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Assessing research quality in education: The Hong Kong research assessment exercise

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong is one the first of the East Asian communities to apply quality measures to monitor the higher education sector. The University Grants Committee of Hong Kong (UGC) a non statutory advisory body has the funding responsibility for eight universities within the territory including research universities and a teacher training institute. For the last three decades the UGC has been a key advisor to the Government of Hong Kong in matters pertaining to the growth, funding and more recently quality assurance of higher education in Hong Kong. In this paper we provide some background to the UGC's approach to assessing research in Hong Kong's universities, examine in more detail the most recent Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in relation to the discipline of education, and offer some critical reflections on its operation in terms of a contrast between a number of features of good educational research and whether the machinery for assessing these is conducive to the production of such research.

Background

In the early 1990s, the UGC decided that its methodology for the assessment of institutions' current funding requirements needed to be fine-tuned, especially taking into account the provision for research infrastructural funding. This decision went hand in hand with the establishment of a Research Grants Council (RGC) under the aegis of the UGC to administer grants for academic research projects undertaken in the UGC funded institutions (French, Massy & Young, 2001). The UGC has thus engaged in a system of research assessment as an input to the assessment of the public recurrent funding allocations of the institutions under its aegis and as an extension to its other quality assurance activities (French et al., 2001).

The model adopted was based on the British RAE system. In practical terms, the essential aim of this exercise was to provide ratings of the quality of research being undertaken in each unit of assessment (usually a department) in an institution, thereby furnishing reliable performance information that the relevant funding bodies can then use to allocate the available research funds. As in the UK, the aim in Hong Kong was to rate "cost centres" (academic departments) and hence the institution, not individual staff members. In the RAE, those faculty members who have all research outputs identified concordant to the threshold set by the UGC would be considered as "active researchers". The focus is thus to determine the "research index of a cost centre, i.e. the percentage of full-time equivalent researchers in each cost centre whose research work is judged to have reached or surpassed the quality threshold" (UGC, 2006). The more active researchers a cost centre has, the more funding the centre obtains.

The primary goal of the Hong Kong RAE is thus to provide reliable information on research performance (in the form of departmental research indices) that can be used by the UGC to allocate research funds between the degree-granting institutions within the Special Administrative Region. More generally, the RAE is designed to:

- provide the institutions with an incentive to improve their performance management systems for research;
- strengthen the research culture within institutions;
- increase the incentives for the production of high-quality research outputs; and
- allocate resources to areas and institutions of high research intensity. (Boston, 2002)

The UGC guidelines for 2006 RAE states that:

> The funding of each institution is made up of three elements: provision for teaching; provision for research; and provision related to performance against role. It is the UGC's intention that public funds in support of research should be allocated preferentially to those institutions which demonstrate that they can use them well. There is therefore a need to assess research performance in some way so that it can be reflected in the funding level. ... The Research Assessment exercise (RAE) is thus part of the UGC's performance based funding assessment process. It measures the output and quality of research of the UGC-funded institutions by cost centre as one of the key factors for allocating the research portion of the institution a recurrent grant for the next triennium (i.e. 2008–2011) in a publically accountable way. (http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/faq/q304.htm)

RAEs have been held in Hong Kong in 1993, 1996, 1999 and the last one was carried out in 2006, after the UGC decided that the time between each exercise was to be extended to six years. A higher quality threshold, the raising of the standard of assessment, refining operational procedures (for example more and larger panels with international and local practitioners) are the ways that have been adopted to strengthen the process. There was also a complementary review system to gauge the quality of teaching and learning in the universities. This is known as the teaching and learning quality process review (TLQPR), albeit this is not directly linked to the allocation of funds. The education system in Hong Kong is poised for a major reform with the proposed introduction of the four year undergraduate programme. The RAE system is currently under review. The UGC notes on its website:

- While the UGC is satisfied that the RAE in its current form has served its purpose successfully, we consider that, having conducted four RAE exercises since 1993, it is opportune to conduct a full review of the approach and the value of the research assessment and resource allocation mechanisms.
- The UGC is collecting views and feedback from local academics, and plans to conduct a comprehensive review of the current mechanism and methodology. (http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/faq/q304.htm)

Therefore, it appears likely that the next round of RAE may see changes in its format.

