

# RANK HYPOCRISIES



# INTRODUCTION

The Research Excellence Framework, or REF as it is commonly called, is the most recent in a series of national assessments of research in British universities that began in 1986. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and its counterparts for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland organize the REF on behalf of the government. These audits, previously known as Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs), have taken place at intervals of four to seven years. The change of name was intended to signal a radical shift in the method of assessment in which metrics – statistical data – would replace grading of publications by discipline-based RAE panels, making the exercise more efficient and much cheaper. In the event the universities succeeded in persuading the government that peer review remained essential to judging research quality across the disciplines and the only major change in REF 2014 from RAE 2008 – a change that was widely seen by academics as a sop to the politicians – was the addition of ‘impact’ as a dimension of the evaluation. These exercises are nevertheless very costly. While official estimates price the REF at around £60m, some put the bill to the taxpayer as high as £200m.<sup>1</sup>

Universities submit their staff to the REF in ‘Units of Assessment’ corresponding to 36 discipline-based REF subpanels, which may or may not mirror the organization of departments within universities. Since 1992 universities have been allowed to choose which ‘research-active’ staff they include in their submissions rather than having to enter all staff whose contracts include a research element, as many have argued they should be obliged to do in order to prevent gaming and provide a truer picture of institutional research profiles. Changes to HEFCE’s funding formula in 2010 increased the incentives for universities to establish more systematic selection procedures for the REF and many institutions put in place elaborate ‘internal REFs’ as a preliminary culling device. One hundred and fifty-five institutions submitted the research of 52,077 academic staff members for assessment in REF 2014 – a slight fall on RAE 2008, but one that may conceal much higher exclusion of eligible staff in some institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 51.



The deadline for universities to make their REF submissions was 29 November 2013. Throughout 2014, subpanels will have read the 191,232 individual research outputs that made it through universities' internal vetting procedures and graded them on a scale of 1\* to 4\*. The scoring of outputs is the single most important element in the overall ranking of each unit of assessment (UOA) and therefore each university, counting for 65% of the total assessment; receives a further 20% comes from 'impact' and 15% from 'research environment'. The results will be published in December 2014, with more detail to follow in Spring 2015. They will determine the level of HEFCE support for research infrastructure (so-called QR funding) that each university will receive until the next REF, which is currently expected to take place in 2020. Perhaps more importantly, they will establish a pecking order and bragging rights among universities and departments that will affect everything from their ability to compete for external research funding to their capacity to attract and retain top-notch staff and graduate students.

The REF has few equivalents elsewhere in the world and none in North America or Europe. It has proved controversial since its inception. Few would deny that RAEs initially played their part in increasing research productivity in UK universities. Certainly I would not: I left the UK for Canada in 1986 largely because I felt research and publication was neither adequately valued nor rewarded. But many – among them Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer,<sup>2</sup> author of the first 'research selectivity exercise' back in 1986 – have argued that this improvement came at inordinate cost. As we might perhaps expect, the University and College Union believes that:

The RAE has had a disastrous impact on the UK higher education system, leading to the closure of departments with strong research profiles and healthy student recruitment. It has been responsible for job losses, discriminatory practices, widespread demoralisation of staff, the narrowing of research opportunities through the over-concentration of funding and the undermining of the relationship between teaching and research.<sup>3</sup>

I concur with all these points. The main thrust of this book, however, lies in a different direction. What I challenge is the claim from which the REF derives its entire authority as a mechanism for funding allocation and on which it stakes its entire legitimacy as a process of research evaluation – *the claim that it is a process of expert peer review*. It was this claim that convinced the government

<sup>2</sup> Discussed below, pp. 83–4.

<sup>3</sup> University and College Union (UCU). 'Archive: RAE 2008'. <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1442> (accessed 23 April 2014).

to back down on its plans to replace the RAE with metrics after RAE 2008. If the claim is false, the case for metrics needs to be reconsidered – along with other ways of funding universities' research infrastructure, which might include scrapping any such centralized national research audits altogether.

