The research assessment exercise in Hong Kong:

Positive and negative consequences

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This article reports findings from 39 interviews from two Hong Kong universities and offers a critique of the RAE system. Respondents stated that the main emphasis in counting research productivity was on articles in prestigious international journals. There were many negative comments about this as the main quality indicator. Some respondents mentioned that international journal articles benefited natural and physical scientists more than social scientists and devalued local research and local journals, resulting in a bias towards the West. The more positive comments accepted the RAE, feeling that there was an emphasis on quality not just quantity. In terms of the impact of the RAEs, many participants expressed that the exercises encouraged a great deal more publishing and that academics could fast track their careers by publishing more. However, the negative responses indicated that the RAEs encouraged a glut of publications that were more mediocre with little substance or originality.

[Key words: research assessments, accountability, quality, universities]

INTRODUCTION

The University Grants Committee (UGC) introduced the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1993, repeated the exercise in 1996, 1999 and 2005–06. Through the RAE and the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review (TLQPR) and the Management Review (MR), the government increased its influence on the higher education sector. This article analyses one of the three reviews, the RAE, used by government to direct more closely the operation of its universities. It demonstrates how managers in universities began to align their internal procedures with the outputs that external reviewers preferred. For example, as a consequence of the RAE, universities strove to develop intensive research cultures by forging stronger links between publishing in prestigious, international journals and appointments, promotions, substantiations (tenure) and extensions of contracts.

Using the voices of managers, academics and administrators[1] at two Hong Kong universities (The University of Hong Kong (HKU) and City University of Hong Kong (CityU)), this article analyses the RAE and its effectiveness. It argues that Hong Kong universities have followed global trends towards corporate accountability that closely reflect the competitive environment that exists in this Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR). The HKSAR[2] government sees itself as competing in the region against other states like

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[1] Managers are academics in senior positions like provosts, pro-vice-chancellors, and deans; administrators are non-academic general staff in relatively high level positions like senior research officers and registrar officers.
[2] The terms Hong Kong and HKSAR are used interchangeably in this article as they are in the region.

Singapore to develop "world class" universities (Mok, 2006) and attract international scholars and students.

POLICY ENVIRONMENT: GLOBALISING TRENDS

Quality assessment exercises are an example of a global practice that has been adopted in Hong Kong and some might even consider HKSAR's quality assessments in universities to be on the leading edge. Government decision-makers and university managers introduced changes that were designed to make universities more competitive and efficient. Despite some resistance, it appears that the UGC and vice-chancellors were able to make most of the efficiency-driven changes rather swiftly.

The craze with rankings and developing the top universities in the world has become a mantra for government policy makers and Hong Kong is no exception to this trend. For example, the former Chief Executive of HKSAR, Tung Chee-hwa announced in his 2004 Policy Address, "We are promoting Hong Kong as Asia's world city, on par with the role that New York plays in North America and London in Europe" (2004: online). He looked upon education as the most important long term investment. With the goal of trying to create Hong Kong as the educational hub of the region, he remarked, "As Asia's world city, Hong Kong should be where talents from around the world congregate" (Ibid: online). The UGC has praised the vibrant higher education sector in helping to achieve the vision of creating Hong Kong as the educational hub of the Asian region (*UGC Annual Report*, 2003).

During the period 1999 to 2005, several policy reviews were undertaken in addition to the quality reviews on research, teaching-learning and management. The UGC asked Professor Steward Sutherland, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, to chair a committee to review higher education (*Sutherland Report,* 2002), which recommended a number of changes. In response to the UGC Management Review of its university in 1999, The University of Hong Kong commissioned former Australian Vice Chancellor John Niland to examine its management and governance structures (*Niland Report*, *Fit for Purpose Review,* Niland, Rudenstine and Li, 2003). Both these reports refer to the need to modernise governance and management.

The *Niland Report* states that "The architecture of governance at HKU was set in place in a pre-globalised world" (2003: 12). The *Sutherland Report* remarks about the need for universities to meet the global challenge: "Universities of the 21st century will have to operate in this virtual space of a global market and meet global standards for education quality and cost effectiveness" (2003: 27). The need for reform is set within this changed environment.