The definition of assessment and its implications

From RAE in 1999, the UGC has adopted a broad definition of scholarship and research adapted from two of the Carnegie Foundation's special reports which covers "discovery, integration, application and teaching" as the basis for assessment. In other words each research item is classified by the staff member and the institution (not by the UGC or the panels) as an output of one of the four scholarships. This falls in line with the UGC's view that research is not an isolated activity but intrinsically linked with teaching and learning:

> the message of a broadened definition of scholarship high quality output in all forms of scholarship will be encouraged and assessed across a broad front. This will help address the perceived bias in favour of basic/traditional research. (UGC, 2006)

Workshops were held prior to the RAE in order to familiarise panel members with the ramifications of the four types of scholarships, but adopting the Carnegie Foundation's definition of scholarship and research proved to be not without its drawbacks. French et al. (2001) point out that at the outset of the 1999 exercise there was some confusion about the concept of scholarship of teaching and exemplary teaching itself. Ironically, after much discussion the eventual operationalisation of the concept – the scholarly outputs arising from teaching which were innovative, generalisable, accessible and peer-reviewed – arguably differed from the terms of the original Boyer report (1990). Secondly, when the research items were submitted for the 1999 RAE it was found that the majority were ascribed to the scholarship of "discovery", and finally, all panels had difficulty with assessing the outputs in the categories of "integration", "application" and particularly "teaching" (French, Massy, Ko, Siu & Young, 1999). Similarly, the institutions have viewed this broadening of the definition of research ambiguously, some preferring an assessment of the institution's performance in basic research, while others accepted the broader definition of research and scholarship but questioned the panel's competency in assessing some of the categories (French et al., 2001). Some operational problems were also noted during the 1999 exercise in Hong Kong – at the outset there was confusion in the understanding of the concept of "the scholarship of teaching" and exemplary teaching practices. During the exercise there were issues regarding the assessment of co-authored papers, research conducted in other institutes and the research of new staff. More importantly, French et al. (2001) raise concerns that the relative newness of Hong Kong's research culture and the smallness of the academic community may have affected the assessment, as there were insufficient numbers of experts available to gauge the research outputs and panel members occasionally felt uncomfortable at the idea of having to assess items that did not fall within their own specific discipline areas.

The 2006 RAE process

For the 2006 RAE, UGC invited institutions to submit research material in respect of any member of staff who the institution feels has output that can be assessed. As in the earlier RAE, output items (not to be restricted to papers in journals only) were acceptable providing that they were "published or made publically available in other forms within the assessment period" or not yet published but accepted for publication. Materials that may not be in publishable form (for example, videos) were accepted if they could be evaluated for "merit and as assessment obtained." The UGC stressed that a maximum of six output items could be submitted, however individual staff or institutions on their behalf might wish to submit fewer items based on the quality of the item. There is thus a clear message that it is the quality of the output items that matter, not the quantity. In most cases decisions could be made on the basis of four items. Moreover, each institution was also required to submit a Research Strategy Statement to reflect its research philosophy, vision and priorities in relation to its role, development and the distribution of research efforts in the four categories of scholarship. The institution's research-focus areas were to be indicated and an explanation given as to why they were selected. Institutions were also asked for strengths, standards and overall research strategy in the long run. The threshold standard was raised, with the definition of the 2006 exercise being:

> Quality of output equates to a level of excellence appropriate to the discipline in Hong Kong and showing evidence of international excellence. (UGC, 2006)

The UGC attempted to pre-empt concern over an area of possible conflict – international excellence and international publications versus local publications – detailing the ramification of the key terms by defining in some detail the expectations of "internal excellence" and "international" and "local" publications. With a view to greater transparency in the procedure, the UGC stated that the RAE 2006 results would be released to the public by making available the operational details (such as panel membership and evaluation methodology), the RAE results at the sector-wide level would be published as well as the institutional level in aggregated form in the disciplinary area. Reading material would also be published to help the public and press understand the statistics and thereby gauge the trend of research performance in the universities.

For the current exercise there were thirteen assessment panels (Biology, Health Sciences, Physical Sciences, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Built Environment, Law, Business Studies and Economics, Social Sciences, Humanities, Fine Arts and Education) involving 208 local and international panel members. About 18,700 research items by 3,500 staff were assessed (UGC, 2007). Though there has been little empirical investigation on the impact of the RAE, the results of the RAE 2006, which were announced in March 2007, showed that all the eight UGC-funded higher education institutions in Hong Kong have made remarkable improvements to achieve "international excellence in research across a broad front of disciplines" (UGC, 2007). Commenting on the results, Dr Alice Lam, Chairman of the UGC, said:

> The UGC is pleased to learn that all UGC-funded institutions have made great strides in their research performance since the last RAE in 1999. Many of our colleagues are internationally known top-notch researchers and this reflects the effort of our institutions in excelling in research over the years.

