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Perceptions of the UK's Research Excellence Framework 2014

A small survey of academics

Tony Murphy

Sheffield Hallam University

Daniel Sage

University of the West of Scotland

Earlier work inspired by a body of literature raised important questions about the workings of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) and its predecessor the Research Assessment Framework (RAE), and noted the possible adverse outcomes of such processes. This paper builds on this by examining the findings of a small survey of social science academics. The survey identified concerns about the validity of the REF as a proxy for quality, and the role it has had in shaping patterns of research behaviour. There were also frequent concerns related to morale. Yet although responses tended to be negative, there was also a significant voice signalling the importance the REF plays in ensuring accountability and transparency in research, as well as a sense that the pressures that come with such processes are simply 'part and parcel' of academic life. The role of wider time-management factors, related to heavy teaching and administration burdens, was also signalled, and cited by some as overshadowing the pressures of REF.

Keywords: impact, intellectual freedom, pressures to publish, research assessment, Research Excellence Framework

Introduction

The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) is used to determine the 'quality' of research activity within UK universities, which subsequently informs research funding allocation from the major funding bodies (REF, 2012). Replacing the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the REF has just completed its first cycle involving the assessment of research undertaken between 2008 and 2013. This utilised 36 units (subject areas) of assessment, each assessed by sub-panels of subject experts. The submissions from universities were placed in categories

of overall quality, from 'one-star' (1*) to 'four-star' (4*) (as well as an 'unclassified' category). These categories were determined by the weighted sub-profiles of 'output', 'impact', and 'environment'. Research rated as '4*' indicates that it is 'world-leading', whilst 'one-star' denotes research of national recognition (REF, 2012). The results were published in December 2014 and have prompted a multitude of press reporting and claims of success from universities across the UK, who arguably chose to interpret the results in the manner most sympathetic to them. On the REF results day, *The Times Higher Education* published a 'table of excellence' pertaining to

the overall grade-point average for university submissions (Jump, 2014a). The same article also offered an alternative ranking, this time based on grade-point average specifically relating to 'impact'. This offered a revised order of universities. On the same day, the *Telegraph* published a different ranking, this time based on 'research power', where the actual volume of research is integral to the placing of an individual institution (Telegraph, 2014). This ranking is a closer proxy to the likely funding allocations as a result of the REF and, importantly, varies significantly from other rankings. The proportion of 4* research, or proportion of 4* plus 3* have also been used to confirm ranking. Not surprisingly, on university websites and in press releases, universities carefully chose which measure to cite. Thus, any one of a handful of universities can claim to be the 'best' in the country for research. *The Guardian* picked up on this in an article that asked whether the REF has 'been drowned out by its own noise'. In the *Guardian* article, it was suggested that when 25 university departments can claim to be in the top three for research in their field, which appears to be the case amongst the REF 2014 fallout, then the value of the REF comes in to question (Wolff, 2015). Seemingly, the publication of the REF results and their malleability has caused some confusion and controversy, often in a similar vein to the actual processes of the exercise itself.

Yet, as some have noted, research assessment exercises such as the REF have important implications and are linked to a number of matters such as accountability and efficiency of research (Ab Iorwerth, 2005). Equally, a number of papers have reported on the possibility for adverse outcomes from such assessments (e.g. Hare, 2003; Bowring, 2008; Wells, 2013 and so on). A number of authors have signalled their dissatisfaction with the workings of the REF, pointing to its potentially divisive and morale-sapping nature (e.g., see Jump, 2014b), and the potential for it to adversely shape the nature of research being conducted. Townsend (2012), like other authors, has highlighted the danger that the REF might restrict the type of work being done to meet the criteria of inclusion in the REF. Wells (2013) also explored this possibility. The actual effort involved in meeting the submission requirements, for example in preparing 'impact case studies', has also been questioned by some (e.g., see Jump, 2014b). The requirement to demonstrate 'impact' and the weighting placed on this within the assessment was particularly noteworthy in REF 2014. This has been viewed as problematic for some time (e.g., see Miller & Sabapathy, 2011). Watermeyer (2012, 2014) has detailed the context within which 'impact' has figured

so prominently in this cycle, and equally, the resistance this has generated, where 'impact' has been understood by academics:

...as an infringement to a scholarly way of life; as symptomatic of the marketisation of higher education, and as fundamentally incompatible and deleterious to the production of new knowledge (Watermeyer, 2014, p. 1).

