

# OXFORD

## MAGAZINE

---

No. 293 Fifth Week Michaelmas Term 2009

WHAT could be more reasonable than that we should try to build in to the objectives of our research the expectation that we can fully justify it and that we should explain its value and relevance, if necessary, to the public who pay us to do it? No doubt, being liberal-minded, rational and socially aware, most Oxford academics would entirely endorse such an aspiration in principle.

The problem is that this reasonable-sounding notion is, in effect, becoming more than an aspiration: as a component of the proposed REF 2012 it is to become obligatory and used to determine ratings, budgets and quite possibly careers and jobs. Even a cursory examination of the recent HEFCE proposals makes it all too clear what is intended: Annex D lists 36 specific “possible indicators” of the suggested new assessment measure of “impact”, almost all of them applicable only to applied scientific research. Cosmology, string theory, cognitive neuroscience and evolution theory will, for example, all struggle convincingly to claim any likely, short-term practical importance: the temptations to exaggerate, simplify and popularize such claims will be considerable. The humanities in general face an even greater challenge.

Universities throughout England - Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales reserve their positions - will be subject to pressures that differentially favor the diverse components of the integrated academic enterprise: pure scientific research as against applied, humanities as against science, research as against teaching. The underlying driver is funding and the high costs of big science are the model. Theoretical and small science are tarred with the same brush. So too are the humanities, despite the obvious fact that their research expenses are of a quite different kind and minimal: employment costs are already jus-

---

## Unknown Unknowns

---

tified by teaching duties. How could the University’s stated principle of “parity of esteem” among all staff not be threatened?

This new HEFCE exercise is, like each of the previous six RAEs, different from its predecessor. This constant pattern of change in the form and the finally realized effects of these research assessment exercises not only makes it almost impossible for universities to plan rationally for future years on the basis of the assessment, but it also suggests that the aim of reaching a sensible and generally accepted assessment system may be illusory. REF 2012 would appear to encompass even more radical changes than earlier versions. The fact that HEFCE has already performed a U-turn in its REF planning suggests that HEFCE’s basic assumptions are themselves uncertain. HEFCE is operating increasingly to a dangerously hurried time-scale; finalization and publication of “guidelines on submissions” are planned for late 2010. It seems doubtful that time will allow any further round of consultations.

Although these are not discussed in the HEFCE REF document, there *are* alternatives! One would be a return to a situation similar to that prior to the first RAE; up to then, for many years, the University Grants Committee had dispensed a quinquennial block grant. It is not obvious that much has changed since: despite the RAEs, the relative standings and differential concentrations of research funds across UK universities have shifted only at the margins. We suggest a more immediately politically acceptable alternative on Page 6 below.

One can only agree that many aspects of the REF proposals are socially just and politically reasonable per se. However, the REF carries a cost: it is yet another step on the slippery slope that universities have long occupied,

---

## INSIDE

---

- THE PROPOSED RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

Pages three, four, seven, nine, ten, sixteen

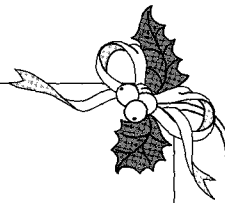
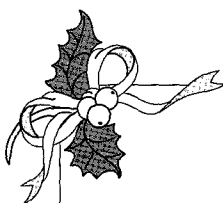
...and much more

namely the gradual loss of their autonomy to define their own aims and purposes, and how they can effect them. The more government assumes this role the more the academic profession will wither away, because it depends, for its very nature, on academic freedom and choice based on the highest standards of truth and argument. The David Nutt affair (the Home Secretary's recent sacking of the Chairman of the Government's drug policy committee over the application of scientific evidence) surely illustrates how even the results of hard, applied scientific research are rated as optional and irrelevant when it suits the short-term purposes of the politicians.

Oxford's response to the first round of REF consultations, eighteen months ago, was impressively and eloquently forthright; see "Reminders". This time we have been given four months to prepare a considerably more difficult response. Barely four weeks now remain because the closing date is 16<sup>th</sup> December. Most mem-

bers of Congregation will probably be unaware of how the University is setting about this task: formally it is the responsibility of the Research Committee of Council. More importantly they will be unaware of any possible route for their involvement in the preparation of the response. Will a draft version of the document even be made available for comment? We do not know. Though he does not chair the Research Committee – or normally attend it – it is the V-C who will have to speak out publicly in defense of a document that one must earnestly hope will be a shining beacon of sanity and common sense. What a pity that we know so little about how Oxford is going about arriving at a landmark statement of enormous significance for the future of the UK university system.

T.J.H.



## Will there be a Christmas Competition this Christmas?

The editors are at a loss as to the degree of enthusiasm among our readers for the "traditional" Christmas Competition. We seek suggestions. Readers are invited to propose a suitable Competition to be published in the final issue of the *Magazine* – deadline, 26<sup>th</sup> November.

NB. OUP is generous in its prizes (in book credits) for printed entries!!

PLEASE CONTACT Tim Horder at: [tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk](mailto:tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk)

### CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

**Robin Briggs** is a Fellow of All Souls • **Susan Cooper** is Professor of Experimental Physics, St Catherine's College • **John Coleman** and **Greg Kochanski** are at the Centre for Linguistics and Philology • **Rob Cuthbert** is Professor of Higher Education Management, Director of CAMPUS, and previously Deputy V-C at the University of West of England • **Peter A. Robbins** is a Fellow of Queen's and Professor of Physiology • **Ross Anderson** was recently elected member of Cambridge University Council • **Max Hammerton** is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Newcastle University • **Keith Gore** is an Emeritus Fellow of Worcester • **Bernard Richards** was Fellow and Tutor in English at Brasenose • **Peter Schofield** is a retired Physicist • **Jane Jakeman** is an Islamic historian and novelist



# Reminders



*The following are extracts from the University's response to the first HEFCE consultation on the REF, dated February 2008, originally available on HEFCE's website - eds.*

While we welcome the attempt to reduce the administrative burdens on the sector, we question whether the current proposals will achieve this goal ...

We are also of the view that too much attention has been given to the need to reduce burdens and that insufficient thought has been given to the aims of the assessment exercise, the types of research we wish to encourage, and the incentives which we create for future generations of researchers. The aim of the exercise should be to encourage high quality research and to support it wherever it is found across UK HEIs ...

It is also the case that the new framework does not provide an incentive for researchers to move into new areas and develop adventurous research programmes. A researcher concerned to perform well in the REF would be well advised to continue to work in the area for which he or she is well known. To the extent that the REF may inhibit the development of novel research programmes, it requires re-consideration ...

We fear that the distinction drawn in the consultation paper between science based disciplines and non science based disciplines will inhibit research between the sciences, on the one hand, and social sciences and humanities on the other hand ...

We are concerned about the impact of the REF on interdisciplinary activities which take place across and between 'science-based disciplines' and other disciplines. It may result in some researchers drawing back from such areas, in order to maximise their citation rates in journals within the Thomson fields ...

This would be extremely unfortunate and run counter to the encouragement given to multidisciplinary research programmes by RCUK (such as ageing, the digital economy and climate change). The problems that confront our society increasingly defy disciplinary boundaries and much of the world-class, cutting-edge research that is being conducted in UK universities is taking place across the disciplinary divides. It would, to put it mildly, be extremely unfortunate if the REF acted as an inhibitor of this type of research given its significance to our society ...

Broad (assessment panel) groups will make it more difficult to identify and reward pockets of excellence within these larger units. A small unit producing world class research which is located in a return which otherwise consists of large mediocre departments may suffer a damaging loss to its reputation as a result of being merged in the larger unit and unable significantly to influence the quality profile produced for that unit ...

The following issues are specific to the Humanities: (i) The time lag for the citation of Humanities research outputs is greater than for other disciplines. (ii) Outputs are often cited for far longer than in other disciplines. Indeed, the importance of research in humanities sometimes only emerges after a substantial time lag which may even extend to decades. (iii) The role and assessment of editions and translations will need to be addressed at an early stage in the consultation. (iv) In Modern Languages and other areas much of the most important research appears in languages other than English. (v) Many humanities research outputs are in books and monographs, the citations they use are not searched

by any bibliometric database, and those that count references to books made in journals are deeply problematic. (v) There are no reliable citations data for Humanities, and no reliable hierarchy of journals; the ESF journals list, in particular, is worthless, as HEFCE has already stressed ...