She added that the RAE 2006 results will be factored into the Research portion of the institutions' recurrent funding. At the time of writing this paper, a table showing the aggregate results of individual institutions of the thirteen assessment panels has been made available on the UGC website.

Insights from the research literature

There is a very modest body of work that contributes to the literature on RAE in Hong Kong though some contentious issues have been raised. On one hand, the benefits of the process have been recognized in Hong Kong (see, French et al., 2001) and in other countries, for example the UK (Harley, 2000) as arguably there has been an increased focus on research resulting in an increase in the number and quality of publications. However Mok (2000) critiques the RAE by stating that a "publish or death" syndrome has now emerged in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. Research has gained precedence over teaching as promotion, substantiation, renewal of contracts and extension of service beyond retirement is directly related to the researcher's publication track record. Scholars in the UK have also commented about this unintended consequence of the RAE (Hare, 2003). The increasing pressure to be "research active" has led to some academics to feel a loss of freedom over their time management, teaching and research roles and scholars have also raised concerns that the RAE has distorted the pattern of academic publishing (Bence & Oppenheim, 2004; Hare, 2003). Elton (2000) commenting about an intended outcome of the RAE in the UK stresses "[B]ut above all, teaching has suffered. This is clearly in contradiction to the principle that research and teaching should support each other (UGC, 2006).

Mok (2001) also notes that the UGC admits that the exercise has put weight on "academic" research in terms of articles published in international peer-reviewed journals. Assessment relies heavily on this kind of publication as the sole indicator of quality. Articles or research published in less well-known, regional and even local publications are ignored (see also, Mak, 1999). Paisey and Paisey (2005) endorse a similar phenomenon in accounting education research in the UK. They note that there are strong indications that a large body of accounting-research literature does not appear in the RAE and suggest that the RAE is a "highly managed process with decisions being taken about who and what will be submitted in order to influence the RAE result". Moreover, they raise concerns that there is a tendency for "short-term focus" of research and conservative papers to maximize the chances of publication within the RAE period (Paisey & Paisey, 2005).

We shall comment at greater length on some of these issues when we have discussed a model for research assessment that can be used in a normative way.

Some features of "good" research

In attempting to evaluate the Hong Kong RAE as a methodology for assessing and promoting quality in educational research, our strategy is to first explore a small number of key features that would be desirable to have in high quality educational research in a number of areas. However, our approach is not to focus directly on whether the RAE can detect these features (we think it can) so much as to explore whether the RAE's operation promotes or hinders the conducting of such research. That is, we are investigating the issue of whether there is a satisfactory congruence between the machinery for assessing good research and the conditions required to produce good research. Features of quality in research are therefore identified with an eye on the sorts of conditions that are conducive to their production and maintenance.

What constitutes high-quality research in education? In general, educational research serves a variety of worthwhile purposes, so that a range of features will figure in determining quality, with not all being required for every piece of research and considerable overlap in most research. We consider four such purposes here: description; policy; a normative perspective; and theory.

Much educational research purports to describe educational phenomena, from past arrangements to the present time. One set of requirements here is empirical adequacy together with some epistemological strategy to indicate how this is achieved. Such a strategy is the stuff of methodology. However, because there is no such thing as a view from nowhere, the facts themselves are described by way of some theoretical vocabulary that reflects an interpretive framework. This is not simply a matter of adopting one or another theoretical perspective in order to account for a set of data. Rather, many of the data in educational research are constitutively defined by virtue of being institutional facts (Searle, 1995). For example, just as the powers of a piece in a game of chess are defined by the rules of the game, rather than being given in the material properties of the piece, so the distinction between a teacher and a non-teacher is not settled empirically by observing particular individuals. Whether someone is a teacher (as distinct from being engaged in the act of teaching) can depend on a range of contractual conditions that specify an employment role and entry into that role. Good research should either contain an epistemological defence of these interpretive frameworks and theories, or gesture towards where these can be found, pointing to the larger methodological and other traditions in which they are embedded.