Despite the suggestions that universities and academics need freedom to be creative, the move towards greater accountability and a more powerful central authority to determine university funding is apparent in the Niland and Sutherland recommendations. Simultaneously, the UGC was carving out for itself a much more proactive role in fulfilling these goals. It moved quite rapidly to advance its goals by publishing a Roadmap Document, *Hong Kong Higher Education: To Make a Difference, To Move with the Times* (2004a), stressing the importance of differentiating the roles and establishing clearly different missions among the universities. These new initiatives adopted by the UGC are to promote Hong Kong as a regional hub of higher education and to enhance HKSAR's international competitiveness in the global market place, hence "taking a strategic approach to developing an interlocking system where the whole of Hong Kong's higher education sector can *be integrated as one force, with each institution fulfilling a unique role, based on its strengths"* (UGC 2004b: 1). Clearly, academics in Hong Kong are currently confronting intensified competition and they are under pressure to perform while their universities are driven to become more entrepreneurial (Mok, 2005).

ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK IN HKSAR

Hong Kong was the first among East Asian nations to apply quality measures to monitor its higher education sector (Mok & Lee, 2002). It drew its model for the RAE from the UK. The two exercises in the 1990s were when Hong Kong was still a British colony. The implementation of the first RAE was concomitant with the establishment of the Research Grants Council (RGC) under the aegis of the UGC in 1991. This research council allocated a portion of its resources based on the RAEs during each funding triennium following each assessment. The RAEs assess departments on the basis of the quality of their research output. For each round the threshold for assessing quality was raised. In the 2005-6 RAE, staff members submitted a maximum of six of their best research products (publications, patents, artefacts or videos of artistic performances) over a four year period (1 January 2002 to 31 December 2005). Thirteen panels of local and overseas experts assessed these items to determine their quality.

The UGC intends to base its funding on the following percentages: RAE (22%); Teaching and Learning Quality Process including full-time equivalent enrolments (FTE) (68%); and role-related performance (10%).[3] Thus, if the UGC determines a university is drifting away from its mission, it has the power of its purse to deny up to ten percent of its funding, a fairly powerful stick to control the direction of universities. However, the RAE is a substantial portion of the funding and will be given to those universities that achieve higher RAE ratings and help to differentiate the universities into "research-intensive" versus "teaching-only" institutions.

These review exercises are a perfect example of 'decentralised centralism' (Karlsen, 2000; Lee & Gopinathan, 2003), which characterises governments that want to introduce deregulation of universities but keep control of funding mechanisms to steer universities in certain directions.

The HKSAR government has less direct control over its universities than a country like Singapore, given the buffer of the UGC. Hong Kong's UGC was established in 1965 as an intermediary between the colonial government and the universities to keep the government at arms length from the universities. However, arguably, in recent years, the notion of "ministerialisation" of power within governments has reached Hong Kong and as a result, the UGC may be losing some of its independence as a buffer between the university and the government. It now takes advice from both and as a government agency must try to meet the goals of the government while not losing sight of the needs of universities and their desire for autonomy.

In addition to the RAE that the UGC institutes, there are also government audits and each university has its own internal audit office. In terms of research, there are peer reviews of articles and peer reviews of grants. These types of research accountability mechanisms would fall within the model of professional accountability that universities have had for many years. However, the new types of accountability based on ranking universities and producing league tables establish more customer-focused accountability in the competitive environment of trying to attract the most productive scholars and the best students from around the world. When asking a UGC respondent in this study whether all these different types of accountability were needed, he remarked: "The audits are mainly judging value for money and are checking that financial processes are in place. However, the RAE was needed because the UGC felt that there was a lack of research going on in Hong Kong and there was a need to project the universities here into the international scene". In asking whether the UGC had costed these exercises, he responded that the costing was for internal reference only. Furthermore, the UGC participant said: "We feel that it is essential to carry out these accountability exercises and feel that they have improved the functioning of the universities".

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[3] Based on a telephone interview with a member of the University Grants Committee Secretariat, 14 January 2004.