Chapter 1 discusses peer review as understood and practised in various contexts in North American universities, focusing on its use in journal and book publishing, research funding competitions and tenure and promotion proceedings. Many of the features I highlight are found in comparable British settings. Had I more space, I would have liked also to discuss British promotion procedures, which are similar to those of North America in their use of external reviewers (at least at senior levels), though they often differ – I would argue, in a revealingly British way – in requiring a *prima facie* case to be recognized by internal committees before reviewers are approached. But the main purpose of the chapter is to establish a set of *independent international benchmarks for what constitutes peer review* against which the procedures used in the REF can be compared. Since the REF claims to evaluate individual research outputs according to international standards, this seems to me an essential starting point for any enquiry into whether it meets its declared objectives.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the REF at national level. Section 2.1 begins with a brief history of the UK's research assessment exercises from 1986 onwards and a detailed examination of the background to REF 2014, including the arguments over metrics. It ends with a brief discussion of the implications of factoring 'impact' into research evaluation. Sections 2.2 and 2.3 contain a detailed critique of the REF evaluative procedures. Among the issues raised are the narrow disciplinary remit of REF panels and their inability to evaluate interdisciplinary research, the inconsistencies of using nationally recruited panels to make judgments of comparative international excellence, the risks of replication of entrenched academic hierarchies and networks inherent in HEFCE's procedures for appointment of panel members, the unrealistic volume of work expected of panellists, the perversity of excluding all external indicators of quality from assessments, and the incompetence of REF panels to provide sufficient diversity and depth of expertise to evaluate the outputs that fall under their remit. I demonstrate the latter in detail for the History panel, my own discipline, in section 2.3. The final section of the chapter (2.4) is devoted to the changes in HEFCE's QR funding formula since 2010 and the pressures this put on individual universities to be more selective in submitting staff to the REF.

Chapter 3 focuses on what I regard as the most disturbing aspect of REF 2014, the widespread abuses that attended staff selection for the REF in individual universities. This underbelly of the REF is difficult to document (victims are often reluctant to speak on the record and universities hide their practices

behind firewalls of confidentiality). I have drawn on my experience at Lancaster University, first as a Head of Department<sup>4</sup> appointed to improve on History's performance in RAE 2008 and latterly as a dissident who appealed against my own inclusion in the REF with the object of forcing the university to clarify the procedures and criteria it employed in staff selection. I have also made use (with permission) of the testimony of colleagues who were excluded from the REF at Lancaster, as well as published accounts of alleged REF abuses elsewhere. The opening section of the chapter (3.1) discusses Lancaster University's staff selection processes, with particular reference to the History Department; section 3.2 is a systematic demonstration of Lancaster's failure to meet HEFCE's stated criteria of transparency, consistency, accountability and inclusivity in selecting staff for REF 2014; and section 3.3 considers the situation at other universities, including Birmingham, Leicester and Warwick.

If the REF's 'peer review' processes fall so short of international standards at both the national and the local level, I ask in the concluding chapter, why should the upper echelons of British academia have been so keen to retain it? Taking off from Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer's suggestion that the REF has long since ceased to be a 'tolerable process' for allocating QR funding, the opening section (4.1) suggests that irrespective of their intrinsic merits or otherwise, metrics would have been an excellent predictor of most universities' performance in RAE 2008 at far lower cost and with far less damaging side effects. The point is not to defend (or advocate) metrics per se so much but to suggest that if this is the case, universities must have some considerable stake in *the REF process itself*. I conclude that the British academic establishment's tenacity in defending the REF, despite its palpable inadequacies as a process of peer review of research quality, is explained by self-interest. The REF may be dubious in the extreme as a means of evaluating the quality of individuals' research and publications, but it works admirably as a disciplinary tool for university management (4.2). It also (4.3) provides an excellent vehicle for the legitimation and replication of the country's established academic elites.

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<sup>4</sup> I should stress here that nothing said in this book rests on knowledge entrusted to me in confidence as a Head of Department.