In conclusion, there is diversity of working methods and publication timescales in the non science based disciplines. There is a risk that these methods and publication patterns will be changed for no obvious gain if the REF is introduced without carefully thinking through the consequences. The new framework for the non science based disciplines should seek to limit perverse incentives and game-playing, and exclude incentives to increase the volume of research outputs for its own sake ...

There is no comprehensive proxy for assessing research quality in many of the non-science disciplines; those working as 'lone researchers' can do so without research grants, and research students are not necessarily an indicator of the quality of their activity. As described above, the capture of citations is not straightforward ...

This assessment need not be as comprehensive as the RAE2008. It may be that panels could 'dip stick' a proportion of submitted outputs, informed by supporting data (HESA returns for staff, students and research income). The panels could assess these outputs and then provide a quality profile ...

As mentioned earlier panels could also identify any potential game playing, or 'odd' behaviour and could perform a useful role in commenting upon the state of the discipline ...

The validation burdens associated with the REF should not be under-estimated. Checks will be required at a number of points. For example, it will be necessary to ensure that the correct proportion of each publication has been accurately assigned to each author and that the address of the author at the time of publication corresponds to the institution's employment records. In all likelihood it will be necessary to check this information looking back over a ten year period. The cost of introducing an automated system of suitable sophistication would be substantial to an institution of Oxford's scale ...

We are very concerned about the possible impact of the proposals on early career researchers. We are concerned that the REF, as presently constructed, gives universities an incentive to recruit mid-career, established researchers, to the detriment of early career researchers ...

We also harbour a concern about the substantial power that will be given to journal editors regarding the acceptance and placement of articles (given that analysis shows that the placing of an article within a journal affects its citation count) ...

Finally, the way in which any system is measured is bound to have an impact upon the behaviour of that system ...

It is vital that careful thought be given to the incentives created by the REF and that we avoid the encouragement of practices which are detrimental to the conduct of world class research and which could, unintentionally, result in a reduction in the international standing of UK universities.

# Making Sense of the REF

ROBIN BRIGGS and TIM HORDER

“In his letter of 22 January 2009 to the HEFCE Chair about funding for 2009-10, the Secretary of State emphasised that the REF should take better account of the impact research makes on the economy and society, and gave further guidance on particular activities that the REF should encourage:

*“The REF should continue to incentivise research excellence, but also reflect the quality of researchers’ contribution to public policy making and to public engagement, and not create disincentives to researchers moving between academia and the private sector.”*

(quoted from: *Research Excellence Framework. Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research.* HEFCE, September, 2009, §11)

In essence the most important change in the new REF proposals by comparison with the RAE or the earlier REF consultation document is the introduction of what amount in combination to two new criteria (“impact” and “research environment”) on which research will be evaluated, in addition to the already established RAE-style evaluation of research “output quality” per se. The distinction between these two new categories is hard to grasp (e.g. both include elements of assessing “secure future impacts”, Annex D §3) and they certainly overlap; together they would account for 40% of the REF evaluation according to the draft scheme.

The HEFCE document sees the REF as building on the earlier RAE, described here as an:

*“assessment of the actual or foreseeable impact of research. All types of research, including basic and applied research were assessed on an equal basis. The criteria for quality were ‘originality, rigour and significance’, including significance to users of research. The assessment of environment and esteem included indicators relating to collaboration with and income from research users, exploitation of new ideas and products, and influence on public policy advice”. (§52, 53)*

## A SELECTION OF KEY ISSUES AND ARGUMENTS

- The REF proposals make some crucial and fundamental assumptions which appear deeply flawed. It can be argued that the teaching of the next generation is closer to the core role of universities than research. To concentrate on research without due consideration of teaching makes a nonsense. The implication of many current government initiatives is the splitting apart of teaching and research.

One can debate endlessly how much research or scholarship has to be an integral part of the work of good university teachers, but the key point is that the “research-based”, enquiring, critically questioning attitude that we aim to pass on to our students comes out of the research experience of the lecturer. Ideally students should see research in action and take a part

in it, but even the writing of an essay marked and criticized by lecturers involves deploying and acquiring similar skills.

The only mention of teaching in the REF document is as follows:

*“Impact on teaching within HE will be taken into account where it can be shown that high-quality research has informed practice, not just course content, well beyond the institution in which that practice was first developed”. (§ 53)*

The QR funding element determined by the REF is treated as if it could be disaggregated from university funding as a whole (despite HEFCE’s insistence in other contexts that universities are expected to set their own priorities in spending the block grant). So long as the RAE was based overwhelmingly on intellectual excellence there was a considerable degree of symbiosis between the demands of research and teaching. These activities are very largely done by the same people, so that major changes in the support given to research in particular areas are likely to have dangerous consequences for the provision of essential teaching.

- Another split is being imposed in the REF through its unspoken but evident drive towards tangible economic justifications, a trend that will inevitably favour applied science over basic science, and policy-oriented social science against more theoretical work, while further downgrading the humanities generally. This has destructive implications for the picture of the university recognized by most academics and sanctioned by history, as an intellectual centre combining the broadest range of subjects, each given equal status, so that both staff and students are exposed to alternative influences. This has proved to be a uniquely fertile matrix for the generation of world-changing ideas and techniques, one of whose most striking features has been their unpredictability.

Against the view implied in the REF, it could be argued that, despite their success, science and technology have also created innumerable problems which society in general is poorly equipped to deal with. Climate change comes immediately to mind. Technology may reign supreme but the discontents of still-warring, often starving, nations and of our own dysfunctional society remain badly understood and beyond the reach of technologies. Science must be balanced by alternative viewpoints. Above all, universities need to equip the next generation with the skills and imagination to cope with the unknown future as civilized individuals. Among the sensitivities hopefully passed on are the lessons of history, the appreciation and valuing of the creative arts, respect for rationality and argument, understanding of uncertainty, etc. These fundamental aspects of modern rationality have to play a crucial role in the future of humanity, and they

require constant reaffirmation, yet no plausible indicator of impact can hope to capture them.

- The proposed REF imposes a set of priorities which directly undermines the notion of the university as an internally coherent community of disciplines. Most controversially the overt intention of the REF is to favour applied research over “pure”, so following a very narrow conception of national interest. However, what little hard evidence there is (Comroe and Dripps, 1976; see Smith, *Brit. Med. J.* 295, p1404, 1987) indicates that some 62% of the identifiable sources of major technological advances would have been classified as “blue skies”, in this case in medicine. The government’s wish to select out economically profitable applied research runs against all past experience, and contrasts unfavourably with a more sophisticated attitude in the USA, where the crucial long-term importance of the scientific base as a *whole* seems to be much better recognized.

It is easy to point to the fact that a Darwin, Newton or Einstein would not have qualified for support under the current or proposed grant regimes. It is harder to appreciate how their discoveries were primarily important for the way they informed our world view, rather than for any direct “applications” they may have had. Newton changed the nature of scientific method; Darwin affects all aspects of our understanding of man and society. These are paradigm examples of REF “impact”; but it makes no sense to try to evaluate or grade them. Moreover they can only be fully understood in a very long time frame.

It makes even less sense to try to generate such scores across all areas of academic life on an equal footing. This is particularly evident in the unreality of the REF proposals when it comes to assessing impact in the humanities, where no meaningful examples or proposals are offered by HEFCE.

- The REF proposals are founded on the premiss that it is possible to predict the future significance of academic activity today by looking at past achievement, on a notably vague timescale. The government record in forecasting and policy making is hardly reassuring. But history teaches the unwisdom of any such ambition. Government is interested in short-term political gain, while not even the best available “experts” are clairvoyant.
- The single most questionable element in the proposals is the new emphasis on “impact”. The proposed criteria by which this is defined (Annex D) make it abundantly clear that different academic subject areas will be differentially picked out. Very few, if any, of the criteria have any relevance to the humanities at all.

One welcome feature of the proposals is that HEFCE has backed off from the generalized use of metrics, although the remaining suggestions for their use still look naive. The consultation document gives no reason to think that its unidentified authors (by implication the Council of HEFCE comprised of 13 persons from business and university administration, none a practicing academic) have done any better in establishing objective measures or assessment methods for impact. That is less surprising when it is noted

that the current proposals have apparently been generated in a mere nine months, following the earlier U-turn on metrics and steered by the forthright letter from the Secretary of State (quoted above).