Following the fall-out from the publication of results for REF 2014, Jump (2015) explored the role of 'impact', particularly 'impact case studies', and the possibility for game-playing to have occurred at the level of institutions, as well as REF panels. In the case of the latter, this was suggested as a possible ploy by panel members to ensure their discipline was not perceived to have been underperforming in relation to 'impact' and found wanting in comparison with other disciplines.

In a similar vein to much of the above commentary, Murphy and Sage (2014) found that academics reporting on the REF tended to be sceptical about it in one form or another. Often, this was related to a discussion about 'impact', and in a related sense, the demands of proving 'impact' (see HEFCE, 2010 for a discussion of 'impact'), or wider anxieties created by the demand to prove your worth (Murphy & Sage, 2014). The paper also demonstrated that, although reporting on the REF was primarily (but not exclusively) negative, the level of this varied according to author type and their institutional base. It was also shown that those author characteristics appeared to shape the types of concerns being raised in relation to the REF. Yet, themes such as 'impact', 'funding', and 'marketisation' were most prominent, all of which appear to be connected. Authors also seemed to be concerned with how the REF might adversely shape researcher behaviour; narrowing the type of research undertaken. This concern is reflected elsewhere (e.g. Watermeyer, 2012, 2014). There are also concerns that the pressures of playing the game can adversely shape behaviours, possibly creating incentives to cut-corners – the possible outcomes of this have been explored previously (e.g., see Fanelli, 2010; Murphy, 2013).

The REF, like the previous guise of the RAE, has high stakes: and universities have invested heavily in the process, including the buying-up of researchers to boost REF scores (Jump, 2014b). Unsurprisingly, controversy has inevitably followed. Academic researchers and managers alike have had to 'dance to the tune' of the REF despite genuine concerns about the nature of the processes involved and possible adverse outcomes. Seemingly, the implications of this extend beyond the UK. Such

research assessment exercises exist in many countries: the Performance-based Research Fund in New Zealand; the Netherlands Research Embedment and Performance Profile; and the Australia Research Quality Framework (now Excellence in Research for Australia – ERA) are just some examples (see Curtis, 2015). With this, the extent to which a balance is struck between ensuring excellence of research and value for money, with fostering morale and fit-for-purpose proxies for 'quality', appears to vary.

Our aim in this paper is to examine input from individual academics who responded to our survey, in order to determine the extent to which those voices reflect or challenge the issues raised in our earlier paper and in other recent commentary on the REF.

Methodology

We disseminated an online questionnaire to academics in England and Scotland in late 2012. As social scientists we focused on that section of academia. The survey link was sent to those identified as gatekeepers to academic mailing-lists within social science departments and groupings within institutions; this varied according to institution, but tended to be senior administrators, departmental heads and subject leads. We split institutions into their associated mission groups in order to ensure that we targeted a variety of university types: both research-intensive and teaching-intensive institutions. The questionnaire offered respondents a series of questions, each designed to assess the extent to which they viewed the forthcoming REF as a positive or negative process, what they associated with the process in terms of likely outcomes and any possible issues associated with the REF. The response rate to our questionnaire was relatively low, despite us sending two waves of requests. We received 64 completed surveys from the pool of 33 institutions we contacted. The responses did however raise some interesting questions.

The final question in the survey was an open-ended request for 'any other comments'. We found this to be of particular interest owing to the level of qualitative data obtained, thus our main emphasis within this paper is to analyse these responses. We received 32 qualitative statements, some of which were particularly detailed – perhaps suggesting that some academics had a lot to say about the REF. The responses came from a mixture of both research and teaching-intensive institutions and from both junior and senior academics. The data can by no means be viewed as representative of academia as a whole but, when viewed more widely in the context of

other work in this area, highlight some important issues in need of attention.

Results

Respondents to the survey were more or less equally split between men and women, and they affiliated themselves with a range of social science subjects, across both research-intensive and teaching-intensive institutions and both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Most were either senior lecturers or lecturers, and just over half had participated in a previous RAE. On reviewing the qualitative data, we identified five themes of interest. Some of the themes demonstrate some level of concern amongst academics about the way in which the REF has worked and its anticipated outcomes. However, there was also some level of acceptance, and even positivity about the REF, and some academics pointed to the wider context of academia as being of more relevance than the REF to the possible pressures and stresses that academics might face. The emergent themes from the qualitative responses are presented below and, where appropriate, they are supplemented with data from the structured elements of the survey.

'REF-able' work only

A number of respondents were concerned that REF narrowed the type of research being conducted and the type of publications encouraged within departments, where only certainly types of work and publications were deemed to be 'REF-able'. For example, one noted that the REF:

'dictates what people write and research, under-values theoretical work... and deters academics from embarking on major long-term projects'.

