

176 Gender and precarity amidst the changing research landscape in the UK

[Lisa Lucas](#)¹, [Barbara Read](#)²

¹University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom. ²University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

In this paper, we draw on two projects featuring gender and research policy in the United Kingdom (UK). Data for Project 1 come from two sets of interviews with academics about their experiences of the Research Assessment Exercise in 2001 and the Research Excellence Framework in 2014, considering the extent to which these interventions have enhanced or curtailed career opportunities for women academics over the years. Project 2 is a feminist intersectional analysis of discourses found in articles about the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK's leading higher education publication, the Times Higher Education, from January 2020 to June 2021. Together, the two projects expand notions of precarity as introduced by Judith Butler and enable some conclusions about connections and continuations of the gendered impact of UK research and evaluation policies on women researchers amidst the complexities of the research landscape over time.

Full paper

Context and background of research funding in the UK

In the UK, government research funding is split between a quality-related block grant allocation to individual universities based on the outcomes of a periodic audit of research staff at the institution (the Research Excellence Framework or REF, previously the Research Assessment Exercise or RAE), and competitive research project grants and programmes administered by discipline-based research councils under the auspices of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

The research arena has long been a highly gendered and racialised field, which affects both types of government research funding. Although data show that applications and successful outcomes for UKRI grants increased for female applicants between 2014–2015 and 2019–2020, around two thirds of all research grant applications are still from male applicants, the majority of whom are white (UKRI, 2021). Further, whilst there is relatively little data about gender inequalities in how institutions present researchers' work for audit under the RAE/REF, in a case study of a research-intensive British university, Yarrow (2018) argues that 'unconscious bias', together with the operation of informal networks that favour men, can affect the representation of women academics in the REF.

Theoretical framing

The work of Judith Butler will be utilised to explore the various complexities associated with precarity and challenges in forging a research career, particularly for women academics. Butler (2004, 2009) uses the term social precarity to refer to precariousness that is not simply the product of accident but is connected to, or indeed induced by, wider socio-political policies and practices. Of particular concern to Butler is that the ability to cushion oneself from the worst effects of precarity is greatly mediated and constrained by particular social positionings. Those in less advantaged positions are more likely to experience insecurity and precarity and to experience it more severely (Butler, 2009).

In the UK, a variety of factors influence who can conduct research and apply for research funding as well as what knowledge is produced, valued and recognised. This includes identity formations such as gender, social class, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and age; discipline and university status; and contract status (made more precarious by the absence of a strong tenure system). Policy changes and unexpected events, such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, add another layer of insecurity.

Methodology

Project 1 draws from two empirical studies undertaken around the Research Assessment Exercise in 2001 and the Research Excellence Framework in 2014 and features a thematic analysis of 18 semi-structured interviews with women academics in different disciplines across a purposive selection of a range of UK universities. Project 2 is a feminist intersectional analysis of articles in the UK's leading higher education publication, the *Times Higher Education*, from January 2020 to June 2021. Overall, 540 articles were chosen from the 'News' and 'Opinion' sections of the online edition of the paper.

Both thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Foucauldian discourse analyses (Khan & MacEachen, 2021) were applied to identify gendered discourses relating to research in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings and conclusions

In Project 1's interviews, three key themes, laced through with anxiety, captured the women's experiences of the relevant RAE/REF exercise: (a) being RAE/REFable: the challenges of building and maintaining a research profile, (b) the imperative of research funding and publishing and (c) research support and mentoring. Project 2's discourse analysis showed that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated individual academics' and university concerns about access to research funding opportunities and the continuation of international research collaborations in the higher education sector. In addition, fears over job security already engendered by REF requirements, as reported in the interviews, were deepened by the pandemic. It is potentially those who are already in precarious situations in UK academia – more likely to be women and people of colour – who are at most risk of cuts and job losses post-Brexit and post-COVID-19 (Watermeyer et al., 2020). Furthermore, difficulties of combining academic work with caring commitments, evident in both projects, also disproportionately affected women in the pandemic, impacting on their ability to publish and submit funding bids (Baker, 2021; Walker et al., 2020) and signalling potential long-term career disadvantages (Carruthers Thomas, in press). In combination, the two projects provide a broad temporal perspective on ongoing gendered challenges in relation to research production in academia, showing how longstanding inequitable patterns have become even worse in precarious pandemic and post-pandemic times.

References

Baker, S. (2021, January 15). Higher education and the pandemic: key trends to watch in 2021. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/higher-education-and-pandemic-key-trends-watch-2021>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life*. Verso.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* Verso.

Carruthers Thomas, K. (in press). Casting a long shadow: COVID-19 and UK women academics' research productivity. In S. Acker, O.-H. Ylijoki, & M. K. McGinn (Eds.), *The social production of research: perspectives on funding and gender*. SRHE/Routledge.

Khan, T. H., & MacEachen, E. (2021). Foucauldian discourse analysis: moving beyond a social constructionist analytic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211018009>

UK Research and Innovation. (2022, November). *Research England: how we fund higher education providers*. <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RE-031122-HowWeFundHigherEducationProviders.pdf>

Walker, J., Brewster, C., Fontinha, R., & Haak-Saheem, W. (2020, June 12). Three challenges facing academic research during the Covid-19 crisis. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/three-challenges-facing-academic-research-during-covid-19-crisis>

Watermeyer, R., Courtois, A., & Lauder, H. (2020, April 3). Reacting to Covid-19 by slashing fixed-term staff would be a disaster. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/reacting-covid-19-slashing-fixed-term-staff-would-be-adisaster>

Yarrow, E. (2018). Gender and the Research Excellence Framework. In J. Robertson, A. Williams, D. Jones, L. Isbel, & A. J. Tait (Eds.), *EqualBITE: gender equality in higher education* (pp. 63–68). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789463511438_012