But the difficulty with impact is a fundamental one within the crude scheme now proposed. This is evident with the strange plan to use selected case studies as a key part of the impact assessment, without any recognition of the ways in which such a method will be wide open to manipulation. The authors appear to remain unaware of the crucial warning enshrined in Goodhart’s Law, which emphasizes that when a measure becomes a target it ceases to be a good measure.

As the experience of the RAE has shown, these assessment exercises are at high risk of generating unanticipated and damaging consequences; they lead to game playing and force changes in research priorities. In an age of generalised “grade inflation” academics will in effect be forced to exaggerate their claims to impact, subverting academic standards and even honesty.

- In terms of the quality of the arguments we are offered, the REF consultation document does not itself include any evidence as such to back up the new proposals; the evidence and arguments are assumed to have been dealt with by the expert groups preparing the document, but the annexes are as sketchy on key points as is the main text. It is striking just how brief the descriptions of the principal innovations are, with no more than a page and a half on “Research Environment”, for example.

The unnamed authors make it clear at several points that the set of proposals are as yet incomplete; work on them is still ongoing. Thus, if one looks (in Annex B, listing background studies) for the evidence on the origin and support for measures of “impact” all one finds is:

*“a report by Rand Europe, to be published shortly”, and “a summary of discussion at a workshop in July 2009”.*

The examples given are the obvious and apparently straightforward ones, so none of the real difficulties are confronted; to note these major unsolved problems, as the document sometimes does, amounts to no more than an evasive tactic. The authors evidently realized that they were in trouble where the humanities were concerned, so included impact on “culture and quality of life” in their lists, without any attempt to show how they could be sensibly evaluated. Here as elsewhere we are invited to buy a pig in a poke. At the most bathetic, some marginal suggestions might be thought to imply that historians or philosophers will earn points for impact when they appear on television.

Presumably HEFCE wishes to convince the academic community of the merits of the REF and to persuade it willingly to participate. This document is far from offering a coherent, fully argued case of the sort that academics expect in their own work; it is essentially laying down one set of routines, without discussing any alternatives. Take it or leave it.

An implicit argument may be detected within these proposals, that the RAE gave exaggerated priority to purely intellectual quality at the expense of valuable applied research. In the absence of convincing evidence it is hard to know if this belief could be justified. One would certainly want to see a far stronger case made out before accepting the need for a new assessment strategy whose modalities are so unclear, and whose potential effects are so extensive and unpredictable. Nevertheless it does seem reasonable that the REF should include changes that ensure a proper valuation for applied work, at a sensible level that would not cause major upheavals, and whose efficacy could then be evaluated in the light of experience.

The document does pay lip-service to the need to reduce the complexity and cost of future assessment exercises. However it is hard to see how the current proposals would not be more expensive, whereas the simpler scheme of the following kind would surely be cheaper.

Sensible additional incentives for applied research could in fact be achieved by changing the scoring system to make impact an *elective* rather than a *compulsory* element, a move that would have several major benefits. It would greatly reduce the incentive for individuals and departments to make forced arguments about impact, allow it to be assessed in parallel with other merits, and empower panels to use their judgement in a more flexible way, as is already being proposed in the document for the use of metrics by different panels. The task of assessment would be reduced, so that it could be undertaken on all submitted work that claimed impact, the only remotely fair method. Panels would have to make judgements about the likely impact of the nominated inputs, but this would still be much simpler than the elaborate and unrealistic historical approach adopted in the consultation document. Just as with the abandoned bibliometrics, the notion of a scheme that could weigh all these complex matters adequately is a dangerous chimera, which is bound to prove unworkable.

The scoring system could be adapted in a number of ways, so the scheme proposed here is merely indicative, and the values suggested could be changed. A bipartite

system would replace the tripartite one, with excellence and research environment as the two components. This would remove the overlap between impact and research environment, but a more explicit element of impact could be included under research environment, without the need to specify percentages. A split between the two elements of the order of 80/20 or 75/25 might seem appropriate. All inputs would have the option to claim impact as part of their excellence, and this would be graded on the four-point scale proposed in the consultation document. This score would then be used to moderate that for purely intellectual quality, upwards only, to a maximum of two points. A 4 for impact would raise work graded 2 to level 4, that graded 1 to level 3. In similar fashion a 3 for impact would take a 3 up to 4, and raise lower scores by 1, while a 2 for both impact and general quality might require assessment to see if the combination merited an overall 3, or perhaps be awarded a 2A as an intermediate grade below 3. Crucially, no input could score more than 4, even if it achieved this on both sides. A 2 for impact would stand as the final score even if the quality assessment was lower. The alternative scheme would achieve the objective of weighting the scoring to include impact, without devaluing the very best 'pure' research, and would make the whole system far more transparent and user-friendly. Most of the humanities, and a good number of scientific departments, would probably make very little use of the impact element, removing a whole range of problems in the proposals as they stand.

In an ideal world there might be many better ways of arranging differential funding for universities, so here we have simply tried to find a way to modify these proposals that would mitigate their most damaging features. We certainly believe that this modified REF would go quite far enough as a reworking for the next iteration of research assessment. If however the government has already pre-judged the issue without waiting for the consultation, as their latest pronouncement on university functioning (Lord Mandelson's "*Higher Ambitions*", published last week) strongly suggests, it would still be possible to combine a similar optional marking for impact with some other variant on the HEFCE proposals.

Not  
the  
*Gazette*

*NB* The *Oxford Magazine* is not an official publication of the University. It is a forum for the free expression of opinion within the University.

# Repairing the REF

SUSAN COOPER

THE government has launched a consultation<sup>1</sup> on its revised proposals for the REF to replace the RAE. The proposals leave some old problems unresolved and generate new ones with perverse incentives and unintended consequences. However it is not all bad and suitable modification could turn the REF into an improvement.

## *Grades of Excellence*

One of the old RAE problems that is simply copied over into the REF is the grading scale (§41). While HEFCE has tried to improve the definition of 4\* to require the “highest standards”, that is still a qualitative statement which each panel will interpret differently. The distinction between 2\* and 1\* keeps its previous definition based on ‘international’ vs. ‘national’ recognition. I have no idea how this distinction is to be drawn. HEFCE’s interpretation is paradoxical: in the 2008 RAE it gave no funding to 1\* research, defined as research quality that is recognised nationally! A sound judgement of research quality is independent of national boundaries and needs to be on one (international) scale.

The 2008 RAE results showed wide variations in the proportions of 4\* and 3\* between subjects. The funding method then gave more funding to subjects whose panels graded more generously<sup>2</sup>. The new definitions stick to the futile goal of an absolute scale to evaluate whether UK outputs in one subject deserve a higher 4\* percentage than in another. A more reliable (and thus ultimately fairer) solution is to set a *maximum percentage that can be graded as 4\**, another maximum percentage for 4\* plus 3\*, etc., and require each subject panel to obey these limits.

## *Unit of Resource*

On the teaching side, the government has for several years attempted to maintain the ‘unit of resource’ – the amount it pays towards teaching each undergraduate student – by raising it annually with inflation (one can argue about the appropriateness of the measure of inflation used, but at least there was a nominal attempt to maintain the value). On the research side this principle was abandoned already in 2001 when the increase in highly-rated departments was not met by a corresponding increase in funds. This could have been justified if it were due to grade inflation, but this hypothesis was contradicted by government claims that the RAE had driven an increase in the quality of UK research. The erosion was even greater in 2008, with some departments rising considerably in the rankings but seeing a decrease in their funding.

It is currently impossible to define an appropriate ‘unit of resource’ for QR (quality related) funding because there is *no clarity on what it is actually supposed to fund*. Previous to fEC grants, it seemed that QR paid for the research part of academic salaries; infrastructure needs simply went unmet. When fEC (full Economic Costing) was originally introduced with Research

Councils funding only 80%, QR was supposed to supply the missing 20%. Academic research time<sup>3</sup> is now supposed to be funded on fEC grants, but this works better in some areas than in others. The limited Research Council funding available for the humanities means fEC grants can only cover a very small minority of academic salaries. The Science and Technology Funding Council’s severe funding problems have recently led it to decide to fund a maximum of 16% of academic time, which is also completely inadequate. Despite the resulting need for QR to plug the gaps in funding for essentials, the government apparently thinks it is for ‘something else’, as last year universities were asked to report on what sorts of new things QR funding had allowed them to do.