The UGC introduced an accountability regime that has seen a movement from professional to political accountability and towards corporate accountability. Even though there are efforts to continually revise these reviews in response to criticisms from the higher education sector, the shift towards corporate accountability is often the result of wider global trends that unflinchingly utilise the services of accounting firms, such as PricewaterhouseCoopers,[4] to assist their review panels and in so doing change the culture of the reviews. The use of performance indicators, rankings and funding tied to these results indicates a shift from "soft" professional forms of peer review to "hard" accounting forms of external assessments (Huisman & Currie, 2004).

THE STUDY

Two Hong Kong universities, HKU and CityU, were chosen for case studies with analysis done in two stages: (1) national and university policy documents on accountability and autonomy policies; and (2) semi-structured interviews with academics and administrators on these topics. HKU represents the oldest and a more traditional university, still using the British designation of ranks and titles for senior managers (vice-chancellor, pro-vice-chancellors, senior lecturers and lectures, etc.). CityU is a newer and more technological university, which uses American terms for positions (president, vice-presidents, provost, professor, associate professor and assistant professor).

In two world ranking exercises, these Hong Kong universities fared well in the East Asian region and reasonably well in world rankings. According to the *Shanghai Jiao Tong University* ranking of Chinese universities in 2003, HKU was rated number five and CityU was rated number seven. According to the *Times Higher Education Supplement*'s world rankings of the top 200 universities for 2005, HKU was rated 41st and CityU, 178th. In terms of student numbers, the enrolments of the Hong Kong universities were similar in 2003–2004: On most measures, HKU rates as the number one university in research rankings among HKSAR's eight institutions and CityU ranks around number four. For example, HKU had the highest number of refereed publications per academic and research staff members and the highest citation numbers. At the same time CityU's social sciences departments have been rated very highly internationally so there are pockets of excellence within the university. HKU had a little larger enrolment (12,847 full-time students) with more research postgraduate (1,343) and coursework postgraduate (2,520) students than CityU (10,539 full-time students), which had about half the number of research postgraduates (585) and coursework postgraduates (1615).

During 2003–04, I carried out interviews with 20 HKU and 19 CityU managers, academics and administrators. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Within each university, I used a snow-balling technique to obtain interviews while trying to obtain a range of individuals from different parts of the university.

At HKU, the respondents were 8 professors, 5 associate professors, 5 senior lecturers and 2 administrators; there were 16 men and 4 women. They came from a range of discipline areas within the university: science (1), law (5), politics (3), literature/philosophy (7), and education/social work (3). The administrators were in research and in the registrar's office. The managers were also academics with direct responsibility for RAE. The participants were quite an international group, with eleven born overseas (Australia, China, Malaysia, the United States and the United Kingdom) and with six of the nine born in Hong Kong educated overseas (2 in Canada and 4 in the United Kingdom).

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[4] PricewaterhouseCoopers consultants were hired by the UGC to undertake preliminary information collection and analysis and interview 21 academic and administrative staff in October 1998 as part of HKU's Management Review, as detailed by the UGC report found on 18 March 2003, http://www.hku.hk/ugc/eng.htm.

At CityU, the respondents were nine professors, five associate and two assistant professors and three administrators; there were 16 men and three women. They came from a range of discipline areas within the university: sciences (4), political science/public administration (7), applied social studies (2), economics/business (2), and humanities (1). The administrators were from the offices of research, education, and quality. More respondents at CityU were born in Hong Kong (11) or China (5) than overseas (3 in UK); however, quite a number of the Chinese were educated overseas (2 in Australia, 4 in the USA, and 4 in the UK). Thus, many participants in this study were educated or had worked in universities outside of Hong Kong and brought a comparative perspective to these reviews and the management of their respective universities.

In the coding after each person's number, "manager" designates individuals in more senior management positions like provost, pro-vice-chancellors, and deans. "Admin" refers to non-academic, senior administrators. Academics are indicated by their rank, gender and academic area.

The interview questions focused on the three types of reviews held over the previous decade. In this article, I concentrate on the responses about the RAE by asking whether positive or negative sanctions followed the RAE and whether there were any consequences for poor or excellent performance in research. In addition there were questions about the impact of these reviews on their research and their views on the effectiveness of the RAE.

These interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were returned to the participants to be checked for accuracy and confidentiality. After correcting transcription errors and expunging potentially identifying information, the transcripts were entered into NUD.IST software. This software program enables the transcripts to be searched for strings, code the answers based on themes and identify trends within the responses. Thus, it becomes possible to determine if there was any influence of variables, such as age, gender, rank, university, place of birth, overseas education, and administrative responsibilities. Some of these categories had too few respondents to make valid comparisons so only those results where there were substantial differences are reported.

FINDINGS

To gain a deeper insight into how our respondents viewed these quality exercises, quotes are given in some detail. Even though only a small portion of staff in these two universities were interviewed, some percentages are presented to give the overall trends that were evident in the responses to specific questions.

Impact of RAEs

The policy change from a three- to a six-year interval between each RAE is in line with the results from our interviews. The majority of participants wanted fewer research reviews. Not surprisingly, there were some differences among the participants. For example, those born in Hong Kong were more likely (69%) to want fewer RAEs than those born overseas (47%). However, some of the harshest criticism about the RAEs came from those born overseas and this difference in wanting fewer RAEs can be explained by the higher percentage of overseas- (32%) than local- (19%) born academics wanting a different form of assessment altogether, which might mean a less intrusive form of assessment. The majority (65%) of those who were over 45 years of age wanted fewer RAEs compared with those who were younger (42%). This might suggest that the younger generation is more willing to go along with the competitive environment that the RAEs produce or they may have only experienced one in comparison with the older generation who may have experienced all three of the past ones. The younger academics may see themselves as more energetic and productive and thus benefiting more from the RAEs.

The responses to the question: What kind of impact do these RAE measures have on you as an academic and upon other academics in your department? show the differences between the two

universities. The older, traditional university academics at HKU were less likely to feel its impact than those at the newer university (CityU). Table 1 shows that those at CityU (12) compared to HKU (3) were more likely to say that the RAE had a "great" impact. Those at HKU (12) were more likely than those at CityU (4) to say that it had "some" impact. There were very few (5) who said "little" to "no" impact and there was no difference in this category between the two universities.

Table 1. Impact of the RAE on Academics

University	Great	Some	Little to None	Total
CU	12	4	2	18
HKU	3	12	3	18

The quotes from participants demonstrate why academics thought the RAE had an impact on them and also indicate whether they thought it had a negative or positive impact. These differences cannot be gained from the numbers above because there were more negative (27) views than positive (13) views expressed even among those who said the RAE had little to no impact on them.

Negative Views

A British-born academic attacked the very foundations upon which the UGC decided to engage in the RAE exercise:

The RAE was invented to reduce the number of individuals that would apply for funds and to develop differential research activities in universities. It is a method of exclusion. The RAE is a governmental mechanism to divide and conquer, of the most obvious and blatant kind. Instead of dealing with the problem of inadequate financing of the universities, you invent the RAE which takes a lot of time and of course, it doesn't work. It's blatantly ridiculous in my view. (CU108, prof., male, sciences)[5]

A Hong Kong-born academic also critiqued the RAE based on its Western bias and its undermining of scholarship per se:

We are concerned that the evaluation criteria may lead to local and regional journals being further neglected. At the end of the day you need to nourish local and regional journals. Also there was this inclination to only look at journals. I think that is really against the spirit of enhancing research scholarship because you want to encourage scholarship that is relevant to the community you are living and working in, particularly for the social sciences. Yet this RAE exercise in the eyes of our colleagues is too much of a paper exercise, more for administrative purposes, rather than really enhancing scholarship. (CU104, prof., male, social sciences)

Another Hong Kong-born academic was against the whole idea and really did not think it would work well in practice:

I'm an old-fashioned academic and I don't really believe in this initiative. I really believe that academics should be given the freedom to do research and one should be examined very holistically rather than all the time being asked how many pieces have you published this year. I also think having this list of journals is a self-defeating game because everybody is fighting to get their stuff published in that short list of journals and it can only absorb so many from Hong Kong.

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[5] The respondents were divided simply between sciences and social sciences to maintain their anonymity. The code begins with their university (CU for City University and HK for Hong Kong University), their rank (prof, associate professor, senior lecturer, and assistant professor, included instructors) or the fact that they were administrators (general staff, non-academic), their gender and their field (sciences or social sciences).

I think it makes life very difficult because everybody tries to send their pieces there and the capacity of absorption is limited. (CU100, prof., male, social sciences)

A Hong Kong-born academic who had worked in the United States was against the whole idea and did not see it as necessary since there was nothing similar to it in the USA.

