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Current discourses and practices of research assessment in the United Kingdom and beyond: assumptions and problems

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Mega-trend: stratification and specialization of research evaluation

Level	Scope	Rationale	Evaluator	Strategies & procedures
Macro	international, national, multidisciplinary and disciplinary	policy and strategic decisions; resource allocation; field identity and status	international organisations, professional associations, funding bodies, user agencies	econometrics, bibliometrics, expert descriptions, scenarios, peer review, consensus conferences, consultation, public debate
Meso	organisations, research units, programmes	allocation of funds within organisations; management decisions; human resources decisions; organisational identity, competitiveness and prestige	national strategic bodies; funding bodies; quality assurance and audit bodies; professional evaluators; management; external evaluators; public; media	rating; peer review; bibliometrics; econometrics; international standards; accreditation; impact and use studies; benchmarking; total quality management; advisory boards; case studies
Micro	teams, individuals, projects, outputs, and outcomes	access to funds; publication; career and professional status; awards and recognition; decisions on: implementation, follow-up, dissemination, reviewing; brokerage, mediation and transformation etc.	peers; human resources departments; management bodies; professional associations; grant awarding bodies; editors and referees; users and partners; mediators; public, media	peer review; human resources management; case studies; public debates

Eight problematic international trends in research evaluation

1. Performance-based allocation of research funds and externally-defined indicators
2. Pressure towards increased transparency and accountability
3. Institutionalisation of research evaluation
4. Specialisation (professional, methodological) of research assessment and the emergence of assessment expertise
5. Mismatch between economic & strategic, and professional & academic, indicators
6. Leaning towards peer review in micro evaluations and metrics in meso and macro
7. Diversification and variation of modes, criteria, procedures, and agencies of research evaluation
8. De-sensitisation of research evaluation

Assessment Techniques 1: Peer review

• *Assumptions*: plurality of views; expert judgement; peers' independence; counting on efficiency, accountability, rationality, fairness, validity and trustworthiness.

Benefits:

- stability of a field (tension original/traditional);
- independence of professional judgement (from politics and public);
- stimulating excellence and filtering out weak proposals.

“No alternative to peer review panels for assessing the quality and significance of outputs is credible” (British Academy, 2006, para 2; see also British Academy, 2007).

Limitations:

- Presupposes agreement on what constitutes good research
- Network effect in choosing ‘peers’
- Potential bias: competition; halo effect – ‘Matthew’ effect (blind review as illusory); conservative process – not good for mediocre projects
- Transparency problems: confidentiality and plagiarism/ leaks
- Lack of predictive power (impact)
- Overemphasis on theoretical and methodological solidity to the detriment of certain modes of research
- Costly (time investment at high levels of seniority)

Assessment Techniques 2: Bibliometrics

Assumptions: number of publications, citations and co-citations as valid indicators of research quality; consistency of citation behaviour.

Benefits:

- useful in policy, strategic and tactical decisions;
- mapping a field;
- positioning of an institution;
- meaningful at higher levels of aggregation;
- easier to manage and to feed into decision-making;
- possibility of normalisation by field and type of output → “sophisticated” metrics (van Raan, Moed and van Leeuwen, 2007).

Limitations:

- Productivity and popularity but not necessarily quality
- Problems in the social sciences: lack of disciplinary sensitivity
- Patterns of publications and citation vary among countries, disciplines and in time as well as idiosyncratically – ought not to read too much in them
- Very problematic when used out of context → ISI- specific problems: selection; anglo-centrism; incompleteness and disproportion between disciplines; exclusions (books, conferences, electronic publications etc.); calculating indicators (impact factor: 2 years); no valid individual impact judgements; inconsistencies when details change
- Strategic use of indicators by those evaluated
- Problems with citation behaviour: abuses (networks) 10%; selective citation (at best 64%); errors (10-50%); self-citation (10%); negative citation etc.

Assessment Techniques 3: Economic and financial metrics

Benefits:

- Monitoring investment in research;
- Backing funding decisions;
- Accuracy in relation to applied and technological research;
- Support forecasts and feasibility studies;
- Transparency;
- Claim to ensure stability of funding;
- Encourage focus on research that is of public interest;
- Support concentration of funding.

Limitations:

- Limited accuracy in relation to basic research;
- Non-linear relation between research quality, productivity, and added value;
- Strategic use by those evaluated;
- Incomplete understanding of research;
- Emphasis on what is (economically) measurable and tangible;
- May lead to volatile funding;
- May affect the nature of research (e.g. leading to volume inflation), teaching, administration, employment patterns, and university policies (Sastry & Bekhradnia, 2006; Royal Society, 2006)
- May leave out wider societal benefits.

Discursive alternatives to instrumental accounts of research assessment

Beyond the myth of the “perfect technique”:

→ Is research evaluation simply a matter of getting the technologies “right” (i.e. of making them effective, controllable, and in perfect fit with their object)?

→ What are the consequences of focusing on the fine-tuning of techniques and criteria to objects (and the reverse), rather than on the limits of the discourse from which these techniques emerge?

→ How can the socio-cultural, historical and philosophical aspects of research assessment be recognized and contribute to enhanced evaluative practice and research policy?

Current discourses	Alternative discourses
–Hierarchical relationship between modes of research	–Complex entanglement of research and practice and different modes of knowledge
–Quality assurance and quality assessment	–Nurturing excellence/virtue (epistemic, technical, and phronetic)
–Quantification, measurement and ranking of performance	–Deliberation and judgement
–Assessment techniques unquestioningly produce externally-specified outputs	–Assessment techniques support increased control by research communities over the contingencies of their practice, without stifling diversity

Tensions underpinning debates about research quality

Assessment filters research outputs and steers them towards specifications and user requirements



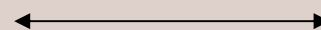
Assessment supports research communities in gaining increased control over the contingencies of their practice

Simplified proxies and standardised measurement for rigorous holding to account on quality



Deliberation and judgement for informed exchange of accounts of quality

Quality as “qualities” (partitioning)



Quality as “judgement” (predicating)

Hierarchies of knowledge and of practices



Complex blend of modes of knowledge and practice that eludes ranking

Trade-off between capacity and quality



Capacity and engagement as conditions of excellence

Better performance in public assessments of quality (sanctioned on the basis of agreed quality criteria)



Striving towards intrinsic excellence

Looking Ahead: Key Issues in Research Quality

(Oancea, 2008, report to the UK Strategic Forum for Research in Education)

Publications on which this presentation is based:

- Oancea, A. (2007) From Procrustes to Proteus: Trends and practices in the assessment of research. *International Journal for Research Methods in Education*, 30(3), pp. 243-269.
- Oancea, A. and Furlong, J. (2007) Expressions of excellence and the assessment of applied and practice-based research. *Research Papers in Education*, 22(2), pp. 119–137. Republished in Furlong and Oancea (eds.) *Assessing Quality in Applied and Practice-Based Research in Education*. London: Routledge.
- Oancea, A. and Pring, R. (2008) The importance of being thorough: On systematic accumulations of "what works" in education research. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 42(s1), pp. 4-15.
- Oancea, A. (2008) *Key Issues in Research Quality*. Report to the ESRC/BERA SFRE.