Without the principle of a constant unit of resource, the RAE/REF leads to a Malthusian disaster. In the run-up to an RAE/REF, each university sees that it is much better off recruiting new academics before the census date rather than afterwards, so there is an increase in total numbers in a sort of ‘RAE fever’. By the time the bad news about the decrease in *per capita* funding comes through, there are only a few years left to decrease costs as people retire before the next pandemic of RAE fever comes around.

Adding to the problem is the government’s desire to increase the numbers of undergraduates going to university. Since a university is supposed to do research as well as teaching, usually with academics doing both so that students get the benefit of being taught by research-active staff, this also pushes for an increase in researchers.

Lacking a principle of a unit of resource for research, the government is free to ignore the resulting problems and call on universities to make ‘efficiency gains’ and other sacrifices until the whole system simply breaks.

## *Requiring Research Excellence AND Impact*

In the meantime the economy has broken and the government wants universities to help fix it. Would the proposed REF support or hinder this? The main change in the new proposals is to add to the section evaluating research excellence a new section evaluating ‘impact’. The scores are to be combined so that a top ranking can only be achieved by being excellent in both.

In the past the RAE has led to great prominence being given to excellence in pure research, with applied research being neglected. The solution is not to require that everyone do both in order to be regarded as excellent, but to give applied research an equal chance. *Work that is excellent when evaluated as pure OR applied research should be rewarded*, without requiring an AND.

The criteria discussed in §39 do allow an OR in the evaluation of the ‘significance’ of a research output, defined as “the capacity to make a difference either through influence within the academic sphere, or through actual or potential use beyond the academic sphere, or both”. This broadening is to be welcomed, as is the inclusion of ‘grey literature’ in §46. However these

are both part of the evaluation of research outputs and 'impact' is to be evaluated separately, so instead of a true OR we have something more complicated. The impression that 'impact' is creeping into everything and being over-emphasised is causing a great deal of anxiety.

In principle separate profiles could allow separate rewards for research excellence and impact, but we all know that great emphasis is put on the reputational reward based on the combined score. This generates pressure for every university to try to do everything rather than to play to its strengths. Even worse, §72 says a unit can only get the highest score for impact if it has "achieved impact across the full range of activities and contexts appropriate to its field of activity". *If we are each required to do everything, we will do nothing well and the effort will be inefficient.* Government has said that it wants to support diversity in HEI, but requiring that a HEI excel in both initial research and application in order to get a top overall grade perversely punishes diversity rather than supporting it.

### *Impact of What?*

The path from initial research breakthrough to eventual impact can be long and complicated. There is no reason to assume the process is more efficient if the whole path is travelled by people within the same institution. However the proposal (§68) does not allow an institution to earn impact credit for research it has initially done but which is exploited by another institution, nor apparently for the reverse. The research which eventually has the largest impact may take the longest to do so because it requires a total paradigm shift and may be excluded by the proposed 10-15 year window. These issues cause perverse incentives against developing applications of research initiated in another HEI, never mind in another country, or long ago, and thus *reduces the UK's capacity for gaining economic and other benefit from research* wherever, whenever and by whoever it was initially performed. This problem would disappear if work to get impact from research were allowed to gain credit on its own merits.

### *A Positive View*

While defending the value of pure research, we should not be snobbish and claim it is the only thing of value.

Work in creating 'impact' of research, whether of one's own original research or that of others, deserves equal prominence and reward in the REF. This can be achieved by loosening up the definition of the outputs evaluated in the main component of the REF to include applications as well as original research<sup>4</sup>. The evaluation of research outputs is already set up to allow a varying emphasis on the 'significance' and a modest broadening of the definition of 'significance' can accommodate what is being sought as 'impact'. The key difference is that a given output can be rated excellent for its value as pure research OR for its significance OR for a combination of the two. This allows each researcher, each research unit, and each university to develop its own emphasis.

Such broadening of the criteria may not appear to be in the immediate interests of Oxford, which benefits significantly in its total QR funding from the 'concentration' aspect of RAEs previous to the 2008 one (which was re-imposed somewhat on the 2008 RAE by the STEM ring-fencing). However we must beware of trying to defend a stance based on thin ice that is bound to melt away under our feet anyway. It is better to promote a system that tries to be fair to all and which would preserve the recognition of the value pure research, only removing its exclusive right to such recognition.

A government that considers equal treatment of pure research and impact not to be strong enough should consider that historically the research with the greatest impact was usually done out of pure curiosity and its impact came in ways not yet conceivable at the time.

<sup>1</sup> The consultation document is on [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09\\_38/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_38/). The § in this article refer to the numbered paragraphs of that document. The submission deadline is 16 December 2009. Oxford's Research Committee will be preparing the University's response using inputs from the Divisions.

<sup>2</sup> The resultant shift of funding away from the sciences would have been so strong that the government decided to 'ring fence' science funding. This counteracted the shift in a very coarse way but left strong variations between different subjects on the same side of the fence.

<sup>3</sup> The corresponding Estates and Indirect costs, proportional to the academic's FTE, also go on the grant and nearly double the total amount.

<sup>4</sup> 'Case studies' could be allowed as an optional type of research output to increase the scope for submitting applications.

The *Oxford Magazine* is edited by

**Tim Horder and Gavin Williams**

The *Magazine* normally appears in Noughth, Second, Fifth and Eighth Weeks each Term. Submissions (preferably by e-mail to: [tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk](mailto:tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk)) should be received by the Thursday of the previous week.

*Literary Editor.*

**Bernard O'Donoghue at Wadham.**

If you would like to subscribe to the

*Oxford Magazine*

please email

[subscriptions@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:subscriptions@admin.ox.ac.uk)

*Subscriptions normally run from September for a full academic year, but can be started at any time.*

---

# “Impact” and the limits of storytelling

---

JOHN COLEMAN and GREG KOCHANOSKI

IN two related changes, HEFCE (presumably at the behest of H. M. Government) now requires us to tell stories about the impact of our research. Since this past Spring, all research council grant proposals are required to tell a story about the impact the research will have, and now, in the REF (“Research Excellence Framework”) consultation, it is proposed that we will be required to tell stories about the impact - the demonstrable “economic, social, public policy, cultural or quality of life impacts” - that our research has had outside academia.

So, let’s talk about storytelling. Any stories we tell will be limited by the facts, but they will also be limited by the necessity that they be believable. Logically, there are four kinds of stories: false stories and true stories, combined with stories that are believable and those that are not. Examples of all four sorts abound in history and academia.

Quantum mechanics, for instance, is a true story that is nearly unbelievable. We like to think that if an electron starts here and ends up there, it follows a certain path and you can know where it is every step of the way. It’s hard to imagine that electrons don’t work that way, and it takes intensive training to get students to believe what electrons actually do.

And there are stories that are false but that virtually everyone believes at first. In linguistics tutorials, we see students come in with certain pop-linguistic ideas that are hard to eradicate. There’s a widespread belief that when we listen to speech, break it down into a string of discrete phonemes (consonants and vowels), and then clump those together into words, which enables us to look up their meaning in our mental dictionaries. There’s the belief that there are separate little modules in the brain: one for phonetics, one for grammar, one for meaning, and so on.

So too with impact stories. For research proposals, believability will be the dominant effect because there are no hard facts. Proposals must contain a story about impact in the more-or-less unknown future (this will be a mixture of hope, guess, and fiction). Looking forward, it may not be possible to plausibly and honestly predict the direct impact or public benefit. And even for the retrospective case studies that would be required for the REF, believability would still be at least as important as facts. The full story of how any research project affects society is complex and filled with detail; many history books (with competing viewpoints and conclusions) are written about some discoveries. Yet, for the purpose of the REF, it must be condensed to a few paragraphs, and the condensation will be governed by believability.

