

BOOK REVIEW

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Smith, R. & Jesson, J. (Eds). (2005).
*Punishing the Discipline – the PBRF Regime:
Evaluating the position of Education – where to from here?*
AUT University & The University of Auckland.
ISBN 1-877303-11-8. Pb., 213pp.

At the time of the production of this book Australian universities were in the process of preparing for the Research Quality Framework (RQF). With the change of government thinking (and processes) has moved to the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) from the agenda of the previous government. *Punishing the Discipline* is about the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) in New Zealand and its impact on the discipline of Education. The clauses within the complex title of this collection give some indication of the range within the publication. The publication grew out of a PBRF Forum in September 2004. It is a collaborative “research endeavour” between the Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland and the Te Kura Mātauranga, AUT University.

The collection is made up of papers presented at the forum, commentaries and commissioned papers, and the invited contribution of writers on the effects of the PBRF on Māori and Pasifika education research. The publication is described as the “extended proceeding and additional papers” of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE) and the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER). This in itself creates one of the problems with the collection. There is a significant amount of repetition through the papers as many of the writers consider the restatement of policy, its implementation, impact and developing agendas.

The book is organised into a series of eight sections: Theoretical and background papers, Impact for Māori research(ers), Impact for Pasifika research(ers), Issues for practice, The impact of outputs and case studies, Improving your PBRF profile: Issues from the PBRF education panel, PBRF key concerns and future issue; and Concluding comments, plus Appendices and commentaries. These sections provide a comprehensive framework for the publication.

John Hattie in his foreword suggests that “the place of PBRF within our systems must be constantly questioned; not only to refine it, but to question its existence” (2005: iv). He contends that “we must be careful to not blame the PBRF for every sin we see. Many of the problems existed and were pervasive before the PBRF, and it is worth asking how the PBRF has highlighted, polarized, or changed what happened” (iv). Hattie identifies that there are many questions related to all disciplines (and not just Education) such as the implication of the ranking of the Education against other disciplines, the effects of the ranking based on the individual or research group, and the effects on the development of new researchers.

Richard Smith in his introduction suggests that “the principal aims of this book are: to raise issues; to provide academic commentary on the first round of the PBRF, and its effects on the discipline of education and educational research ..., the shaping of educational academic identity; and primarily its effects on educational practice” (2005: 1). Commenting on the contributors, Smith states that “we wanted a range of presenters covering those at: various points in their careers; a range of PBRF ratings; from different sub-disciplines of education, different levels of critique, and all types of tertiary institutions” (2005: 1). This book does indeed present and raise issues on the scope and quality of the debate on the effects of the PBRF. As the editors claim, it is the first major edited collection of critiques on the PBRF.

The issue of “performativity” (2005: 3) runs through many of the contributions. Performing at the local, national and international levels is discussed on a range of levels and is related to the intensification of the research audit process. David Small identifies that “the pressure will be on academics to be as prolific as possible, and to tailor their research activities to meet PBRF criteria” (2005: 24). This brings with it a whole series of issues and concerns associated with the PBRF and other such processes. Small notes that, “academics should be encouraged to perform well in every facet of their work, with their research, teaching and community contributions being mutually reinforcing” (2005: 24). With schemes such as the PBRF there is the potential for non-research based activities to be undervalued and not rewarded.

There are many well considered and valuable contributions included within this publication. For me the greatest insights were demonstrated in the papers and commentaries in the sections on the impact for Māori and Pasifika research(ers). These provide great significance in the ongoing and expanding discussions on Indigenous education and research, and the very definition of what counts as research. Colleen McMurchy-Pilkington provides the statement that, “As Māori academics we gained our qualifications in traditional universities ... As such we have been trained in western paradigms of research. However, we have each brought something new to the process, both philosophically and methodologically” (2005: 73). She provides a consideration as a Māori researcher of expectations under the groups of her five Rs: responsibility, reciprocity, respect, relationships, redistribution (74). Applied to the PBRF these are enlightening. Airini, in the commentary entitled “Strip away the bark to make the tapa”, discusses the characteristics of the performance education research. The observation is presented that, “research has at least three major characteristics identified by Pasifika peoples as being the inner ‘fibre’ of high-performance research in education: values, collaboration and balance in research participation” (2005: 85).

The issues of practitioner research are presented within the collection under the section of Issues for Practice. While suggesting that practitioner research may be seen as vulnerable, Missy Morton and Liz Gordon in their paper, “What counts as research?” suggest that, “Practitioner research may offer a counter discourse of research as relational knowledge as meaningful” (2005: 96). Joanna Higgins presents a range of comparative arguments in her exploration of the distinction between theoretical and applied research. Mavis Haigh provides an interesting case study based on her research outputs making that the point that research outputs can have impact in terms of professional practice. This paper provides an interesting comparison between PBRF status and professional impact. The diversity of the projects outlined covers a significant amount of activity from an academic in education (and many other disciplines). It is in this area that educators must argue their case regarding both status and impact.

This was initially not an easy volume to navigate. The editors have made a considerable attempt to coherently organise the presentations under the broad issues. They have contextualised each section with an introductory essay. The papers are supplemented by additional papers that were not presented at the seminar. These add to the weight of the publication and assist with the contextualisation of the range of issues.

Punishing the Discipline provides a good model of presenting ongoing work on the PBRF and other national research quality systems. The editors have successfully attempted to provide a detailed account of the seminar, and its directions, while providing a 'countable' means for the presenters to publish their research, and giving the reader considerable information of the PBRF, its development and potential directions in Education. The significance of the publication is broader than the impact of the PBRF on Education as a discipline. It has much to contribute to the impact and significance of other disciplines.