

Measuring What's Valued Or Valuing What's Measured? Knowledge Production and the Research Assessment Exercise

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Introduction

The final Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is being implemented amidst rancour and debate about what counts as knowledge, and who will do the counting. This mechanism for measuring research productivity has created imperatives for most lecturers in the UK – intensifying the pressure on academics not just to produce ‘research outputs’ but to produce certain types of knowledge in certain types of publication. Its demise is not grounds for celebration, however, since a metrics-based alternative looks set to entrench existing funding success more deeply and make it even harder to do research that has no customer (e.g. Bekhradnia 20/06/06). This chapter does not address which mechanism provides a more truthful account of the value of a set of ‘research outputs’. Instead, it is concerned with the power of such a mechanism to reinforce particular values and to inscribe resulting hierarchies regarding knowledge. We will argue that, regardless of what replaces it, the RAE process will have been productive, not just reflective of academic values. We will examine some of the consequences of the RAE for UK academic life, focusing on two themes, both of which highlight the operation of power through processes of knowledge production.

First, we will consider ways in which practices intended merely to measure research productivity themselves create particular dynamics of power and produce or sustain particular hierarchies regarding types of research and models of knowledge production. In addition, we will argue that what, at one level, appears a rational, if overly-bureaucratic, measuring exercise is, in practice, a variable and shifting endeavour that rests on highly subjective ‘measures’. We suspect that, not only does it fail to live up to its promise of transparency and clarity, but, as more is written about the criteria in the name of clarity, the closer we get to MacLure’s use of Breton’s ‘clarity bordering on stupidity’ (2005: 1).

Second, we will explore the impact of these dynamics and status hierarchies for individual academics. As academics become increasingly self-conscious of performance indicators and, individually more visible through them, we are more tightly disciplined by them. The way our research performance is measured and judged comes to be productive of our ways of being and our

academic selves, and we wish to register some concerns about the consequences of this. We draw upon our own and colleagues' experiences of trying to make sense of and navigate the RAE. These allow us to explore the curtailment of professional and personal freedoms and the reshaping of expectations and obligations that are productive in their effects: reconstructing academic work, and those who do it, in ways that serve the prevailing model of institutional competition. Our concern in each case is that the 'mentalities' sustained by the RAE will outlive our memory of the arbitrariness of their production and our criticality about them, leaving the values and hierarchies reified even harder to contest. We will therefore have ended up valuing what was measured in spite of ourselves.

What is the RAE?

The Research Assessment Exercise is a process by which the research of UK universities has been evaluated in order to determine future funding, or rather, 'to *inform* the selective distribution of public funds for research by the four UK higher education funding bodies' (RAE 2006: 1, italics added). It therefore provides the UK's Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) with information for the selective allocation of research funds to universities as part of their block grant. The next RAE (2007/8) will be the 6th in the series conducted nationally since 1986. This process of assessing research has been highly controversial and yet is currently informing models being developed for use in Australia and elsewhere (McNay 2006). The RAE is merely the particular instantiation of more general pressures associated with the rise of the audit culture and new managerialism over the last 20 years in the UK and beyond. Yet it has changed fundamentally - at both individual and institutional levels - what is produced and what is valued in academia.

The most obvious way in which the RAE wields power is in the grading of research outputs (e.g. chapters, books, articles, reports) and the hierarchical ranking of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) on the basis of a summation of these. A revised 'marking system' for producing these gradings - seeking to measure the quality of each output, and assign it a value on a scale - has been devised and made public before each RAE. Such grading schemes attempt to discriminate between knowledge outputs according to objectively applied criteria and have generally sought to make explicit how value is assigned and by whom through publication of the criteria and of the panels of judges.

Despite such attempts at transparency, the rules of 'the game' can be hard to fathom. Differing accounts of 'the rules' emerge from differing interpretations, from the various strategies HEI managers adopt, and because of actual revisions between successive RAEs, which provide some basis in fact to our sense of shifting 'goalposts'. For example, some of us were academically socialised (in the social sciences) into prizing book authorship and aspired to win book contracts after our initial publications of chapters or articles, only to find when we eventually did that the message about what is valued has changed, and, in line with scientific rather than arts disciplines, the journal article is the prized form of publication. The broad adoption of a value-system rooted in the sciences is the most general example of the hierarchies of

knowledge forms, favouring empirical research and, within that, quantitative methods. Between the 2001 and 2008 RAEs, an explicit shift instituted across disciplines was the emphasis on quality of research output, not quantity. This grew out of a widespread recognition (including by the Government, see McNay 2006) that the RAE process had skewed academic production by pressuring academics to write multiple outputs on the same findings.