So, what stories do people tell and believe? Simple, linear stories without too many steps. We like stories where each cause has one effect and each effect has one cause. We like stories with a single inventor, hero, or villain. For instance, when we think about one output of “research and development” - *Microsoft Windows* - we may think of Bill Gates as the cause, even though a little arithmetic makes it obvious that he couldn’t have writ-

ten all the code by himself. (Nor, in fact, did he even have time to personally hire all the programmers.) In reality, *Microsoft Windows* has a large number of direct causes, each of whom was influenced by books they had read, courses they took, e-mails they received, and conversations they had in hallways. There is a backwards-spreading tree of causality behind *Windows*, much like the tree of your ancestors.

But, suppose you wrote a book on programming in 1988. Would you dare write in your impact statement that you helped make *Microsoft Windows*? Would anyone take it seriously if you did? Of course not. But, without question, some academic’s research helped *Microsoft* engineers make the design decisions that were critical to *Windows*’ success. The trouble with REF is that any specific story you could tell would (with 99.9% probability) be wrong in detail, and therefore hard for the referees to believe, even though impact happened. *Windows* would certainly have been different had no books on computer science ever been written.

Predicting impact - predicting *anything* - may be impossible if human society is chaotic. Any small change might grow and eventually lead to a society that would be completely different in detail (though perhaps similar in certain overall properties). A good analogy is the weather, where the flap of a butterfly’s wings will (in a matter of weeks) rearrange the pattern of thunderstorms. Chaos often happens in a system with lots of components and complicated interactions, and society can reasonably be described that way. If society is chaotic, the only kind of impact you could honestly measure would be immediate impact. If you were to follow the chain of cause and effect more than a few steps, it would be overwhelmed by the effects of flapping butterflies. But, whether or not society is really chaotic, we tell (and believe) stories as if it is *not*.

Overall, research certainly has a strong impact on society: many aspects of modern society can be traced back to someone’s research, and many improvements were inspired by research. But, telling a specific, convincing story is hard because only certain types of true stories are convincing. Because of this, impact statements are an untrustworthy tool.

Even in hard sciences that we think of as being fairly close to market, it was or would have been impossible to believably predict the real impact of such developments as steam engines (which plausibly led to the spread then demise of canals), techniques for growing single crystals (which led to microelectronics), the computer (“*The Final Question*” [1956] by Isaac Asimov shows how inaccurately the future of computers was predicted), white-light holograms (now most frequently found in gift-wrapping paper and on credit cards), speech codec chips (mostly found in talking birthday cards and mobile phones), lasers (ubiquitous in CD and DVD players) and so on.

How much more difficult it is, then, to tell a story about the wider public impact of history research. And

yet, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) woke echoes in 2008, during the credit crunch, when the "decline and fall of the American empire" was the subject of hundreds of blogs. Are they part of Gibbon's impact? And there are also the butterflies in our culture: nihilism, counterpoint, and Abkhazian syllable structure. They form part of the rich dynamic of our culture, but what is the impact of a butterfly on the weather? We do not know how (or if) the world would be different had these things been thought of differently; but it is hubris to say that they have no effect just because we cannot draw the path.

Telling plausible stories about impact is somewhere between impossible and damaging. The resultant stories will be written to be believed, and reviewers will be continually on the fork between unpalatable mixtures of guesswork and optimism. The stories will have as much in common with fairy tales as with scholarship or science. Forcing researchers to tell such tales as part of their work should be vigorously resisted: it will not lead to the

wise expenditure of public money, and teaching us to lie is hardly good policy.

We offer as exercises for the reader:

- 1) Produce the impact statement that would be part of a proposal to write the Communist Manifesto (Marx and Engels, 1848).
- 2) Produce the 1968 version of the retrospective impact statement.
- 3) Pretend to be a reviewer back in 1847: comment on both (1) and (2).
- 4) Draft impact statements (according to your personal taste) for Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne*, Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*, or Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*.

---

# The View from beyond Russell Square\*

---

ROB CUTHBERT

IN Victorian times, before the Football Association came together in 1863 to agree on a common set of laws of the game, it was necessary before any fixture for the teams to agree on which laws they would use for the game. In 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education there are echoes of this gentlemanly chaos in the discussions about research assessment. But it is to be hoped that this time the rules will not ultimately be decided, as they were then, in a private meeting of public school men from the leading clubs, mediated by Oxbridge<sup>1</sup>.

Research assessment is always accident-prone, because of researchers' overdeveloped tendency to analyse and proselytise about methods and their consequences. The iniquities of the audit culture<sup>2</sup> are well-known, but research assessment compounds the problem, in the way it brings out narrow self-interest in so many people, departments and whole institutions. There are many claimants to the moral high ground, but too often they see no further than their own patch.

Across the whole of higher education, research assessment is repeatedly misused for purposes beyond its stated aim—which is to assess research *quality* in *units of assessment* to help inform decisions about research *funding*. However, research assessment has a major influence not only on the units of assessment, but also on *individual* academic careers and on *institutional* reputations, and it may be mobilised to justify the closure of *teaching as well as research* in some departments.

Since this broader use is inevitable, the architects of any new research assessment process must have an eye to its broad impact, not just its narrow fitness for purpose. The proposed Research Excellence Framework will have significant effects beyond the so-called 'research-inten-

sive' universities, indeed, beyond higher education institutions altogether. And it will have significant effects on the whole of academic practice—teaching, research, and public service—not just research. We should consider its effects in these terms, and to do so we need to examine our assumptions about higher education and universities, and about teaching, research and the relationships between them.

## *The ideal of higher education*

Higher education now extends far beyond the kind of universities that once made up most of the sector. The 1963 Robbins Report shaped how we think about higher education, defining the purposes of higher education in such memorable terms that we still take it as the classic statement: "the development of the general powers of the mind", and so on. But Robbins' idea of the university corresponded to an age when universities catered for less than 10% of the population. That idea of the university had evolved from the Humboldtian idea of academic freedom realised in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, mediated by Newman, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Robbins and others, and modified by mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal democracy. Martin Trow<sup>3</sup>, its principal exponent in the 1960s and 1970s, drew on the Humboldtian ideal not only in terms of academic freedom but also in terms of the research-teaching-scholarship (R-T-S) nexus as the defining characteristic of the university. Trow's expression of that idea, and his model of higher education progression from elite through mass to universal provision, was so beguilingly plausible that we uncritically swallowed a narrow idea of the RTS nexus, which has dominated policy thinking ever since.

But mass higher education does not mean more of the same. A system that in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century catered for

\* *The Russell Group is an association of 20 major research-intensive universities in the UK, formed in 1994 at a meeting convened in Russell Square, London. <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/>*

less than 5% of the rising generation now accommodates almost 50%, with new demographic diversity, new kinds of preparation for admission, and an explosion of new subjects to study. There are now more HE students in FE colleges than there were in the whole of the university sector in the 1950s. There are more and more private providers of HE, some even allowed a university title. Globalisation has created new collaborators, new competitors and new opportunities. To comprehend this variety we need to change how we think about higher education.

1970s and 1980s HE policy was dominated by binary thinking. The polytechnics had grown from a different vocational applied tradition of higher education and were funded for teaching but not for research. The funding regime allowed the polytechnics to expand freely in response to student demand, and they became the largest part of the sector in terms of undergraduate student enrolment. Controlling the cost of local authority higher education became a major policy issue, but expanding the polytechnics was comparatively cheap because their level of funding per student, the so-called 'unit of resource', was much lower. The University Grants Committee, which tried and failed in 1981 to hold a line on universities' higher unit of resource, was politically embarrassed<sup>4</sup> into disaggregating universities' funding, declaring that the cost of teaching a student was marginally lower in universities than in polytechnics, with the rest of the university unit of resource being spent on research—thus quantifying the original QR pot. Pressure for greater accountability for that QR spending led directly to the RAE and the creation of separate funding streams for teaching and research.

This separation was taken for granted as the natural order of things when the binary policy ended: the polytechnics gained university title, and there were unified Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales. Binarism lived on with two main streams of funding, T and QR, preserving dual floor funding for those universities which would soon be calling themselves the 'research-intensives'.