In a related sense, another respondent reflected negative experiences associated with the prioritisation of research within departments:

'projects are being turned down, longer-term – and arguably more interesting and more internationally-relevant – projects are being turned down as 'too ambitious for this REF' and funding is being given to those who already have full, relatively strong, submissions'.

For other researchers, a major issue was how the REF incentivised the production of 'measurable impact factors', rather than research that academics considered to be 'socially and politically important'. Indeed, another respondent noted how the 'measurement of research' inherent within the REF was, in her eyes, 'distasteful, difficult and against the principle of academic freedom'.

This was a common feeling amongst respondents: that the REF constrained and limited academic research.

In addition, the following reflected concerns for how publishing habits were being shaped by the requirements of REF submissions:

'The more academics are pressured to publish their work in more elite journals, the less we are able to communicate with and disseminate our ideas to the public sphere.'

Perhaps then there is the possibility that competing agendas exist, where true 'impact' of work and the prestige of publication do not always mirror each other. Another respondent noted the problems associated with the specific situation of co-authored papers, where they count for the REF in some instances, such as external collaborations, but not for others, such as internal collaborations. Whilst another statement focused on the relatively low standing of books within the REF process:

'I have published a book with a top publisher in the current REF period, I have been deterred from publishing another book because of the need to get articles in top journals.'

A different respondent noted how:

'I was told by an external reviewer that this [human rights research] did not count for REF purposes as it is not 'purely scholarly work' and not written in the appropriate 'scholarly form'. If such work does not count for the REF, then there is something seriously wrong with the REF.'

In the body of the survey, pressures to publish were cited as influencing the nature of work being undertaken. Although the responses varied significantly across the scale we used, there was a slight skew towards responses at the higher levels when respondents were asked whether academic freedoms were compromised by the demands of the REF, and the pressures to publish.

The REF as an ineffective measurement

Many of the surveyed academics were concerned with the actual processes associated with the REF: how this might be subject to 'game-playing' and how such processes missed the point in terms of effectively encouraging, assessing and rewarding research quality. For example, one respondent noted how despite acknowledging that accountability of research was important:

'the way in which the government does it through the REF (and QAA, the Quality Assurance Agency) is the worst possible way, since it imposes enormous costs of administration and seeking to game the system and measures quality very poorly.'

Impact case-studies were cited within the responses as being time-consuming and, more widely, the costs and energies of the administrative demands of the REF were noted by some, for example:

'The time that I have already had to spend on the administrative side of the REF (particularly impact case-studies, but also reporting information through cumbersome online bureaucratic systems) is so enormous that I could have written, realistically speaking, at least three additional articles or half a book manuscript in the time that has been consumed.'

Another issue generated in the responses concerned the REF requirement to submit just four outputs, which was perceived to have meant that prolific researchers are not duly rewarded for their sustained and successful engagement with research.

Where respondents were asked about their participation in REF 2014 within the structured part of the questionnaire, 35 of the 60 respondents to that question went on to participate, five did not have the necessary publications, three were to opt-out, and interestingly, the rest were unsure. Thus seemingly, the REF prompted some confusion amongst academics about what might qualify them for inclusion or, alternatively, whether their department intended to use their outputs.

One respondent saw the inherent positives of such a measurement instrument, but argued that processes associated with the REF essentially 'offers management a tool to apply undue pressure on its staff'; this is reflected more broadly in our later discussion about morale. Several respondents additionally mentioned the very real prospect of researchers and institutions 'gaming the system', to the detriment of the actual aims of the REF vis-à-vis encouraging and rewarding quality of research. Another response suggested that:

'the REF has produced greater attempts at managerial/top-down influence on research direction. It skews the balance between teaching and research, effectively 'dumbing down' both'.

Concerns for morale and careers

A concern for how the REF and the processes associated with it adversely impacted on staff morale appeared often within the qualitative responses and also in the more structured element of the questionnaire. For example, one qualitative statement noted how the 'pressure to publish together with increased difficulty in getting published has an impact on morale', whilst another stated, in relation to processes such as the REF, that it feels as though 'it undermines much of our work'.

Another respondent noted how the REF determined that only research-prolific staff were considered 'attractive' to prospective employers, who may simply be looking to hire 'REF-able' academics. Yet periods of maternity leave had meant that her publication record was 'not what it would have been' and, consequently, she claimed that 'the wellbeing of my family is impacted to an extent in that I cannot get work closer to home...It all comes down to publications'.

Another explained how they sought to leave UK academia to work overseas. The structured element of the survey supported some of these accounts. For example, on being asked whether the pressures to publish had made them consider changing jobs as a result, 23 out of the 60 respondents for that question positioned themselves in the top four scores on our scale – indicating that they had considered their position with some intent.