Standards for good policy research that goes beyond the merely descriptive are demanding, particularly where such research attempts to specify what will happen under counterfactual conditions. Invariably such research must contain, either implicitly or explicitly, a causal model. The reason for this is because whereas description can be an accurate representation of the statistical structure of past events and happenings, policy is often a prescription for intervention, or change. Unless any discovered regularities funding predictions about the consequences of change are also causally significant, the predicted outcomes will occur only by coincidence (see Evers, 2001: 104–105; Meehl, 1970). Although the criteria for good theory are similar for descriptive research and policy research, there is a heavier premium on good theory in policy research, at least in those circumstances where it is to form the basis for educational change. The complexity of educational policy research carries some additional demands for methodology, since discerning the role of variables in producing change outcomes is difficult. Pilot studies and rich case studies can be helpful here. So too are more longitudinal approaches that track change over time, especially where a piecemeal approach to change has been adopted in order to benefit from successive bands of feedback.

Policy and other research that is evaluative invariably involve a normative perspective. And there is no shortage of such perspectives. A rough taxonomy of those associated with the justification of ends would include utilitarian arguments, Kantian considerations such as those that flourish in the critical social science tradition, virtue ethics, both Aristotelian and Confucian versions, intuitionism, and appeal to prevailing cultural, social and religious values (MacIntyre, 1998; Graham, 2004). Moreover, there are many forms of intermediate evaluation involving appeal to goals that are derivative on assumed ends. The point to note here, however, is that normative prescriptions are vacuous without some reference to the contingencies or circumstances of the judgment situation. So again, the best research will make reference to the machinery of both normative justification and descriptive particularities.

Finally, theoretical research in education, which underpins description, policy, evaluation and all other types of disciplined inquiry, can be conducted in its own right, usually in the form of philosophy of education, or educational theory, but also within the specific disciplinary frameworks that inform particular branches of educational studies such as sociology, history, or psychology. Here standards of rigor are taken from the relevant disciplines as well as such generic standards of theoretical excellence as empirical adequacy, coherence, simplicity, comprehensiveness, consistency, explanatory unity and fecundity (Evers, 1999).

Although the criteria in this model are abstract, the conditions for their implementation are not, and these conditions can be either helped or hindered by the procedures of research assessment. Overall, we think that implementing these criteria requires, in many cases, exceptionally strong attention to the particularities of time and place and that this conflicts with some of the RAE practicalities of assessing excellence.

The RAE and the conduct of research

The first point we note is that while the unit of assessment for the Hong Kong RAE is meant to be departments and faculties, or schools and centres, in fact these assessments are built up in a straight arithmetical way out of the assessment of individuals. Thus, a department that scores 100% on the RAE is one in which every individual is rated as an active researcher, scoring a "1" for their submitted materials. But this approach means that if double counting is to be avoided in assessing departments then co-authors in the same department cannot include the same item of published work in their RAE submissions. So while the close proximity of cognate specialists within departments might be seen as a circumstance for promoting collaboration, the RAE in fact functions to penalise it.

Matters can be otherwise. For example, in the devising of an Internal Research Strategy Exercise for The University of Hong Kong – a kind of mock RAE which was, in part, preparation for the 2006 RAE – an intermediate step was introduced to assess the research performance of teams on a scale of 1 to 5. A very good team, rated a 5, might consist of some very experienced researchers (individually rated as 5s) plus some relatively junior researchers whose individual research ratings might be less than 5. In this way, the team's score is greater than the team's numerical average. A department's score would then be the weighted average of its constituent teams.

Although two sets of academic judgments of research assessment are required – one for individuals and one for teams – when it comes to the assessment of research at department or faculty level there is merit in this kind of aggregation. In not offering disincentives for collaboration, research is enhanced in a number of ways. In addition to supporting a richer form of mentorship, the scope of research is extended in several dimensions thanks to the benefits of an epistemic division of labour. Complimentary cognate knowledge can be brought to bear on research problems; those with different geographical regional interests can extend comparative studies;

temporally limited studies done by colleagues can be furthered by others, or widened in range of application and purpose; and so on.

A second concern with the Hong Kong RAE for research in education is that almost all educational research is heavily contextual, or steeped in the particularities of location, jurisdiction, culture, history, and traditions of practice. This concern has several aspects that correspond to issues about the purpose of good research. In a field like education, there is a tendency for the RAE panel (as opposed to researchers themselves) to suppose that most educational research is not discovery, in Carnegie terminology, but application, or integration or teaching. This resonates with the idea that educational research plays an important role in the analysis, evaluation, and improvement of educational practice, and in fact a great deal of educational research in Hong Kong is funded by the government through the Quality Education Fund, which has this purpose.