The dominant idea of the RTS nexus and its consequence, the idea of the university as a site for the nexus, means that for the last 20 years policy-makers and managers have been obsessed either with how the post-1992 universities can get more money for research, or how to stop them getting more money for research and get them to concentrate on something else. After each research assessment exercise the funding council modelled funding formulae until it could create the even steeper hierarchy of funding demanded by Government. In each case—until 2008—the funding council injected new money into the pot to protect the best-funded. But with no new money after RAE 2008<sup>5</sup>, the consequence of identifying excellent research in all kinds of places was for the first time a small net transfer of funds to those places—and disproportionate squeals of protest from the pre-1992 universities which had lost a small percentage of their total QR funding to upstart 'islands of excellence' beyond the research-intensive pale. This is tendentiously labelled 'leakage' by those who believe, like Michael Arthur, chair of the Russell Group, that a limited number (Arthur puts it at 25-30) of universities should forever be protected as the guardians of world-

class research for the sake of our economic competitiveness<sup>6</sup>.

This is of course an elitist view, but there is nothing wrong with elitism in principle. Indeed, the academy depends on it, in the sense of encouraging the survival of the fittest ideas, and their eternal openness to new challenge. But the kind of elitism espoused by critics of research assessment and its consequences too often slides over from worthy academic elitism into snobbery and mere protection of the status quo. The stakes, of course, are high. Not so much for Oxbridge and the golden triangle, who may have their attention diverted but will not have their existence and reputation threatened by such ephemeral trivialities as research assessment exercises. But the other research-intensive universities have more to lose: they fear relegation from the premier league of research-intensive universities. And like the beneficiaries of other English premier leagues, they marshal arguments in favour of the status quo.

Rugby Union has a persistently strong lobby to abolish promotion and relegation from the Premiership—which of course is always said to be for the good of the game at the highest level, and to preserve national competitiveness. In football, the Premier League clubs find the no-relegation argument attractive, but settle for fixing the funding regime so that the top clubs get the lion's share of television money and exposure, are able to attract disproportionate shares of new talent, and are cushioned at the point of failure with 'parachute payments' to support their return to the top league as soon as possible.

In higher education, the Russell Group continues to argue for no promotion or relegation, which is always said to be for the good of the science base and to preserve national competitiveness. Failing that, they seek to fix the funding regime so that the top universities get the lion's share of research money and exposure, are able to attract disproportionate shares of new talent, and are cushioned at the point of failure with parachute payments (whether in QR, or in 'moderation' funds) which reflect nothing but the fact that they used to perform at premier league level, but their form has dipped.

Analogies with the US are often cited. But in US HE there is a greater variety of institutional types, and there is greater upward and downward reputational mobility for institutions, even if the top two or three are never in doubt. And in American football, as in almost all sports, the funding and talent regimes are designed to promote greater competition, by steering new talent to the teams *least* successful in the previous season. The rhetoric of competition is embodied in how the system works. In English HE, universities preach the rhetoric of competition but seek a funding regime which denies it. Americans preserve competition, the English preserve the status quo.

### *Research and/or teaching*

The self-interestedness of the argument is obscured by an unduly narrow view of the ways in which research, teaching and scholarship may fruitfully interact. The theology of the R-T-S nexus has fuelled an endless search for evidence to justify the belief that research and teaching must be linked for high quality higher education to be possible. In a broad sense this is inevitably true, but that broad truth does not mean that the 19<sup>th</sup> century ver-

sion of the R-T-S nexus must be reproduced in every unit, every department, every faculty, every institution where there is teaching, research or other forms of academic practice. The macro-nexus is essential; the micro-nexus, especially in the internet age, is not. On the contrary, good research can be done where there is no teaching, and good teaching can go on where there is no research. We need to find a better way of capturing the pluralism of institutions in a 21<sup>st</sup> century mass higher education system, one which allows that there may be many different ways and many different contexts in which research, teaching and scholarship can interact.

Let us start with some research evidence. At the same conference where the Russell Group chair delivered his broadside in favour of the top 25-30 institutions, Jonathan Adams of Evidence UK, a leading analyst of UK research performance in global context, presented evidence that there is indeed a 'super elite' in UK HE<sup>7</sup>. Adams showed that the global prominence of UK research is significantly due to a small proportion of work which is 'super-cited'. This 'very concentrated peak of exceptional excellence' is significantly located in just five universities—Oxbridge, UCL, Imperial and the LSE—a statistically significant golden triangle. Beyond that golden triangle, 4\* excellence truly is widely dispersed and not confined to a premier league of 25 or 30 institutions; for example, the 1994 Group of universities slightly outperforms the Russell Group once the golden triangle five are removed.

And this research has developed despite funding regimes which strongly steered research funding towards that top 25. For competitiveness or value for money, investing QR outside the top 25 delivers much greater returns. The Russell and 1994 Groups make much of statistics about proportions of academic staff submitted in the RAE, but this is neatly sidelined by the REF proposals, which allow for the publication of such statistics but deny them a place in the assessment process. This is surely correct. To do otherwise would be rather like denying Italy a place in Rugby's Six Nations Championship because so few of its citizens play the game. There was of course an excellent heritage for the preceding Five Nations (and before that the four nations of the UK), but the authorities sensibly perceived that openness to new entrants would be good for the game as a whole. And just as in the RAE, new entrants soon adjust to the point where they start beating some of the old competitors.

Does this mean that we should encourage all universities to become more like the once-successful research-intensive universities? Of course not, because there is more than one game to be played. Higher education is about world-class research, but it is also about public service, knowledge exchange and most of all about teaching half the population. A latter day Robbins would no doubt speak of higher education's role not in terms of 'maintaining a common culture', but rather in supporting the continuing regeneration and transformation of our culture. Higher education is for citizenship, and we should not restrict its scope to a few universities of a particular kind. We should abandon the social elitism inherent in binary thinking. There is a wide range of relationships between teaching and research in different kinds of university, and there are higher education contexts, like private providers, research laboratories and FE colleges, where the research-teaching nexus idea breaks down

completely. The terms of the argument were and are too narrow.

There is of course a hierarchy of esteem, in which research-intensive universities are and perhaps will always be at the top. Nevertheless, not all universities want to be narrowly research-intensive, and not all university academics want to work in a research-intensive university. Research, teaching and scholarship are important for any academic. Across different HE contexts, the psychological contract between the academic and the institution usually depends on some self-determination in terms of work patterns, a freedom to think and speak, and a freedom to pursue research as well as an obligation to maintain scholarship. Our perspective should respect those academic preferences, but recognise that they need not take only one historically-favoured form. They need not imply exactly the same kind of academic freedom in every context. But, if we believe that research and teaching must be connected for the health of both, then we should not define a small minority of HE contexts as the only places to be funded for 'proper research'. If we do that, we label the vast majority of institutions, with the vast majority of students, as inferior places<sup>8</sup>. The market will of course always do that, but that is no reason to legislate for concreting over the shifting sands of institutional performance and reputation.

We should instead welcome the diversity of the English HE system, and the fact that it can contain such a variety of institutional types, each capable of performing in its chosen areas of practice at the highest level. We should look for HE policies which seek to protect the world-class nature of the whole higher education sector, emphasising collaboration and mobility between categories rather than encouraging universities to rush for the 'mission group' lifeboats while the mother ship founders. That means recognising that there is more than one model for academic excellence as a university. Not all excellent universities embody the 19<sup>th</sup> century R-T-S nexus; not all excellent universities are research-intensive; not all excellent higher education goes on in universities. We need to find a better way of thinking about higher education.

#### *Rediscovering academic freedom*

The core problem is the fragmentation of our perspective. One of the lesser-known founders of the London School of Economics, Halford Mackinder said: "Knowledge is one. Its division into subjects is a concession to human weakness." Our knowledge of academic practice should be one. We have made concessions to academic weakness long enough. We have to stop thinking about teaching and research separately, and recreate a unified idea of academic practice. And we can do it by going back to Humboldt's better idea, the idea of academic freedom, in its full Humboldtian sense as applying equally to teaching, research and other forms of academic practice.

There are asymmetries in how we see teaching and research. Teaching, however inspirational, does nothing for your academic reputation, but research brings fame and fortune. This is why the hierarchy of esteem inevitably favours the research-dominated institutions. The asymmetry is a problem for any higher education institution and any higher education system. In Britain we

have made it worse by separating the funding streams for teaching and research. That makes the reputational hierarchies steeper, it intensifies inter-institutional competition for resources, and it encourages academics and universities to fall into the trap of seeing teaching and research in competition with one another, instead of being interwoven.

