Effects and Impact of the UK Research Assessment Exercise

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Structure

Introduction

Historical background

Evolution of RAE

Analysis of effects of a ‘strong research evaluation system’ (RES)

Impact on authority relations
  • FCs & government
  • Disciplines & disciplinary elites
  • Universities & departments
  • Individual researchers

Conclusions
Introduction

UK – major changes to public science – efforts to
• improve exploitation of the science base
• increase efficiency and accountability

UK one of first to institutionalise university research assessment (1986)
• Effects likely to be deeper & more pronounced
Historical background

UK HE in 1960s & ’70s

- Elitist (15-20%)
- All universities ‘equal’
- ‘Light touch’ steering only by UGC
- UGC – fairly autonomous
- Individual academics – also fair degree of autonomy
- Dual support system

Changes in late ’70s & early ’80s

- Growing costs of research
- Cuts to public expenditure
  - UGC – substantial cuts in early ’80s, unequally distributed
- Political demands for accountability & efficiency (NPM)
- Jarratt Report – universities need to become more efficient – VCs as Chief Exec’s, more hierarchical mngt
Evolution of RAE

1985 Green Paper on HE - need for
• more selective use of resources
• more accountability

1986 Research Selectivity Exercise (RSE)
UGC hurriedly introduced RSE
Simple methodology – each UoA to supply data on
• research income
• research planning and priorities
• five best publications from last five years
UGC committees ranked in terms of 4 categories
Limited impact on funding but major shock to system
Numerous criticisms ➔ changes to methodology
Evolution of RAE

1988 – UGC replaced by UFC
- Smaller + reps from private sector
- Shift in role from ‘buffer’ to ‘coupling agency’

1989 RSE
More sophisticated methodology
- 2 publications for each person
- Data on research studentships, grants, contracts

UFC set up ~70 assessment panels – disciplinary
- Membership meant to be representative
- Attempt to standardise ratings X panels (not v successful)
- Rating on scale of 1-5

Larger impact on UFC research funding (~50%)
Evolution of RAE

1992 Research Assessment Exercise
Abolition of ‘binary divide’ ➔ polytechnics enter
UFC replaced by HEFC’s for England, Wales etc.
Methodology now begun to settle down
  • Choose which ‘research-active’ staff to include
    ➔ game-playing
  • Information on ‘research environment’
UFC QR funds now 90% dependent on RAE results
  • But HEIs not told how RAE ratings translated into funds
    until after (‘playing a game with a blindfold on’)

Evolution of RAE

1996 RAE

UoA’s asked for

- 4 publications per ‘research-active’ staff
- Esteem indicators

Extension from 5 to 7 grades, with 5* at top

5% cut in HEFC funds ➔ bigger differential between grades (with none for those rated 1 or 2)
Evolution of RAE

2001 RAE

Growing concerns re
- game-playing e.g. re UoA’s, who to include, how to ‘hide’ others
- transfer market
- inconsistent ratings across panels
- treatment of interdisciplinary research

➔ further changes in 2001 methodology

Panels
- broadened to bring in ‘users’ (not very successful)
- meant to treat each publication on merits – huge burden

Many depts rated 1 or 2 no longer entered
Big increase in % of 5-rated depts (31% ➔ 55%)
HEFCE could not afford ➔ bigger differentials
Evolution of RAE

Concern that RAE now too cumbersome
Roberts review – proposed simpler system for HEIs, but rejected
Chancellor of Exchequer (!) – replace by metrics
Uproar! Compromise – wait till after 2008

2008 RAE
Switch from single rating to ‘profile’ (what % of output national/international
Each publication rated on scale 1* to 4*
Results show most UoA’s between 2.0 and 3.0
Analysis of effects of RAE

Some benefits, but diminishing returns
Growing costs – now greater than benefits?