In the 2006 Budget speech, and between first and second drafts of this chapter, the Government announced its intention not to conduct further Research Assessment Exercises after 2007/08, and even considered abandoning that one (Sastry and Bekhradnia 2006) (see HEPI website for details). This news did not salve our concerns about the existing and ongoing consequences of the process to date. In exploring how both knowledge production and practices of the academic self have changed under RAE conditions, a model of power is employed that exposes both the productive and repressive functioning of institutional power (Foucault 1981; Henriques et al 2002). Our disquiet about the RAE come from our perception that 1) we do not share some of the values it embodies, which run counter to our own understandings of what constitutes valuable, socially responsible research; 2) the political consequences of these values are undesirable; and 3) the process is not as value-neutral as is implied by the rhetoric of measurement. Here we will focus primarily on the consequences for knowledge production and aspects of academic subjectivity and touch briefly on the values and objectivity arguments. We now turn to the vexed issue of how indeed to measure research value/output, which means engaging with the RAE's technical detail.

Measuring what we value

For the 2008 RAE the aim of the evaluators is not simply to award each unit of assessment (UoA) (usually a Department) a single grade as in the past, but to produce 'Overall quality profiles' that reflect the percentage of their research activity that is rated in each of five grades. These grades are: 'world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour' (4*); 'internationally excellent' in terms of originality, significance and rigour (3*); 'recognised internationally...' (2*); 'recognised nationally...' (1*) and 'falls below the standard of nationally recognised work' ('Unclassified') (RAE 01/2005: 24, Table 2, cited in Johnston 2005: 117). This grading is applied three times for each UoA in order to grade 'three overarching elements: research outputs, research environment and esteem indicators' (RAE 01/2005: 10, #38, d, ii, cited in Johnston 2005: 116). The weighted sum of these gives the quality profile, where different subject panels can decide what weighting to give research outputs relative to the other two elements for their disciplines (e.g. Johnston 2005). Sub-panels – comprised of academics who 'are currently or have recently been active in high quality research' - will decide which indicators will be used for each element (RAE 01/2005: 5, #18, cited from Johnston 2005: 115). Because of this complexity, the exercise is a massive task for universities and assessors. In addition, the commitment this time to read almost all published outputs (in response to earlier criticisms) means that the 'burden of RAE 2008 will be much greater than ever before' (Johnston 2005: 116).

But what does 'international' mean as an indicator of quality? The widespread concern has been that research on locally relevant matters and practitioner-led disciplines maybe wholly characterised by 'low status' research since large sections of the discipline's work may engage only a UK audience, yet may still make a significant contribution (Lewis 2002, cited in McNay 2006). One of us takes pride in a short publication in a practitioner journal because a Health Visitor responded saying how useful she found it to show to new mothers, yet the article is low status by RAE terms because of its style, length and location in a non-academic publication. Despite later reassurance in 2005 that "World-leading", "internationally" and "nationally" in this context refer to quality standards.. not to the nature or geographical scope of particular subjects (RAE 01/2005: 24, #3, cited from Johnston 2005: 117), this concern remains. Johnston, for one, remains critical – and like McNay and Lewis he is an ex-panel member. He says:

'These are very fine distinctions, to say the least: how do you distinguish something that is 'internationally excellent' from something that is 'recognised internationally' on the same criteria – 'originality, significance and rigor' – always assuming that you can define an absolute standard associated with 'internationally'? (Johnston 2005: 117)

The meaning of *international* in terms of relevance, place of publication or as some purported indicator of standard has been a matter of debate and confusion. It adds a level of variation between panels (in addition to their choice of weightings) because some have elaborated this whilst others have not. In the past, the Sociology panel recognised that 'work that has not received international attention can be of international quality' (HEFCE 1999: 175, cited in McNay 2006) and in the last (2001) RAE, even those involved in making assessments were sometimes unclear about what counted as 'international excellence'. For instance, Lewis reported (of her experience on the Social Policy & Administration and Social Work panel) that:

'One of the interesting quirks of the RAE is that it was concerned to measure the quality of research, but what was meant by 'quality' was never defined. Somehow we were all meant to be able to identify it – and grade it – when we saw it.' (2002: 5, cited by McNay 2006)

This is akin to what McNay (2005 personal communication) and other education theorists call 'the elephant mode of marking' where assessors use their confidence that 'they will know one when they see one' to excuse limited criteria. In addition, as Johnston (2005) asks, how are assessors to know how many submissions should be in each grade band (in fact, how many world-leading articles were published in each discipline since the last RAE)? As lecturers we are expected to know which type of grading system we apply: criterion-referenced or norm-referenced (e.g. Rowntree 1987). In the former it doesn't matter how many are assigned each rank, just that they meet the criteria, but in the latter, exactly where they fall relative to the whole group is the key defining feature of their grade. Given that the exercise is to allocate a limited amount of money, the gradings are surely relative to the whole set of work done and so a normal distribution of 'quality' might be assumed. The

brief criteria provided might be more meaningful if assessors were told to assume this distribution of grades.

