issue of increasing scrutiny of research endeavours, particularly in the university sector.

The volume has had a particularly long gestation. I had a long-standing critical interest in the politics of research assessment and the increasing internationalisation and globalisation of university rankings processes, and approached the Executive Editor with a proposal to guest co-edit a two issue volume on this topic (having invited Bob Lingard as guest co-editor) back in 2006. My interest was both personal and professional; I had read a considerable amount of the critical literature on the effects of the RAE on the discipline of Education, in particular, and also for the newly designated post-1992 universities as opposed to the longer established ones and those in the elite Russell Group (see for example, Barnett, 2000; Bassey, 2003; Delanty, 2001; Henkel, 2000; Kogan & Hanney, 2000; Lucas, 2004, 2006; McNay, 2003; Oancea, 2004a, 2004b; Sikes, 2006). Members of professional educational associations such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and their executive members were writing critiques and position papers to initiate changes for the impending 2008 RAE. Dominic Orr's (2004) article on steering mechanisms for research in higher education which compared the UK system to that of other European nations, in particular Germany, was highly informative and instrumental in my thinking at the time as there was little written providing overviews of what was occurring globally in terms of research evaluations as cross-country comparisons. After the first PBRF in 2003 a group of Aotearoa/New Zealand academics had published similar critiques on the effects of the PBRF to those happening in the UK (see for example, Ashcroft, 2005; Codd, 2005; Hall, Morris Matthews & Sawicka, 2004; Middleton, 2005; and a book of 18 articles co-edited on the subject by Joce Jesson and myself (Smith & Jesson, 2005) for the national research association, New Zealand Association for Research in Education). Around the same time colleagues in our sister organisation in Australia (Australian Association for Research in Education) were also writing critically about the potentially negative effects of the newly proposed Research Quality Framework (RQF), especially for Education as a discipline, based upon similar experiences in the UK and New Zealand (see, for example, the *RARE* volume edited by Blackmore, Wright & Harwood, 2006). These literature bases and discussions with colleagues at international conferences such as AARE, along with Simon Marginson's articles in Australia and other scholars around the world who were writing on the impact of university league tables on research endeavours, prompted my thinking about a special edition investigating these somewhat problematic issues and their effects on academic labour.

Being familiar with the literature and who was writing in this highly political and contested domain I invited a series of international scholars to write a range of scholarly articles outlining the effects of research evaluations in their own countries. In total some 22 invitations were extended to academics in specific countries mostly in Europe (the UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands), North America (Canada and the United States of America), Australasia (Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia), and also Asia (China, Hong Kong and Singapore). Unfortunately due to other competing research demands not all of these scholars were able to take up the challenge, and many offered names of other academics to write in their place. Thus, out of the initial 22 invitations a total of 13 accepted to write reports of research assessment exercises on the following countries: Aotearoa/New Zealand (two articles on the PBRF); Australia (two articles on the RQF); England (one); Germany (one published earlier as Orr and Paetzol, 2006); Canada (two articles); China (one); Hong

Kong (one); Scotland (one); Singapore (one); the USA (one); and finally Wales (one). However, unfortunately, despite the best efforts as co-editors we were unable in the end to secure papers from France, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, the USA, and the second Canadian article. In addition, due to rigorous double-blind peer refereeing from high profile international academics with significant expertise in this area, three papers were ultimately rejected.

In terms of building up both the international profile of this journal and also to source information from outside its usual country-domains (notably Oceania/Australasia) it was necessary to secure contributions from luminaries in this field and many of the contributors will be well-known to readers. However, while the overall aim was to internationalise the journal, whose reputation was already well established in the southern hemisphere, an alternative agenda was to balance contributions from internationally renowned scholars with contributions as well from new and emerging scholars who would be regarded as early career academics. We believe this double issue has more than satisfied these potentially competing agendas.

There is no claim in this journal that these articles are truly representative of all the world's countries higher education research assessment systems, yet they do provide a range of perspectives from seven countries on this issue of global importance. Given that the RAE has been addressed extensively by academics in England, it is highly instructive to have articles from scholars located in both Scotland and Wales, often not referred to in the literature. Thus, these are valuable additions to this area of scholarship. The two Australian articles provide both historical and contemporary perspectives on the development and demise of the RQF and the rise of the newly-inspired ERA, thus providing new information on this topic. While there is a large volume of literature on the RAE from the UK, to date there has been little written about the effects of this British-inspired system imposed in the SAR within the Hong Kong context – the article in this volume by Colin Evers and Kokila Katyal reverses this trend. Furthermore, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong's "giant" neighbor, has also had little written about its research accountability mechanisms and therefore this is an important and informative article.