The key to improving and changing our world view is academic freedom, for research and for teaching. The Humboldtian ideal was what John Searle in the 1960s called a 'special theory' of academic freedom<sup>9</sup>, something which claimed special privileges for the academy in a repressive society. Searle said that with the spread of more liberal democratic regimes the special theory gave way to a 'general theory' of academic freedom, in which the freedom necessary for academic enquiry becomes less distinguishable from the general societal freedom of expression.

This makes the distinctiveness of the university, as a context for understanding the world, harder to pin down. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have Western Governments introducing identity cards, imprisoning people for years without charge, restricting civil liberties, and increasing surveillance of innocent citizens. We have commercial companies expanding their intellectual property, claiming even the human genome. We have 24/7 media intrusion into our public and private lives. And we have the Internet, recording everything and making it accessible. It is becoming much easier to see some differences between the classic freedom of academic enquiry and the modernised version of democratic liberty.

We need to reconsider the merits of the idea of academic freedom as a special liberty, to be exercised only by those who can show a purpose which requires it. And perhaps that academic freedom should then be exercised only in defined contexts—which might for example mean contexts which are in effect licensed as sites for teaching or research by universities, or by academics acting freely as curriculum designers, editors and conference organisers. And if we think of academic freedom in this way we can begin to reshape higher education—not by shoring up the shaky edifice of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus, but by once again defining contexts in society which distinctively and disinterestedly pursue or promote understanding, and claim the intellectual freedom needed in that context to promote that understanding.

We need to work on the idea of academic freedom, to understand its dimensions and its range. We are nowadays so illiterate in terms of academic freedom that some academics think they have a right to make controversial statements on anything, whether or not it falls within their field of expertise. There are others who think they can censor research and comment just because they find it objectionable or politically incorrect, even though it is legal. And then there are those who mistakenly conflate institutional autonomy and academic freedom. I suggest we start by thinking of academic freedom as that scope which an individual academic needs to maintain his/her academic practice with integrity, while institutional autonomy is the scope an institution needs to enable its academics to practise with integrity within their sphere of activity. But those ideas can no longer be contained within von Humboldt's conceptions. We need a 21<sup>st</sup> century idea of academic freedom and we need new ways

of seeing the higher education world. I suggest we focus on the interplay between academic purposes, academic freedoms and academic contexts.

Narrow purposes might require only narrow freedom. In a commercial context where the purpose is high-level professional training, academics might require only the freedom to draw on the results of other people's research to instruct trainees in developing work-related skills. In a commercial context such as an industrial research laboratory, where the purpose is commercial problem-solving or new product development, the freedom to conduct applied research and development means closer working relationships and exchange between university and industry academics, with correspondingly greater freedoms for the commercial researchers.

In a further education college the broader purpose of education for individual development calls for the freedom for teachers to express controversial opinions without fear of retribution. And in a university dedicated to expanding our understanding of the world, which does all kinds of research as well as teaching, we can still lay claim to the widest kind of academic freedom, to teach, research and publish in a spirit of relatively untrammelled intellectual enquiry.

This is simply a sketch of the ways in which we might begin to 'calibrate' academic freedom. Perhaps Terrence Karran's careful typology of academic freedom in Europe<sup>10</sup> can help to put flesh on the bones of the argument, but that would be another article.

If we do not pay close attention to the nature of academic freedom and its contingent justifications, we might damage what is most important for higher education. We need to recognise that there may be good teaching and good research in a wide range of both commercial and public higher education contexts, but the precise nature of the academic freedom needed to protect the integrity of academic practice will vary with context and purpose.

If we care about teaching, research and scholarship, and we want to respect and defend *all* the places where good research and teaching go on, we need to change our understanding of the academic world. We can use the concepts of academic freedom, academic purpose, and academic context to reunify academic practice without homogenising it.

We need to abandon the idea of the (micro) research-teaching-scholarship nexus as the organising idea in how we think about higher education. We need to abandon the idea of the university as the only legitimate context for higher education. We need to adopt an idea of *higher education* which recognises the necessity of academic freedom, but qualifies the extent of academic freedom according to purpose and context.

Let me illustrate what that different way of thinking about higher education might mean.

HEFCE should not try to micromanage university strategy. From our present perspective, diversity of mission degenerates into all aspiring to go up the league tables by being more like the universities at the top—the ones which appear most fully to embody the research-teaching-scholarship nexus ideal. And as long as there are separate T, R and third stream funding streams in their present proportions, this will not change. HEFCE should fund institutions by mission, the way merchant banks finance companies in which they invest. There is

ample room for accountability and inter-university comparison against a range of criteria, but we should not start from a formula which breaks funds down into T and R. We need more of what John Bevan at NAB used to call the ‘judgmental overlay’ – the accountable exercise of administrative discretion – and less of the formula-driven ‘performance management’ which actually drives down performance levels.

Government could tune policy more directly to an idea of institutional mission which does not reinforce the teaching-must-be-done-alongside-research tendency. This is a perfect fit with the Leitch agenda, but the price for Government is the granting of academic freedom in a whole range of contexts which currently are beyond it, in particular the workplace. From this perspective giving Foundation Degree awarding powers to FE colleges was probably the right thing to do, albeit done probably for the wrong reasons. Another example: in pursuing wider participation, rather than requiring every university to make a pro rata contribution and obsessing about working class students in the Russell Group, Government could take a Popperian view of social inclusion and define it as a problem for universities collectively to solve, by working together. That would encourage us to think about how to promote social inclusion through the whole range of academic practice, not just teaching, but also research, knowledge exchange and public service. That way we might be able to shift attention away from the exceptionally-qualified 3000 state school and FE college students who don’t get into the Russell group, and onto the well-qualified many hundred thousand who do get a good higher education, but not in those universities. And it would keep the reputational hierarchy more fluid and dynamic.

QAA should rewrite its codes of practice to reflect the range of degrees of academic freedom that might be appropriate in different contexts and for different purposes. The audit question should become: is this good enough in this context, for this purpose? Not: is this sufficiently like the mythical ideal gold standard course found in the research-teaching-scholarship nexus? Even better, codes of practice could be rewritten on the basis that we can trust most people, most of the time, to do things right and to do them well enough, and so we should focus our efforts on identifying and addressing the minority where this is not the case. However academics and institutions might themselves not be ready to accept the consequences – which would be a return to a focus on quality itself, not quality systems, and the robust prosecution and punishment of cases of failure. If we could live with that then the QAA might indeed become more like a support service for quality enhancement, and less like an enforcement agency.

Higher education providers, universities and others, need to be more subversive and more assertive in protecting their definition of academic practice, against the reductionist pressures of Government and its agencies. To give a small example, as a Deputy Vice-Chancellor I was required to complete an annual HEFCE return which asked how much my university spent on widening participation. I got into the habit of giving an answer equal to the University’s entire budget, since I declined to accept that our spending was or could be fragmented in the way the question presumed.

And most importantly academics need to face up to the consequences of their own rigid thinking, and change their ways. We need to pay less attention to our freedom to research and publish, and much more attention to how we use our academic freedom in teaching and in knowledge exchange, and whether there is enough of the right kind of freedom in all the contexts where academic work is done. We need to switch our research attention away from research-teaching linkages and towards developing a new idea of academic freedom, calibrated for context and purpose, to take the place in our minds of the idea of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus.

### *Reframing the Research Excellence Framework*

If we could do all that, what kind of research assessment would we need? In traditional terms, discussion about the REF collapses into factional squabbles about who wins and who loses, or petitioners claiming that ‘impact’ and the REF will kill the spirit of inquiry, bringing about the end of higher education civilisation as we know it. While those things need to be heeded, the most important consideration is the health of the higher education system as a whole. It is time to move beyond 1984 policy thinking: it is unhelpful either to assert ‘research-intensive good, teaching-intensive bad’, or to say that all universities are equal, but some are more equal than others. Government will not and cannot be expected to pay for everything. But we can at least try to ensure that Government does not unnecessarily inhibit public choices for HE by inventing a formally stratified HE system, with unfortunate financial, academic and social consequences.