A normal distribution however assumes the whole population is represented, whereas not all the research conducted is submitted for assessment as we shall see. Other ways in which institutions 'play the RAE game' affect the pattern too. The mean ratings have improved markedly over time, particularly between the 1996 and 2001 RAEs, leading Sharp (2004: 202), for instance, to conclude that 'the size and stability of the differences are sufficient to cast some doubt on the consistency of assessment standards across time and subjects'. However, the meaning of rising grades is ambiguous: are individuals and/or institutions producing better research, getting better at 'playing the game', or is there 'grade inflation' like some claim affects our degree marking? In addition, the goalposts have shrunk so that only a narrowing band of departments/UoAs at the top receive any money, rather than the higher ranked UoAs receiving progressively more money. Having a *measure* therefore doesn't appear to guarantee that we know what it *means*.

Furthermore, these wrangles over assigning value distract us from the inequity of ranking against each other institutions with dissimilar comparators (Turner 2005) or applying the same pressure for research outputs to staff who are primarily teachers as to those who are primarily researchers. It is commonly recognised that being a lecturer at a new (post-1992) university tends to carry a much larger teaching load than in an 'old' university, yet the RAE makes no allowance for this. In addition, departments engaged in professional training feel unfairly treated since their teaching, tightly regulated by external bodies, cannot be squeezed to make more room for research.

RAE08's emphasis on quality of research output goes some way to addressing this, but the attempt to give 'quality' an objective status and quantifiable character seems optimistic. Stating criteria lends the appearance of objectivity when actually the application of these criteria is harder than their neat definitions suggest. How far can claims to rational objectivity be upheld when subjective judgements clearly form a key element in the assessment process? How can a process designed to discriminate between different standards of output 'treat [all outputs] equally', as one institution tried to reassure staff? We shall discuss what counts as knowledge and which forms of research are valued later, but first we will discuss an area in which it appears the RAE has a rather conservative impact - in the disciplinarity of individual's work and ultimately in departments' recruitment practices - and we will highlight some of the political consequences of this.

Disciplinary difficulties

As before, the RAE08 covers research across the disciplines which are divided into 70 sub/disciplines. Disciplines are clumped into 'Main Panels' A to O, so that for example, main panel K includes the units of assessment called Education, Psychology and Sports-Related Studies, and main panel J covers Law, Politics and International Studies, Social Work and Social Policy Administration, Sociology, Anthropology and Development Studies.

Despite today's widespread encouragement of inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary studies and even broad recognition of the arbitrariness of disciplinary boundaries and distinctions, the assessment exercise reifies distinct disciplines in that each 'unit of assessment' (or department as it usually is) must choose which to be entered under. Whilst statements from the sub-panels try to reassure practitioners of interdisciplinary work by appointing experts from a wide range of specialisms within a discipline, this does not avoid the problem of having to choose one sub-panel. Some departments will fit comfortably into one or other category, but many others may house academics whose disciplinary allegiance is varied. For instance, a School of Education may well include researchers whose work is informed by, intervenes in or might for some other reason sensibly be situated in Psychology, Sociology, Cultural Studies, History, Geography or Social Policy. The task for the main panels is to ensure a degree of 'equity and consistency in working practices across a group of cognate disciplines' (RAE 01/2005: 9, #37, c, www.RAE.ac.uk) and so in the second tier of the assessment process psychological and educational research will be assessed to 'common criteria' (RAE 01/2005: 9, #38, a) because they are co-located in main panel K above. Sociology and Education are, however, in separate main panels. This points to the importance of the overarching criteria across all the panels.