One of the problems with this kind of focus, however, is that it can compromise an implicit Hong Kong RAE value of publishing in – to use the familiar shorthand expression – "overseas refereed journals". In spite of the UGC's determined efforts to define standards of research excellence that will avoid this type of inference, in fact the practicalities of voluminous research assessment impose their own assessment-laden constraints. It is not a question of whether panels read everything, so much as a matter of the specialised nature of most educational research. Papers published in philosophy of education journals require some expertise in philosophy for their merits to be adequately assessed. Mathematics educators writing about dynamic geometry will find their papers inadequately understood unless readers know some mathematics. And so on for language education specialists who draw on a technical background in linguistics for their publications, or writers in educational finance, educational psychology, history, comparative education, various curriculum specialisms, teacher education, higher education, information technology, policy and administration. Since top international journals can be assumed to have published papers after a peer-reviewing process by the relevant specialists, the *prima facie* assumption of quality is not unreasonable.

The upshot is that the small size of Hong Kong, coupled with the importance of particularity, places Hong Kong authors at a disadvantage in the sense of having to compete for the interest of journals and their editors located in other countries. The problem is not a general one, since some research travels better than other research; for example, theoretical work that largely abstracts from particularities, or comparative research where the particularities are welcome. The latter is an example of Hong Kong's positional advantage, which also includes language learning and policy (owing to the two written and three spoken languages in the territory) and the area of cultural influences on learning. However, many other particularities have to be marketed academically as "the Hong Kong experience", and this fact functions to frame academic contributions in ways that are asymmetrical for larger geographical and cultural centres of educational research.

A further aspect of the particularity concern is the question of intended audience. If research in an applied field is expected to influence policy and practice for the better, then it needs to be appropriately targeted. Just as a researcher in the Faculty of Law may have to decide whether it is more important to try and influence a High-Court judge through a local publication or an anonymous academic on the other side of the world, so educational researchers, especially in policy-related areas, may need to have as their intended audience, local policy makers.

This places a somewhat different slant on the assessment of, in particular, policy research in a number of ways. First, as already noted, it places a premium on the contextual definition and analysis of issues, problems and solutions. Even seemingly generic policies, such as the development and implementation of school-based management, which has occurred in many education systems around the world, takes on a very special character in Hong Kong where decentralisation is arguably from sponsoring bodies rather than government and where large class sizes make the implementation of school autonomy rather more burdensome that in many other systems. Western models of school leadership also, arguably, fail to go over without requiring serious revisions (see

Wong & Evers, 2001). While these matters may be of intrinsic interest to Hong Kong policy makers and are readily publishable locally, the case for their acceptance by ISI journals is based on different grounds.

An additional particularity in the mode of research propagation is the use of Chinese language as a medium of communication, a vital feature of the broader dissemination of ideas essential for promoting the implementation of research-based policies. In the case of RAE submitted materials written in Chinese, authors were required to provide abstracts in English. Although this did not automatically imply that only the abstract would be read, it did mean that the pool of RAE assessors with the relevant discipline-specialised knowledge was further reduced.

Summary

In view of these problems, it may be useful to summarise the basic dilemma, canvassed in various forms above, in using a British-style RAE as an instrument of research quality assessment in Hong Kong. Educational research needs to reach standards of international excellence. But excellent research in an applied social science like education must be heavily contextualized, with a strong focus on the particulars of time and place, at least in many of its sub-disciplines. A major asymmetry arises out of the fact that, say, the *British Journal of Educational Studies*, is not construed as "local" for the British RAE, in the same sense as the generically titled *Educational Research Journal,* which is edited and published in Hong Kong, might be considered "local" for the Hong Kong RAE. And the whole apparatus of impact factors, citation indexes, institutional locations, Editorial Boards, affiliations with learned societies, and accumulated reputation simply reinforces this asymmetry. Indeed, in a very large and well established academic environment, such as the US, American academics who publish in journals outside the US may face the same challenge of demonstrating excellence as Hong Kong authors who publish locally.

Short of RAE assessors functioning as specialist reviewers after the fashion of journal reviewers, the actual assessment of research papers and books will occur in more attenuated ways and through the greater use of proxies for excellence. Our concern is that in many cases the proxies require that Hong Kong's educational research be portable in a way that British or North American research is not required to be, and that the twin demands of particularity and portability make for a more burdensome load than the assessment of research excellence requires for work done in some other jurisdictions.

Note

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