The articles are scholarly in that they provide appropriately sourced literature reviews, empirical evidence and convincing arguments, yet many are also highly personalised accounts from academic experiences within the academy, from those in positions of authority as heads of departments, chairs and members or former members of the RAE panels, or in one case a former chairperson. Thus the insights provided are from both outside and from within the academy and system. In one particular article the perspective offered is from an academic who experienced the first round of the PBRF and then moved to Scotland where he became a Head of Department/School preparing for the impending 2008 RAE.

Part of academic life involves networking with international peers at conferences. Two such occasions were highly serendipitous in the production of this volume. While the country accounts provide much in the way of rich data informing others of what happens in these domains, as co-editors we felt there needed to be more accounts of larger cross-country comparative studies offering insights from across the globe. On visits to New Zealand I was fortunate to meet two academics (Chris Coryn and Jan Currie) working on this kind of research and the addition of their two articles provides some revealing and very useful data and analyses. The final paper of this type by Charles Crothers is one which exposes the inconsistencies and inadequacies of international league tables for ranking universities.

Given the extended time period over which this volume has materialised from conception to completion (two years), and given also the highly volatile and competitive international market of academia (and perhaps somewhat ironically for what is being revealed in this journal), of the 18 authors – 14 articles and preface – five or over a quarter (approximately 28%) have changed institutions in this two year period, and four of these five had moved to different countries. Another observable trend which perhaps reflects the increasing importance placed on single-authored international publications by research assessment regimes is that only four of the 15 papers

(including the preface) in this volume are co- or multiple-authored, and thus the remaining almost three quarters (73%) have a sole author. This volume offers 12 full articles from seven countries, including three comparative articles and two to three more personal and reflective pieces; plus two articles from the guest co-editors, namely this introductory overview and the concluding article.

As this issue goes to press it has been announced that the RAE in the UK after the 2008 exercise will no longer remain in its current form, and many in academia have been heralding its demise. It appears that the new system to be adopted is one closer to a bibliometric and quantitative one. This is occurring ironically while Australia has shunned this former model in favour of processes with more peer-review of “quality” over “quantity”, firstly with its proposed RQF and now the ERA. (For a discussion of the previous model in Australia see Bates, 2003). The final section of this introduction provides a very brief precis of the articles to follow.

Overview of the volume

Articles one to three of *ACCESS* constitute part one, with each providing a focus on larger comparative issues of research assessment systems. The first two by Chris Coryn and Jan Currie both present overviews on a large scale of different research evaluation systems in operation around the globe. Coryn’s study draws from his recently completed PhD research and is based upon data from 16 countries. Citing other researchers in this area Coryn argues that there is almost a worldwide interest in the United Kingdom model, which has become a benchmark for research evaluation, and he concludes that while the New Zealand model, the PBRF, may be one of the most controversial systems it is one of the best systems in terms of its quality ranking compared to the other systems reviewed (see Coryn, Hattie, Scriven & Hartmann, 2007). Currie’s article is a useful companion piece to that of Coryn, and while traversing similar themes it draws upon data from a three-year Australian Research Council (ARC) study (see Currie, Vidovich & Yang, 2003–2007) and reports on data collected about the RAE in Hong Kong, comparing these to the RAE in the UK and PBRF in New Zealand. Drawing upon literature that critiques journal rankings and citation indices (indexes) Currie argues that these mechanisms are flawed in a number of ways. Currie’s paper provides a useful bridge from the first to the third article by Charles Crothers. In this critical piece on international citation indexes and international league tables Crothers’ asserts that league tables are widely thought to suffer methodological difficulties and also to give rise to deleterious consequences. The methodological difficulties include the unsoundness of many of the frameworks, which guide the collection and presentation of data, and the quality of the data that are deployed.