It seems to have a negative impact on scholarship per se, encouraging people to publish articles that are so-so, leading to a glut of publications, many with little substance or originality. There is no Humanities Index. These measures benefit the scientists more than the social scientists and those in humanities are particularly disadvantaged by this system. Humanities subjects are often culture bound and area specific whereas the sciences have no boundaries. (CU105, manager, male, social sciences)

Another Hong Kong-born manager[6] could see how it was changing behaviour and expressed sadness about these changes.

It does have an impact on corporate behaviour in terms of what types of research you do. Especially these days, the RGC emphasizes interdisciplinary research and so somehow you move along that line. It also has an impact on the type of journals you may want to publish in. It's now difficult to get people to publish in newspapers or in professional journals or to do book reviews. So people think they better spend time doing the things that count. It also affects people's desires to do administration. From an administrative point of view that is something sad in a way. A few colleagues have told me that they are not going to do any administrative work because they want to spend more time on their research. (HK114, manager, male, social sciences)

Quite a few academics commented on the shift of effort from teaching and students to research and the impact that it had on the quality of the learning environment.

With this pressure for research somehow we have to cut back the time and energy we spend on teaching. Honestly, sometimes I really have to hide myself from the office, stay at home and work rather than come back because when I am here students knock on my door. I think my students are good enough to get a university degree but they are not geniuses so they need more help. I think we will have to cut back the time we spend on teaching and it will definitely have an effect on the relationship between staff and students and it will also affect the collegial and friendly atmosphere in the department. We will have less time with people, basically relationships, whether it is staff relationship or student and teacher relationships, or human relationships (wife, husband, parent/children) — they all will suffer. (CU101, associate prof., female, social sciences)

Another view came across from a British-born professor who could see how the whole exercise could be manipulated and lead to different types of contracts.

One of the effects has been the employment of teaching consultants who are not subject to the RAE and whose only job is teaching and administration. They don't have on their contract, research. So I'm employing staff on contracts as teaching consultants for three years and giving them the option to move onto the research track and then they would come within the RAE. So it is having a notable effect on the type of recruitment I do. The last four posts I have filled have been teaching consultants. (HK112, prof., social sciences, male)

Positive, Pragmatic Views

Administrators often took more pragmatic views of the exercise. For example, a British-born head of department who had recently arrived at CityU said:

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[6] Most of the managers were also professors and kept their substantive positions within their departments. They also happened all to be male. The senior management positions in both universities were predominantly filled by males.

Colleagues are probably looking to better outlets, journal articles rather than book chapters. They are shifting their publication strategy, and also in terms of productivity. There is an understanding in the department that everybody is committed to publishing one good piece a year. We never define what good piece means. We didn't say it has to be a journal article, we left that completely open. But one good piece a year is something everyone is held to and we have an annual reporting mechanism. (CU106, prof., male, social sciences)

A manager (Hong Kong-born) echoes these results:

As far as I can see for the younger universities, there is a dramatic improvement in terms of research output. The research calibre has improved dramatically because people are trying to move to that benchmark. So that is a positive element attached to the RAE, even though some people argue against it. (CU117, manager, male, social sciences)

Another Overseas-born academic who had a previous administrative role could see a strategic use of the RAE:

We can use the research assessment and its impact on funding to say, "It is now official that you have to be a researcher because you are going to cost the university money and once you start doing that you might have to look for your own job." So it can be used as a stick I guess, and it can also be used as a carrot that if you have done well, you will get a promotion and your job will be saved. (HK113, prof., male, social sciences)

Effectiveness of RAEs

Another question on RAEs was: How effective do you think these measures are in increasing research productivity? An interesting difference emerged between the two universities: twice as many from CityU (11) than from HKU (5) thought they were very effective; in contrast, twice as many from HKU (10) than CityU (5) thought they were just somewhat effective; and two from HKU thought they were not at all effective. In categorising the comments as positive or negative, there were more positive (18) than negative (10) comments, with more from CityU (11) than HKU (7) in the positive category whereas the negative ones were more evenly divided between the two universities.