Whilst it would seem inappropriate to insist that all panels operate identically, do the ratings really mean the same when McNay's (2003) comparative analysis of panels shows that the 2001 Anthropology panel gave 5 or 5* ratings to 70% of units whereas Economics only gave this grade to 32%, and when disciplines sampled very differing amounts of the research output: 'a minimum of 10%' in Business and Management Studies, 'at least 25%' in Sociology, and for History 'an absolute minimum of 50%' (cited in McNay 2006). McNay (2006) concludes that panels with clearer, perhaps more demanding criteria, awarded a higher proportion of top scores. Some commentators believe that whereas differences between panels in the last RAE were only apparent afterwards, prior knowledge of their refinements and weightings would have altered the gaming behaviour of players (see McNay 2003 and Lucas 2005). Instead, switching between disciplines happens to good effect between RAEs as potential units of assessment get better at 'playing the game'. McNay (2006) describes how, between 1996 and 2001, the number of submissions in Education fell from 103 to 83, and for Sociology from 61 to 48 as disciplinary allegiances shifted strategically for anticipated better funding outcomes. For example, the American Studies panel received only 13 submissions despite 40 current UK programmes and so concluded that staff's research outputs had been disaggregated back to 'parent' disciplines rather than being submitted for this interdisciplinary subject. Therefore 'what is clear is that the structure of the subject panels and their perceived behaviour influences the way institutional managers conceive of subject boundaries' and, over time, institutional managers have learnt to play the RAE 'game' in more strategic and effective ways (McNay 2006: 153).

Yet, even playing the RAE game still involves the prioritising of particular types of publication. Interdisciplinary academic areas may be seen as too dilute, and similarly, journals that are explicitly interdisciplinary can be

regarded as too wide-ranging and not discipline specific enough, even though they may be the natural home for publications from collaborative, interdisciplinary research (which we were encouraged to do relatively recently). Here our objection is to the political consequences for feminist research of the RAE's powerful reinforcement of the values it enshrines. In particular, our concern is for feminist research work that is informed by several disciplines and 'owned' by none. This position may have intellectual and political advantages, but is not recognised or valued in a discipline-based scheme. Submissions to the Women's Studies sub-panel were lower than might be expected in 2001, which can be read as a conservative or mainstreaming impulse to be counted within larger units of assessment. McNay (2006) reports that over a quarter of submissions to the Sociology panel were women's or gender studies and were therefore referred to the Women's Studies sub-panel. This sub-panel only received four other submissions via other panels, none from arts and humanities, which suggests it did not examine work reflecting the real range or worth of research in the area.

Similarly, feminist journals may be assigned low status where they do not fit disciplinary categories and hence are assumed to have low impact factors. Journals such as *Feminist Review*, *Feminist Theory*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Women's Studies International Forum* do not fit disciplinary boxes, and by virtue of their wider spread across the citations indexes may rank lower on any particular index. It will be interesting to see how feminist journals which do have disciplinary identities, e.g. *Feminist Economics*, fare by comparison to those which stand to lose most as a consequence of the valuing of disciplinary location.

Whilst drawing together different disciplinary expertise when submitting a funding bid is believed to strengthen it, when it comes to publishing its outputs, tensions may develop over where to publish interdisciplinary findings, particularly when specifically interdisciplinary forums are deemed too low status to count for the RAE or are viewed as diluting the disciplinary integrity of an individual's submission. Disciplines differ in how multi-authored papers are received and in how author order is read. Where author order is intended to indicate effort involved yet coincides with alphabetical order it may be assumed simply to reflect alphabetisation. Author naming can become a contentious issue or, conversely, a strategic (and sometimes cooperative) ploy in which team members still 'needing' a publication can be named first. Clearly pressures against team-working have wider implications beyond the RAE for the sharing of expertise, the dissemination of research findings and contributing to research that *makes a difference*. At times then the requirements of the RAE – and resulting practices - can be experienced as running counter to what Stanley has called research which produces 'useful knowledge' and 'unalienated knowledge' (Stanley 1990).

Knowledge production: what counts, where and who says?

So how do we work out what types of outputs count and where to publish in order to be rated well in the RAE? One of us was told by a senior colleague that he wouldn't submit to a journal he didn't know the editor of. This type of

personal contact, along with knowledge of journal hierarchies and citation indices are a form of 'insider information' that might be more available to individuals who are networking with senior academics and panel members, a practice that not all find comfortable or possible, as Gillies and Alldred examine in Chapter Six. This question shows a status-conscious, strategic approach that can distort the relationship between research and publishing (see e.g. McNay 1997). Research findings should surely be published in the journal most likely to reach the audience intended, which is not necessarily the one ranked most highly in RAE terms. Professional and practitioner journals tend not to be highly ranked, even though they may be peer reviewed and inform practice. Our earlier example of the publication eliciting a letter from a practitioner raises questions about how the value of a piece of work is to be measured. There is the potential for conflict with funders where they may want research findings disseminated in practitioner and/or service-user publications that will not be highly ranked by RAE assessors but will meet the intended audiences. Lewis is critical of the hierarchy assumed:

'A piece of local, empirical work which is useful to people in the locality and is written up in an accessible way could be classified as sub-national because it is not couched in academic/discipline based formats, but from other perspectives, could be of international excellence in terms of quality' (Lewis 2002: 5, cited in McNay 2006)

The definition of research employed is 'original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding' (RAE 01/2005: Annex B, cited in Johnston 2005: 116). The RAE08 aims to focus on 'quality' and not be distracted by quantity by only allowing four publications per academic, and by reducing the need for a coherent theme across a UoA, which is thought to have led to a selective representation last time, involving the omission of departments' 'odd ball' researchers who did not fit into the themes that could otherwise be narrated.