Articles four and five make an alternative pairing and constitute part two of this volume. The first by Craig Ashcroft and Richard Smith is based on recent data collected in New Zealand about the effects of the PBRF upon academic workloads and identity. Drawing upon a range of literature from the UK and New Zealand the authors argue that contestable forms of research assessment encourage a sense of conformity whereby the activities and practices of academics are assessed according to a grade-based hierarchy that not only defines an academic’s research productivity, but also creates new norms against which that productivity is measured. Supporting the findings of Ashcroft and Smith, Brian Findsen’s paper is a reflective account of someone who had direct experience of both the PBRF and RAE, which experiences he compares and contrasts. Findsen clearly articulates his own perspective (as a Head of Department) leading a Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) in a Scottish university, and concludes that as an RAE champion and HoD, he was able to detect both positive and negative effects on individual academics. Furthermore, he notes DACE was already a “good player” in research terms, and thus the RAE has not impacted too negatively on individuals’ work though it clearly complicated their work patterns.

The third and final part of this volume consists of seven papers dealing with specific country reports and the challenges faced by academics in relation to research evaluations. The two articles on the Australian system, including one by Jill Blackmore and another by Trevor Gale and Jan Wright,

present state of the art accounts a year after a change of government in Canberra (Australia). They are timely for identifying the changes to the new system of assessment, the ERA. Blackmore's article draws upon earlier critical literature around the proposed RQF model and, utilising policy sociological perspectives, suggests that this model was flawed as a policy mechanism. While dealing with a similar topic, Gale and Wright take a slightly different approach drawing upon the work of Maton (2005) in their analyses, yet their conclusions cohere with Blackmore that the RQF was flawed.

These articles are followed by the papers from the 'Asian' region, from China and Hong Kong respectively. Rui Yang's article selects and critiques seven principal rankings systems currently practised in China. Yang argues that the rankings do not contribute to institutional and system improvement. Yang (citing Tong, 2002) concludes that the developments of university ranking in China during the past two decades have involved visible shifts from a narrow central focus on public objective research indicators, especially in science and technology areas, to an overall assessment with a combination of natural, technological and social sciences incorporating subjective indicators such as reputation. In relation to Hong Kong, Colin Evers and Kokila Katyal argue that this nation was one the first of the East Asian communities to apply quality measures to monitor the higher education sector. Furthermore, noting some of the specificities of the RAE in Hong Kong, these authors argue because of the small country domain, the peculiarities of the dual language academics in their country might be at a disadvantage compared to colleagues in other larger country domains.

The remaining three papers, in part three, focus on the effects of the UK RAE on academics in three country spheres: Wales, Scotland and England. Discussing the situation in Wales, the Sara Delamont, Gareth Rees and Sally Power paper focuses on educational research, and the scholarly identities of educational researchers, in post-devolution Wales. These authors note that the paper draws on, and should be read in conjunction with, a paper published by two of the authors (Rees & Power, 2007). Provocatively, Delamont, Rees and Power conclude that the scholarly identity of an educational researcher employed in Cardiff University since the 1996 RAE is completely different from that of such a researcher employed anywhere else in Wales, and that they are in a somewhat privileged position compared to academics in other higher education institutions. In the Scottish context Sally Brown writes from an interesting position as someone with specific insights into the RAE and its impact upon the Scottish academic community (as a former RAE panel member). Brown's analysis echoes earlier critiques raised by Findsen. Brown notes that despite significant strengths in Scottish educational research, its institutions have had relatively poor performances in the education RAE and concludes that careers, institutional futures, the practices of higher education and personal esteem have all been fundamentally influenced by the assessment of research performance. Having already noted the long established history of critiques of the RAE from England the final article in the volume is by Alis Oancea. Oancea reports on data from the submissions and ratings from RAE 2001 to reflect on the shifts in public understandings of researcher accountability over the past few decades, in the United Kingdom at the level of institutional (rather than individual) accountability.

The final paper by my co-editor Bob Lingard sums up the major arguments traversed in this volume and looks toward the future outcome of research assessment regimes, reflecting upon his own experiences in three countries (Australia, England and Scotland) over the past five years (Bob was in England 2004–2006, and Scotland 2007–2008, returning to Brisbane in mid 2008).

I commend the articles to you and trust that there will be much for readers to ponder, reflect upon and possibly challenge and critique for the future. We would welcome further articles from different perspectives on these issues, and in particular from a number of countries not traversed in this current volume. As this volume goes to press an edited book which traverses a similar domain is about to be launched, edited by Tina Besley (2008, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA), which could be seen as a companion text to this ACCESS collection.

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