Self-imposed pressures

A number of respondents noted that they had not experienced pressures to publish, either because they were new in their role, had been well-supported by their department, or they did not define themselves as a researcher. Others were fairly staunch in noting how pressures to publish in academia, whether related to the REF or otherwise, were 'part and parcel' of working in the sector and often self-imposed: even if some did not agree with the way in which the REF was conducted. For example:

'The pressure I feel to publish is as much about me seeing publication as a way to career development beyond my current institution.'

Similar opinions were offered by other respondents who, despite the pressures to publish inherent in the REF process, stated that a proportion of this pressure came from them, with publishing being seen as fundamental to an academic career and research dissemination. Further, some respondents claimed that institutions had increased the amount of support given to staff to concentrate on publishing research as a consequence of the REF. Nevertheless, a common feeling was that although publishing was an integral part of academic work, the REF process could sometimes act in a corrupting way, with one respondent noting that although publishing was the 'best part of my job' and a 'main motivation', the overall measurement strategy was 'distasteful'. Thus, seemingly, feelings towards the relationship between the REF process and the publishing process are more balanced than earlier themes might have signalled.

Time management is the issue

On being asked about pressures to publish on a scale of '1 to 10' within the structured element of our survey, the majority of the sample reported significant pressures, with 46 of the 62 respondents for that question positioning themselves in the top four scores – the highest levels of pressure. Follow-up questions then asked whether such pressures had an impact on other academic duties, and a skew towards the higher levels was evident, but this was not as apparent as it was in the earlier question. A skew towards the higher levels was then demonstrated when respondents were asked whether there had been an increase over time in publishing pressures; 35 of the 57 respondents here occupied the top four levels. Further, on being asked how those pressures might have affected them, respondents cited particularly longer working hours, change in expectations from management and less time for other academic duties (from a provided list).

These feelings were also evident in the qualitative responses to the survey, with time management cited as one of the most important issues for academics. Amongst the qualitative statements, one respondent remarked that:

'The real problem is the increasing burden of teaching and administration...I am now doing more teaching and administration (which I do not enjoy) than research. That is why I am considering a career change.'

In a related sense, one response indicated that 'much of what this questionnaire covers is really down to time management', whilst another stated that:

'my duties do not give me time to work on my publications, I feel like I am cheating if I work on my own research when I should be doing admin in work time because the norm is that we're expected to work on these outside of office hours.'

Such sentiment is reflected in this final remark:

'In my case and (I suspect) a number of others, pressures really originated through massive teaching and administrative burdens – leading to very high working hours and inadequate holidays, while still not being able to devote as much time as desired to research.'

Conclusions

Although our survey elicited fewer responses than we had anticipated, the data did raise a number of concerns in relation to how the REF was viewed as having a negative impact on academia and the working environment within UK universities. Much of this corresponds with what we found in our 2014 paper and other recent reporting on

the REF (e.g. Curtis, 2015; Jump, 2015; Watermeyer, 2014). Yet, this has to be put in to context. A number of the respondents noted that the REF has a valuable role to play in ensuring quality, value for money and allowing funding to follow excellence. This is perfectly understandable, provided the processes involved with the REF function in the manner that meets the intended outcomes without adversely shaping behaviours of staff and institutions. In this context, many of our respondents had bought in to the philosophy of such assessment instruments, even though some of them did signal scope for possible improvement.

There was a significant voice pointing to wider industry pressures, such as heavy administrative and teaching burdens as occupying a more significant role in determining staff morale and pressures. It was also noted how pressures were often self-imposed, in the pursuit of promotion and self-development, and that this is 'part and parcel' of working in academia. It must also be noted however that differences between institutional type and researcher seniority will most likely have influenced some of the interesting diversity of perspective towards the REF demonstrated in our data.

The discussions around the REF have been more balanced than some would imagine, but they have still tended to be negatively skewed on the whole. Our analysis here suggests that many academics have genuine concerns about the implications of the REF affecting their morale, their sense of their role and, potentially, their employment within the sector. Yet some did adopt a more sympathetic view. As we and other authors are currently involved in examining the fall-out from REF 2014, universities across the UK are readying themselves for the requirements of REF 2020 and the new challenges that this will provoke, which are set to include changes to the sub-profile weightings and an emphasis on open-access publications. It is hoped that lessons from the past are learnt.

Tony Murphy, FHEA is a senior lecturer in criminology at Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK.

Daniel Sage is a social policy researcher at the University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, UK.

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