Evidence of what types of knowledge are valued - gathered from the circulation of journal rankings and citation data - appears to run contrary to the spirit of institutions' guidelines based on guidance from the RAE that 'equity' is the first principle of the RAE and that 'all types of research and all forms of research output shall be assessed on a fair and equal basis' (Institutional memo, 08/07/05). The Orwellian resonance grows when comparing guidance from different institutions. For example, guidelines from the Sociology panel states that 'edited books, research reports, reports to statutory, official and private-sector bodies' are suitable forms of output, yet Tina's contribution to the earlier Women's Workshop book (3 co-authored chapters and co-editorship) is not considered high status enough for inclusion. Feedback from mock RAEs provide contradictory messages about how the Education panel will receive practice-related, as opposed to theoretical work.

The valuing of academic over practitioner-oriented publications illustrates one of our qualms about the political implications of the RAE process generally. In what Lewis (*ibid*) describes as a passive approach to informing policy or practice whereby academics simply publish their findings in existing status-conscious places and expect 'users' to find them, we see responsibility for

changing the world relegated to an optional extra that some academics may do if politically motivated. It represents academic findings as apolitical, that only when *applied* (by others) do they have political effects. This decouples knowledge production from politics and absolves academics of responsibility for the uses to which their work is put.

A clear hierarchy among different methods and approaches to research is embedded in the assessment exercise. Improving the quality of research, in RAE2001

‘was often seen as conforming to a specific definition of quality, so that economists saw work in econometrics and other quantitative approaches being valued above other methodologies (Harley and Lee 1997), and psychologists noted that lab-based psychology gained higher grades than other modes of working (Marks 1995). Their behaviour, in choosing what to research and how, changed accordingly.’ (McNay 2006: 149)

This inevitably has consequences for what research work is conducted in future, engendering a conservative impact on research methodologies employed. In the case of education, McNay (*ibid.* 149) argues:

‘The feedback from the 2001 Education panel called for more large-scale, quantitative, longitudinal studies. That presented several problems: of delivering within a short time-scale before the next assessment, of relevance to the work of many staff who work closely with professionals at the teaching-learning interface, and of attracting funding to a significant number of such projects. No doubt some are trying even now to develop such work, to be “fit for purpose” in the RAE, if of limited utility in improving the quality of practice, or informing teaching, which I see as major objectives of much work in social science.’

Studies such as by Fisher and Marsh (2003:74) describe the impact the RAE process has on disciplines, such as Social Policy and Administration and Social Work ‘that need to adapt to the rubric essentially derived from a different tradition and research base’. The RAE influences the way in which knowledge is organised and bounded (McNay 2006). For an exercise that presents itself as merely ‘measuring’ what is there, the RAE has powerful effects.

The distorting effects of the RAE are recognised at the highest levels including by the Parliamentary Select Committee and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The latter explicitly notes the distinction between RAE requirements and the research councils in areas such as ‘interdisciplinarity, applied research and research related to professional practice and engagement with users’ (ESRC 2004: 26, cited in McNay 2006: 147). Yet McNay highlights the irony of citing the ESRC’s concern given that its own funding is more responsive to Government agendas (instead of those generated ‘bottom-up’ from the research community) than the other research councils.

Whilst the RAE necessitates that academics think about what type of research

to do and where to try to publish research findings, it is at the institutional level that we will each be initially judged. The question of *who* is returned under the RAE and *where* is usually in the hands of those occupying more powerful positions within our institution. Our own disciplinary identities and allegiances or political commitment to making particular interventions may be irrelevant to bureaucratic decisions about which RAE panel our work is submitted to. Through regular reviews and mock RAEs our individual efforts are subject to internal and external scrutiny and our potential value in relation to the RAE assessed. It is hard to believe that individuals will not be made visible or vulnerable in this process.

Quantitative, ideally large-scale, findings are valorised, with theoretical, reflexive work at the far end of the continuum of research approaches and the conventional distinction between academic and applied work is shored up. It appears that, in spite of the huge amount of critical work on epistemology, methodology and reflexivity by feminist and other scholars, the legacy of objectivism and positivism continues to influence what is most valued - and ironically perpetuated by - the RAE. The RAE presides over a lamentable narrowing of forms of knowledge production and a shift towards the most normative scientific models of research. Even the prizing of journal articles over books or other outputs in the RAE regime reflects and validates scientific models of research, seeing outputs as discreet packages of new knowledge that get us further up the mountain towards 'Truth' (Rorty 1980).