RAE as exemplar of ‘strong RES’ (Whitley)
  • i.e. institutionalised, regular, formal rules, standard scale, results used for funding allocation

5 types of consequences of strong RES
  • Growing competition (⇒ e.g. weakened collegiality)
  • Institutionalisation of quality criteria across fields
  • Reduction in diversity of research goals, approaches etc.
  • Constraints on development of novel areas
  • Greater stratification of researchers, depts, universities
Impact on authority relations

Funding Councils, RC’s & government

FC’s more ‘interventionist’ & less indpt of state –
  - Although Thatcher Govt supposedly sought to reduce role of state, effect of RAE = to increase authority of Govt over HEIs

RAE strengthened authority of FC’s, providing them with several sources of power
  - Choice of RAE approach
  - Choice of subject panels – which fields get own panel
  - How to translate RAE ratings into funds (retrospective)
  - Opportunity to withdraw funds from lower-rated depts, and to increase concentration on top-rated ones

RC’s meant to ignore RAE rating of proposal authors
  - But high correlation with RC funding (0.98)
Impact on authority relations

Disciplines & disciplinary elites

RAE based on peer review - traditionally used to assess individuals/small groups, not whole depts

UGC turned to disciplinary elites for panel members
  • Established reputation from contributions to mainstream
  • Able to impose quality criteria on field (e.g. re journals)
  • Panel membership correlated with RAE ratings

Economics case study (Harley & Lee, 1997, 1998)
  • Non-mainstream economics squeezed out
  • ‘Regulatory capture’ by Royal Economic Society & elite

But NB variations with field – lab-based VS SSAH

RAE reinforced centrality of peer review & hence authority of disciplinary elites
Impact on authority relations

Universities & university departments

Under pressure to become better managed
• RAE provided opportunity

Senior mngt assumed responsibility for RAE
• Which depts & staff to include
• Dept heads tasked with improving rating
• Influence on recruitment, promotion, early retirement

RAE results used as input to university strategy
• Which depts to strengthen, merge or close

Funds from RAE may be small but ‘symbolic power’
• Signalling best depts and position in status hierarchy

RAE reinforced shift from collegial governance to managerialism – strengthened authority of institution
Impact on authority relations

Individual researchers

Subject to revised authority relations

- Constraints on type of research and approach
- Growing publication pressure, esp’ly in ‘top’ journals
- Altered balance between R & T (and other activities)
- Shifted balance between individualism & collegiality
- Inducements to engage in 'game-playing'
- Sacrifices to private life

Weakened control over work

Increasing pressure to ‘produce’ (i.e. publish)

Shift from system where academic identity based on informal competition for reputation to more managerial system where required to meet expectations of university managers
Wider consequences

Changes in academic culture
Faculty more instrumental, competitive & judgemental, and less altruistic & loyal
One-dimensional view of research – producing published output in top journals
Identification with high RAE rating rather than enquiry and original knowledge
Culture of performance targets
• modifies behaviour to maximise ‘score’
• cf. Heisenberg, Hawthorne, Goodhart
Wider consequences

Shift towards an ‘audit society’
Focus on ‘excellence’ & accountability ➔ more directed form of governance
  • Accountability becomes linked with surveillance
  • Assessment tends to reduce professional activities to crude, quantifiable outputs
  • Quest for improved performance ➔ adversarial, punitive ethos – not conducive to research

RAE part of process of
  • ‘integrated system’ of control & production?
  • ‘commodification’ of academic labour?
  • publications becoming more prominent form of ‘reputational currency’?
Conclusions

Govts require accountability, including from univ’s

Political pressures especially great in UK

RAE – a more rigorous & intrusive mechanism

Altered balance of authority between individual, discipline, department & institution

Peer review become more central & closely linked to funding

Universities, under pressure to become more ‘efficient’ seized on RAE

- to monitor research performance of departments
- to distribute resources more unequally
- to shift research from matter of individual ambition to collective necessity
Conclusions
Univ’y & disciplinary elites tried to maintain academic control
• Ensured peer review at heart of RAE
• But forced to acquiesce to formal assess’t system
RAE become more central in mngt of univ’s
• Used to justify more centralised, hierarchical mngt
• Academics expected to continually produce ‘output’ –
  under constant monitoring (cf. Bentham’s Panopticon)
RAE approach reductionistic – counterproductive in longer-term
Need reconceptualisation of ‘accountability’ so that
rebuild sense of autonomy and trust
Universities and research may function best with
less management and external control?
Conclusions

Where next?

UK Govt decided to replace RAE with REF which is planned to include metrics and ‘impact’ as well as peer-review

Likely consequences?

• Strengthened emphasis on publishing in ‘top journals’
• New opportunities for disciplinary elites to exercise influence
• Reinforced pressures not to stray too far from disciplinary mainstream
• Increased constraints on development of new fields?

Will soon be reminiscing about ‘good old days’ of RAE!
References