People who responded positively and thought that the RAE was very effective tended to focus on how productive it was and how it improved quality as well:

It's not just quantity; I think the quality has improved. I think colleagues are aware they are going to be judged hopefully on quality rather than quantity. (CU106, prof., male, social sciences)

I think you get a lot of better than average publications. But you are less likely to get very innovative, very high impact research out because you have to meet the quota. Right now I think the norm is that you have to be in the top 40% of the ranking in the discipline in the SCI ranking. It is a very, very mechanical way of ranking people. (CU109, manager, male, sciences)

I think overall for a lot of people in Hong Kong, the university seems to have delivered more. (HK111, manager, male, social sciences)

There were fewer negative responses and these tended to be by those who ridiculed the whole process. They thought that it led to a decrease in quality, took a lot of time and paperwork with little increased quality from the process.

Research productivity in my view is not the same as research quality. You can have a lot of numbers, and sometimes numbers lead to good values, but that doesn't necessarily mean you have good quality. (CU104, prof., social sciences)

A loss is in the originality, a loss is in the control and excitement you feel about doing your own research. There is nothing internal now that drives me to finish an article. There is nothing that feels good about it – the way of staking out new ideas does. You have to prove your merit to a bureaucracy that can only credit countable items. But the fact is that if you are just publishing crap, and publish a lot of it, then more quantity harms your reputation rather than helping it. (HK105, prof., male, social sciences)

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Many academics seem to have accepted the RAE since it has completed its fourth round (over 14 years) and they have begun to adapt their careers to the "rules of the game". Nevertheless, there seemed to be a significant group of academics who had recently come from working overseas who were more sceptical about quality reviews in general. There were also many concerns raised by Hong Kong-born academics who had not worked overseas.

Despite the overall acceptance of the RAE, there was still significant criticism of the review. The emphasis on counting research productivity based on refereed articles in prestigious international journals was seen as jeopardising local journals and being unfair as the major indicator of the quality of research. Some participants indicated that the RAEs encouraged a glut of publications that were more mediocre with little substance or originality. There were those who felt that there had been a shift of effort away from teaching and counselling students towards research. Higher teaching loads were used as a negative sanction for those who did not publish enough. A number of respondents mentioned that the RAE benefited natural and physical scientists more than social scientists and devalued local research and local journals, resulting in a bias towards the West. There were concerns about the quality of judgements from the review teams and a feeling that personal politics may be playing a part in the overall assessments. In contrast, the more positive respondents had accepted the measures, feeling that there was an emphasis on quality and not just quantity. In terms of the impact of the RAEs, many participants expressed that the exercises encouraged a great deal more publishing and that academics could fast track their careers by publishing more.

It was clear that the RAE was a product of the British higher education system and introduced in Hong Kong during the colonial era. There had been some small changes in how it was administered over the years but essentially it was introduced to improve the research culture and output of the universities and it seemed to have achieved the desired effect. The assessment of quality was increased with each successive round. As a result of the higher quality produced, Hong Kong universities began to think that they could compete in the international stakes and the universities in fact ranked well in some of the league tables that were produced in the region and across the world. Global competition for students and scholars is a reason that the UGC intends to continue with the research exercises but to have them less frequently so as to reduce the cost of them and the pressures on universities.

There was substantial cynicism about the RAE and the effect it was having on the culture of universities, pushing them in a direction that might reduce creativity, even though it might increase productivity. Many academics expressed concerns about the increased paperwork and even more complex bureaucracy that the RAE was creating. They might like the more productive research profile that their universities have now but dislike the elaborate procedures that they need to go through to produce these results. Many questioned whether quality research had been improved and wondered whether the RAE results in more mediocre publications. These are the imponderables of quality exercises that often just get swept under the carpet and are not really addressed in these review processes.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Hong Kong's higher education sector is following the global trend well documented by Power (1999), Ball (2001) and Ranson (2003) that has seen a shift from professional accountability to corporate and political accountability. By readily accepting the UK models for all of its RAE, Hong Kong seems to have easily slipped into the audit and performative regimes of its former colonial master.