The same presumptions about the value of forms of knowledge production are embedded in the evidence-based movement in education which seeks research findings that inform practice and support (but do not critique) policy implementation. Qualitative research is devalued and quantitative research privileged in 'systematic reviews' of 'the evidence' and this has implications for what (and whose) perspectives are taken into account in the development of policy, for instance, rarely including the views of those who are the targets of the policy (Graham and McDermott 2005; Dixon Woods et al, 2004). It has political consequences for the relationship between research and policy, and for the way research questions get framed. It influences the type of projects that get funding, the types of new journals starting up or surviving the market and the type of funding available through the funding bodies' choice of funding streams and thematic priorities. The 'evidence base' that is deemed relevant to inform practice seems to have got narrower over the past decade by the elevation of quantitative methods and relegation of qualitative methods in policy discourse. Large-scale or longitudinal studies are beyond the reach of many of us and funding bodies will err on the side of caution in awarding grants of the size required for these only to those who are seen as pre-eminent in their field and based in prestigious research universities. This leaves the skills of those of us trained in qualitative approaches undervalued and our experience and commitment to, for instance, feminist or critical approaches further marginalised. Academics with an established record of attracting research funding are more likely to attract funding in future making it difficult to establish a foothold in grant-winning. The introduction of a metrics-based system (see Sastry and Bekhradnia 2006) will worsen this: money will be awarded precisely on the basis of money previously won from research

councils and other funders (Bekhradnia 20/06/06), making the system itself inherently conservative.

The systematic review illustrates the controlling and reductive aspects of audit culture in the extreme, in its 'rage for clarity, transparency and certainty of outcomes', as Maggie MacLure writes:

'Exasperated by the inability of education research to deliver the kind of seemingly hard evidence offered by health and medicine, systematic review favours quantitative methods and embodies a scarcely-concealed positivism that places qualitative research far down the 'credibility hierarchy' (Hammersley, 2001, p545).'(MacLure 2005: 394)

However MacLure argues persuasively that it fails ultimately in its goal of improving quality because it reviews only those studies that address the pre-defined question and meet the strict criteria for 'quality' research. The 'tiny dead bodies of knowledge disinterred by systematic review', as she puts it 'hold little power to generate new understandings' and by trying to regulate reading, writing and interpretation, 'suppress[.] aspects of quality in research and scholarship that are at least as important as clarity, countability and accountability - such as interstitial connectivity, critique, interest, expertise, independence, tacit knowledge, chance encounters with new ideas, and dialogic interactions between researcher, "literature" and "data"'. (2005: p394)

Performing academic subjects

What then are the consequences of measuring research performances for academics ourselves? As we become increasingly self-conscious of performance indicators and - individually audited and more visible through them - our research performance becomes inextricably caught up with our academic decisions, actions and selves, but many authors point to the ways in which academics feel it compromises some of the shared principles underpinning academic identities (Henkel 2000) and violates traditional academic values (Harley 2002; Lucas 2005). The overall impact of RAE-induced pressures has been to create a more individualistic orientation and more competitive ethos. In compliance with the new regime we have to become more instrumental in our decisions about what work to take on and as a result, activities that are not valued in RAE terms, lose out. For instance, many of the smaller and perhaps more 'everyday' pieces of work that academics do such as reviewing and refereeing the work of others for journals and for funding bodies are either invisible or don't count highly in the RAE. Evidence of an increasing instrumentalism is seen by journal editors in finding people to agree to referee articles. For instance, a recent article submitted to a feminist journal now needs a 9th and 10th referee to be approached, because all so far have said they are too busy. Similarly the editors of a proposal for a journal special issue pulled out realising they'd be 'better off' publishing their collection as a book. This is even happening for a journal that approaches *feminist* academics, colleagues who therefore have a political interest in the journal, not only an academic one. It represents an insidious undermining of the idea that academic work might be to promote social justice.

We are expected in the next RAE to comment on how much work went into a joint-authored publication, but how much work goes into a joint publication 'normally'? Against what should we compare our contribution vis a vis our co-author's? What about ideas generated in dialogue? This institutionalises the individualising notion of the originating subject. A performative model of the subject is assumed where it suits - such that increasing pressure on individual academics is expected to productively enhance our investments in particular types of knowledge claims and production practices – and, it is intended, to increase our overall productivity. But it is the Cartesian subject who is assumed when the originating subject is required to produce glamorous 'new' knowledge. We suspect that increasingly strategic decisions are made in order to prioritise individual outputs over more collegiate modes of working. Our concern is that the instrumentality, individualism and competitiveness the RAE produces in us will not be easily shaken off afterwards. It will leave us changed subjects. In this sense it will have been productive irrespective of whether it made us work any harder.

