

Recent Research Excellence Evaluations In the UK and Portugal: Methodologies, Controversies, Cultures and Consequences (0269)

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### **Background and objectives**

The paper compares the methods, panel composition and cultures and consequences for academics and universities of two recent European research excellence evaluations, that of the UK Higher Education Funding Council for England (2008 Research Assessment Exercise and 2014 Research Excellence Exercise) and the 2013 Fundação para Ciência e Tecnologia/European Science Foundation Research Centre Evaluation in Portugal.

The objectives of the paper are to:

1. Compare two different ways of evaluating and rewarding research excellence
2. To explore the composition, cultures and practices of social science panels in these evaluations (Sharp & Coleman 2005, Lamont 2009, 2012)
3. To ask in whose interests these evaluations take place and explore the notion of a 'research game' (Lucas 2006).
4. To explore institutional and academic responses to these national evaluations in relation to research strength and strategy

### **Theory/Design/methodology**

The paper examines the nature, evaluation processes and panels and the purposes of research excellence evaluations; a recent European University Association publication (Pruvot and Estermann 2014) observes that competitive exercises to evaluate HE excellence are on the increase in Europe. Also considered are the unintended consequences of the UK and Portuguese research evaluations from different perspectives (panels, funding bodies, academics, institutions). Public policies almost always have unintended consequences (Margetts et al 2010) and following Krücken (2014), use is made here of an adapted version of Merton's (1936) work on the unintended consequences of what he termed 'purposive social action'. Lucas's (2006) work on research evaluation as a 'game' is also drawn upon, as is Lamont's (2009, 2012) work on different disciplinary evaluation cultures.

The paper is based on several data sources. These include the author's experience of being an evaluator in the 2008 UK RAE and the 2013 FCT/ESF exercise. The paper also draws on a range of documents in the public domain about the two evaluations, including 'official' papers, media and internet coverage and their reception by the wider academic community plus a small number of interviews with key actors. This data is fed into an analytic framework (Srivastav and Thomson 2009) which asks who evaluated what, for what purpose, the responses to it and how identified unintended consequences came about.

## **Findings:**

The two evaluations differ in methodology, scope, cultural/economic context but each has been controversial. Both methodologies are being copied elsewhere. The UK exercise focuses on past performance, whilst the ESF/FCT looks at past performance and future plans. RAE/REF involve assessing the outputs of those academics entered, the FCT/ESF exercise didn't but commissioned a bibliometric survey. RAE/REF sub-panels are made up of UK academics and non-academic user-members (the four main panels also had international members). The FCT/ESF exercise drew entirely on international academics. But while RAE/REF sub panels are usually single discipline or at most two or three, the FCT/ESF panels were cross-disciplinary (e.g social sciences, Exact sciences etc), suggesting that the cultures of those panels are likely to be different. The RAE/REF evaluations are based on submission/output/impact-case-study based discussion at panel meetings and individual panel-member assessment of outputs, submissions and impact. The ESF/FCT exercise involved an initial remote-evaluation of full submissions by both panel members and others, panel meetings at the end of stage 1 (initial judgments) and stage 2 (final outcomes) but also site visits to Centres that reached the initial threshold for stage 2. REF had four main panels (Medicine; Science and Engineering; Social Science; Arts and Humanities) and 36 sub-panels. ESF/FCT had six panels covering cognate disciplines and a multi-disciplinary panel. The RAE/REF process awarded units a graded-profile of outputs, environment and either esteem (2008) or impact case studies (2014). The ESF/FCT exercise awarded a single overall grade made up of individual scores on five criteria. In both exercises the allocation of funding is separated from the peer-review element. Institutional and academic responses to the evaluation outcomes are varied. The UK has no appeal against academic judgment, whilst in Portugal this is not so and applicants could appeal at the end of the first stage and after the final outcomes were announced. The unintended consequences of both evaluation exercises include the effect on the careers, morale and research of academics/centres/departments who are unfunded or poorly funded, the impact of the process and outcomes on the panel members themselves, the uneven distribution of funding across institutions and regions and funding/grading variations between disciplines. A number of these unintended consequences probably arise through Merton's notions of error and ignorance but immediate interests and values are important too. There are both practical and public policy implications of this analysis for what kind of future excellence evaluations get used in Europe and beyond and how institutions respond.

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