Another dimension that relates to the "policy cycle" literature is how policies may be remade at the "street level" by institutions and individuals. Here a difference between the two universities emerged in some of the responses. The divisions in Hong Kong might be similar to those in the United Kingdom and Australia where the more elite, research intensive universities are differentiated from the newer, more technological institutions, which were former colleges without university status. In these countries, academics in the more research intensive universities (established before the 1990s) are more appalled by the managerialist, bureaucratic trends that are imposed upon them than those from the newer institutions that tended to have in the past more autocratic and less collegial styles of decision-making (Currie & Vidovich, 1998). Also, those universities that are already ranked as top in the research stakes are less likely to need to change their behaviour radically to achieve the additional research funding. Creating a research culture from a limited base takes more energy in the technological and newer universities. Thus, managers are likely to be more directive in their push towards using performance indicators.

It was evident that the managers in HKSAR believed that they had improved their research productivity through the RAE process. The RAE was, and is currently, driven by the pressure for Hong Kong's universities to compete internationally and to be seen as "world class". To this end, the UGC used the language of international competitiveness to embed the RAE into HKSAR universities. It was not surprising that this resulted in a strong pressure towards global homogenisation. To counter this trend, the UGC is directing universities to improve their processes towards sticking to their different missions despite the fact that the very funding mechanisms, especially those tied to the RAEs, have meant that the universities are all trying to develop strong research cultures in similar ways.

Paradoxically, the UGC adopted market mechanisms (incentives and performance funding) to create stronger research cultures and could operate at quite a distance from universities to accomplish its goals. Now it seems to want a stronger steering role (as illustrated in their "fit for purpose" reviews), which suggests a distrust of market forces. In the midst of all this, academics become pawns in this system, jumping through hurdles that are constantly changing, with little capability to resist or redirect these reviews. As a result of funding cuts, the government forced universities to alter their hiring practices, leaving many academics without tenure and especially making the new recruits vulnerable and unable to sidestep the "performativity" culture. For the most part, the senior managers have fallen into step with the UGC goals because they also want to give Hong Kong universities a stronger competitive edge in the region, and their own performance management depends on it.

There are still some academics and managers who express alarm and regret over the current direction, which has seen a shift from professional to corporate accountability. There is some nostalgia for the old ways of doing things in the university and for the freedom and autonomy that one had in a system that was not overly policed. This nostalgia was more apparent among HKU academics, especially those who had been at the university a long time and preferred the more collegial processes they had experienced. However, these academics appear to be in the minority and are virtually powerless to change the current system of quality reviews because each university and each department is so reliant on government funding that is partly based on prescribed performance indicators. As part of a highly competitive region, it is not surprising then that HKSAR universities should join British and Australian universities in this drive to be among

the most prestigious institutions on the world stage, now using mechanisms that mean they are "steering from a *shorter* distance".

Perhaps the more interesting question is why neighbouring countries, like China and Singapore, have not yet taken the same route in such an evangelical way. (See Vidovich's article in this volume for more detail on Singapore's strategies and Yang, Vidovich & Currie, 2007 for China's practices.) Why have Continental European universities for the most part eschewed these accountability regimes and kept their trust in professional accountability (Huisman & Currie, 2004; Massy, 1999)? Certainly it can be said that the push for quality assurance has become a global trend, especially among Anglo-American universities, but the form that quality reviews take can vary considerably.

As argued by some commentators on accountability in the Asian region (Lo & Tai, 2003; Lee & Gopinathan, 2003; Mok, 2005), the greater the centralisation of these mechanisms at the national level, the greater the likelihood that diversity will be reduced across the higher education sectors of different countries. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that global flows in higher education are mediated through national and local actors and agencies (Marginson & Sawir, 2005). Although it is equally important to recognise that it is difficult to escape the power of global ideoscapes in policy, such as demonstrated in accountability mechanisms which have flowed from North to South and West to East. However, as this article indicates, the national actors in Singapore and Hong Kong decided on slightly different mechanisms to compete on the global stage and are attempting to devise their own educational futures in this competitive environment (Luke, 2005; Cheung & Sidhu, 2003).

Certainly it can be said that the push for enhanced accountability has become a global trend but the form that quality reviews take can vary considerably. The greater the link to funding and compliance, the greater the possibility that academics will resent the intrusion and a culture of mistrust rather than trust will begin to develop between them and university and higher education system managers, whether at the local, state or national level.

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