Disciplined Selves

Among those writing on new managerialism and performative regimes in higher education (HE) are analyses of the consequences for individuals of the resulting organisational cultures. Valerie Hey (2004) explores the 'perverse pleasures' of our over-commitment to intellectual labour in 'greedy institutions' and McWilliam (2004) explores how individuals shoulder the burden of risk minimisation in the post-welfare universities (of the UK, Australia and New Zealand) and her analysis of the self-auditing academic subject is relevant here. More specifically, Henkel (2000) and Lucas (2004, 2005) each explore the RAE's impact on individuals and their academic identities.

Hey (2004: 33) describes being 'perplexed by the clash between corridor... critique of the impact of audit and managerialism and our manic productivity'. Our commitments have been powerfully reworked so that we have become instrumental in our own exploitation, over-complying or over-zealous, suggesting that there is 'more to our punitive work rate than can be explained as compliance with the escalating demands of higher education restructuring (Marginson 1997; Morley 2002).' (*ibid.* 34). The Foucauldian (1977) understanding of how individuals come to do the work of institutions in 'policing' or disciplining themselves fits: power works *through* us to stimulate in us the desire to succeed in these terms which we may previously have been critical of (Foucault 1981). What role do we play ourselves in 'buying into the particular economy of new times performativity and [what] rationales [do] we offer about our commitments and performances' (Hey 2004: 35) when we know what academic culture desires and come to want that too. 'Even our language is instructive' Hey points out: 'we learn the texts of our discipline, we do disciplined enquiry, we must be rigorous, and we offer our work as submissions' (*ibid.*). There is something deeply ascetic, self-denying and yet egotistical in this peculiar practice that indeed reveals something of the origins of the English university in Medieval monastic vocational devotion. We even allow ourselves only short-lived pleasures 'success is always postponed in the race for the next prize' (*ibid.*: 40).

In *Ethics in Qualitative Research* (Mauthner et al 2002) we wrote about the old-fashioned motive to 'make a difference' and feminists' use of academic work for social change, but does this get 'eaten up by the desiring machine of professional identity projects fuelled by ambition and personal and positional gains?' (Hey 2004: 41). Hey suggests that

'If we are honest about what we "get out" of the current settlement, even so far as recognising the perversity of our pleasures, we might be in a better position to stop martyring ourselves – as punishment for those inadmissible 'guilty pleasures' (in intellectual work, in competitive endeavours, in status, in winning, etc) and put our skills and capacities to 'better public and civic use' (2004: 41)

The individualising, competitive, perhaps even masochistic space of academia can be deeply compromising for feminists (Burman 1996; Morley 1999), yet we help each other comply, compete *and* resist. Now the language of 'collaboration' has been colonised by the new managerialism that saturates universities and we are expected to do it for instrumental reasons (ideally with someone at a higher ranking institution), but some inspiring collaborations buck the RAE audit process. Collaborative productions that publish under a group name, such as the Hall Carpenter Archives (e.g. 1989) or even invent for themselves a name, such as the collective that published under the name Beryl Curt (e.g. 1994) resist the individual attribution and fantasy of the originating subject standard practice shores up.

Valuing what we can measure

A popular critique among educationalists of today's over-testing of pupils in UK schools is that we cannot measure that which we value, and instead we come to value that which can be measured. This is one of the most troubling effects of the RAE. In addition to the way it enables us to discipline ourselves, the academic terrain itself will bear the imprint of the RAE into the future. Whatever system replaces it, when we hear ourselves referring to '5*' departments in the future, we will know that its logic has won out. The power of the RAE lies in this inevitable process of reification. No matter how qualified, tentative or complex the outcome measures are, as soon as a number or rank is assigned, the qualifiers and caveats fall away. All 'Ah buts' and explanations of strategic play-offs will fail to register, in much the same way we sometimes feel students' perception of our detailed formative feedback is utterly dominated by the summative feedback (the grade). They sometimes seem not to hear our explanations of (and implications of) their mark, they just want to know what they 'got.'