Universities and other providers of higher education will develop their own mix of teaching, research, knowledge exchange and public service in different and perhaps distinctive ways. The assessment and funding regimes should encourage diversity and competition, rather than close it down. Formal stratification of the sector, as proposed by Michael Arthur, should be resisted. In battles about the REF we should keep our sense of perspective and aim to win the war for higher education as a whole. The strategic objective in the forthcoming battles about research assessment, higher undergraduate student fees and public spending cuts should be to win back, if possible, some greater degree of autonomy for institutions and freedom for academics – a ‘trust dividend’ as the *quid pro quo* for the cuts which must inevitably follow the Government’s rescue of the financial system. Perhaps we could even make a move towards more peer review as part of the process which decides how institutions are funded – Government might not retain quangoes like HEFCE. Reductionist target-driven performance management diminishes higher education’s contribution not only to economic prosperity, but also to society, culture and human understanding.

‘Impact’ in research assessment has many dimensions and many implications. As Bahram Bekhradnia argues<sup>11</sup>, the whole point of every research assessment exercise has been to evaluate the impact of research in academic terms. We should not let the argument descend to a yes/no squabble about whether ‘impact measures’ are a good thing. A new Government might decide to drop the kind of approach currently proposed in the REF consultation, and HEFCE has, as William Cullerne

Brown points out<sup>12</sup>, cleverly designed the impact proposals to facilitate their later removal if required.

We should use the REF debate to remind policy-makers about the impacts not only of research, but also of teaching and other academic practice. Bekhradnia rightly argues that the RAE is a more efficient way of assessing research quality than, in particular, the way research councils assess grant proposals. But the negative effects of the audit culture carry their own significant costs, and we must develop the argument that excessive surveillance can make 'performance management' fail in its own terms, by actually driving down the overall level of performance.

There may be a limit to our influence on broad-brush Government policy. So we should try harder to improve how higher education sector is managed and led<sup>13</sup>. There are many steps on the 'implementation staircase'<sup>14</sup> and we should be using the discretion available at every step, to improve the academic and institutional impact of higher-level policy decisions, and to protect the diversity of the system as a whole.

There is more than one game in higher education. Some universities are like golf clubs. They attract members by providing exclusive facilities and social prestige, and they impose high entry qualifications and checks. They retain members because members don't want to lose their privileges. Other universities are more like football clubs. They have a loyal local following. Even though the supporters know that their club may never be in the Premier League, the club retains its members because they love the game and they feel an identity, loyalty and pride bound up with their club being part of the local community.

There is more than one game at stake in our discussions about the REF. A change in the offside laws affects how football is played not only in the Premier League and Championship, but also in the Blue Square Premier, and even in the local park. A change in research assessment methods has an impact on teaching as well as research, and an impact on every place where academic work goes on. Impact matters, but it matters far beyond research. Everyone in higher education has a stake in how research assessment works. If we fail to recognise that, we might end up appealing against a foul REF. It is to be hoped that the rules will not ultimately be decided in a private meeting of public school men from the leading clubs, mediated by Oxbridge.

<sup>1</sup> At Trinity College, Cambridge: see Speight R (2008) 'Trinity and the Beautiful Game' *The Fountain* Trinity College Newsletter Autumn 2008 pp6-7 <https://alumni.trin.cam.ac.uk/design/pdfs/Fountain7.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Power, M. (1997) *The audit society: rituals of verification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

<sup>3</sup> Trow, M. (1973) *Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education*. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, Berkeley, California (ERIC resource ED091983)

<sup>4</sup> Thus did the Oxford man Christopher Ball, Master of Keble and Chair of the National Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education (NAB), outmanoeuvre Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, the Cambridge man at the UGC. But the *eminence grise* was John Bevan, superbly accomplished as NAB chief executive and in many other parts, invariably a champion for expanding educational opportunity.

<sup>5</sup> Eastwood, D. (2009) Research Funding and Assessment: the Future Presentation for the HEPI Conference, London 14 October 2009 <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/485-1734/Research-Funding-and-Assessment-The-Future.html>

<sup>6</sup> Arthur, M. (2009) *Assessment, Selectivity and Excellence: Getting the Balance Right*. Presentation for the HEPI Conference, London 14 October 2009 <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/485-1734/Research-Funding-and-Assessment-The-Future.html>

<sup>7</sup> Adams, J. (2009) *How Concentrated is the UK Research Base: the Distribution of Excellence and Diversity*. Presentation for the HEPI Conference, London 14 October 2009 <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/485-1734/Research-Funding-and-Assessment-The-Future.html>

<sup>8</sup> The seductive power of our defective perspective is shown in the way many post-1992 universities adopt strategies which explicitly choose and identify a few areas of research strength, consigning most academics in the institution to the outer darkness of an explicitly 'research-weak' existence. The most successful post-1992 university in gaining research council grants before and QR income after the 2008 RAE was the University of the West of England, which since 2000 had deliberately avoided such a strategy, adopting a rhetoric of inclusiveness and decentralising decisions about how best to support research and teaching in all parts of the University.

<sup>9</sup> Searle, J. (1971) *The campus war*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin

<sup>10</sup> Karran, T. (2007) 'Academic freedom in Europe: a preliminary comparative analysis' *Higher Education Policy* 20:289-313

<sup>11</sup> Bekhradnia, B. (2009) *Proposals for the Research Excellence Framework: a critique* Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute HEPI Report Summary 43

<sup>12</sup> Cullerne Brown, W. (2009) 'Sane again'. *Research Fortnight* 23 September 2009:23

<sup>13</sup> Cuthbert, R. (2007) *How can we manage?* Inaugural professorial lecture University of the West of England, Bristol

<sup>14</sup> Trowler, P. (1998) *Academics Responding to Change: new higher education frameworks and academic cultures*. Buckingham: Open University Press/SRHE.

## Impact-driven D Phils

Sir — I wonder how many of those concerned about REF are also keeping a weather eye on the discussion about the future of doctorates? It is surely important to remember that freedom for research students matters as much as that of academics engaged in research. Universities UK commissioned 'research' from Vitae,<sup>1</sup> one of the numerous consultant 'organisations' now offering higher education their support and guidance. Their report may now be read on the UUK website.<sup>2</sup> It has a good deal to say about taught doctorates and professional doctorates and other current trends, and it is aligned with the notion that the pursuit of truth ought to have a measurable commercial impact.

When the report was presented at the House of Commons on 29 October, UUK's new President told an audience of Vice-Chancellors and MPs that:

*'We need to promote the attractiveness of the UK PhD to employers, as well as students. We also need to do more to encourage mobility between academia and business, and vice versa. Transferable employability skills for PhD graduates, allowing them to work effectively within industry as well as academia, are critical.'*<sup>3</sup>

Business-facing research is the future, then, and not only for academics.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.vitae.ac.uk/>

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/research\\_report\\_doctorate.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/research_report_doctorate.pdf)

<sup>3</sup><http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/375-165451/President-of-UUK-highlights-doctoral-employability-as-key-priority-for-postgraduate-review.html>

Yours sincerely

G.R EVANS

Oxford and Cambridge

## Lost Apostrophes

Sir — Preferably not!

Yours sincerely

JOHN DE'ATH

Jesus College

---

## A Photograph of the Czar

Faces against the snow,  
years ago:  
a man, his daughter and son  
and Prince Nikita.  
The shy child is cheerful;  
The girl and the Prince,  
watching from careful eyes,  
know they have lives to spend.  
The Czar is relaxed, likeable,  
holding a spade.  
His life is paid for.

They've been playing a game.  
The Czarevitch has snow on his knees;  
Tatiana's tailored skirt  
is whitened; three guards  
of the revolution,  
not quite at ease,  
stand against the forest.

PJ MAGEE

*PJ Magee read English at Lincoln College in the 1970s. He has taught English and published poems in many magazines and journals.*

---

## Ebb Tide

The sea is rinsing the stones at the tide's  
Edge, dragging them back and forth and dropping  
Them again twice a day, so that each stirring  
Smooths their corners more and bares their bright veins  
Twisted before the birds' shrewd berry eyes.  
The regularity of this recurring  
A clock moon-wound to infinity, soothing  
As an opiate will soon tranquillise.  
Erase the strain from deadline-haunted faces  
And ease the hurried tapping keyboard hand,  
Until illimitable motion traces  
An undulating screen across the mind  
And susurrantion of the waves replaces  
All stridence, as the sea ebbs from the sand.

ROSEMARY POUNTNEY

*Rosemary Pountney is an Honorary Fellow of St Anne's College.*