We have described some of the values underpinning the hierarchies of research outputs and research methods embedded in the RAE, and our disquiet surrounds their conservative or de-politicising effects. We may not share these values, but it is the fact that they are *assumed* that is problematic. In the valuing of certain types of knowledge over others, is the assumed supremacy of quantitative methods that rest on the naïve objectivity that feminists engaged with in the 1980s and 1990s. What is alarming is not that there exist those who do not share our epistemological perspectives, but that

their views are encoded in a practice which does not admit its partiality, thus actively undermining the recognition that different views exist. Positions stated explicitly can be argued with. Instead it is implicit that bigger is better in terms of study size, that numbers are more robust than 'mere' views, that the 'academic' research firmly within disciplinary boundaries is of higher status than applied or interdisciplinary research, that 'international' is a marker of quality, and that there can be some agreement about the merits of a piece of research on a linear 5-point scale. The individualistic fantasy that academics are originators of new knowledge is reinforced too.

Some of the RAE logics are powerful and worth making explicit. It clearly rests on, and embeds the understanding that competition benefits productivity, at both individual and institutional levels. Indeed if grade inflation were to be taken at face value, competition has been effective in raising grades and the application of market rationalities to education appear vindicated. However, in parallel with GSCE or degree results, the meaning of improved grades is unclear and for the RAE some contribution of better gaming and strategic appointments and manoeuvring are hardly in doubt. Competition has concentrated funding in fewer centres (AUT 2003), but is this necessarily a good thing? It is certainly likely to reduce the range of approaches and topics in a discipline. Indeed, it has 'reduced the originality and quality of much academic research' according to the Commission on the Social Sciences (2003: 5, cited in McNay 2006).

One of the consequences of the measurement of research productivity may have been the rise in status of research, with the resultant individual esteem boosts to 'research active' academics (see Harley 2002; Henkel 2000; Lucas 2005), but the drop in status for teaching and apparently resulting student (dis)satisfaction cannot be ignored and indeed some research-successful universities are now urgently trying to improve the student experience. Pushing research and teaching into competition with each other may prove unproductive for universities. It may ultimately widen the gap between the post and pre-1992 universities which could never compete 'on a level playing field' anyway and see the decoupling of research from teaching to reinstate the division between teaching-led and research-led universities.

One of the most fundamental and least questioned assumptions is that greater funding should follow highest ratings. It seems important to make explicit this logic in order to dislodge its position as the obvious or only rational division of research money: an alternative logic would suggest that enhanced funding followed those departments most struggling to raise their research profile. Indeed this would be an educational, rather than an economic rationale. What is notable is the ease with which one particular logic regarding the allocation of money 'on the basis of the ranking system' comes to occupy the position of common sense. One of the conservative consequences of this is the difficulty getting onto the RAE-ranked ladder which allows existing and entrenched power bases to be retained and strengthened, potentially stifling change or the emergence of new areas of study or groups of researchers.

'How did we ever agree to a linear system of stars?' said one colleague. That

such crude feedback will be the eventual result of such laborious efforts by both submitters and adjudicators is bemusing. How we 'agreed' to it, if this isn't to flatter ourselves regarding our power, was through clever use of the process of peer reviewing (Lucas 2004). Its adoption of peer evaluation as the central evaluative mechanism is the key feature that buys credibility for the assessments. It is seen as democratising the process, so that our investment in peer review manufactures our consent (see also Wisker 1996). In addition, the process of consultation and revision of the RAE itself helps to buy our faith in an improving mechanism, which, in fact, mirrors science's belief in its own gradual progress towards Truth.

We mistakenly assume (against our intellectual commitments) the objectivity of a process so bureaucratised. The technical language of criteria and the complexity of subdivisions of evaluations all serve to convince us that this is a rational process. However, as the European Studies panel noted, the 'more precise' rating scales reduce panels' discretion (McNay 2006) and loses some of the potential benefit from peer evaluations. Moreover, behind its proclaimed logic and transparency, the different interpretations of submission guidelines we find between (and even within) particular HEIs, imply that such guidelines are more subject to interpretation than their presentation admits. What it sold us as an objective way of ranking research outputs turns out to rest on highly subjective judgments every step of the way (Johnston 2005).

The heart of the matter is that evaluating human knowledge practices and production presents a problem far messier than is implied by the types of technical solution considered. Even the crudely simplified rating on 5 (or even 7) points, eventually collapses into two categories - either side of the (regionally variable) threshold for receiving any funding. It perfectly illustrates Bauman's (1992) analysis of the rational, bureaucratic 'solutions' that modernity looks to. Psychoanalytic reflections on the RAE might highlight the search for a process that promises to manage and contain our anxiety which is fuelled by the increasingly competitive environment. The irony is that we invest in the RAE because we value our research (as well as the funding) and the identity perks offered, but that the result of this (over?) investment is a system that fails to reflect what we value, and worse, undermines our political values and potentially our commitment to research of social value.

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