

Research Policy and Academic Performativity: Compliance, contestation and complicity

In the context of a highly competitive and knowledge-intensive global economy, the performance of higher education systems, institutions and individuals has become increasingly important. Universities are judged, ranked and rewarded through technologies of audit and accountability, with a discourse of transparency (Strathern 2000) and global and national league tables ensuring that their success, or lack of it, becomes public knowledge. In the UK and elsewhere, individual academic performance is similarly measured and evaluated through teaching and research quality assessment technologies. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is one such audit technology through which the research activities and outputs of individuals, departments and institutions have been measured and evaluated. Set up in 1986 at a time of a significant reduction in public expenditure on higher education, it has been seen as 'a desire by government to impose top-down, bureaucratic and managerialist types of control over academic work' (Harley 2001: 379) whilst also representing 'prima facie, a successful attempt to sustain academic values and academic control' (Henkel 1999: 105) through the retention of peer review as the prime mode of assessment. Subsequent RAEs have taken place in 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008, with the outcomes of each exercise determining research funding for the years up until the next audit. The outcomes are public and bring reputational as well as material rewards to those seen to achieve in this system. The RAE has now been replaced by a revised version, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the first of which will take place in 2014.

Key trends in research policy over this same time period include an emphasis on knowledge production to meet the needs of the economy, particularly on the STEM subjects, a greater level of steering of research through specific programmes and thematic areas, and increased competition for research funding. Facilitated largely through the periodic Research Assessment Exercises, such funding has become increasingly concentrated in a smaller number of research-intensive universities. Although this trend was interrupted following RAE 2008, which saw 'pockets of excellence' in a wider range of universities receive some research funding, subsequent Government policy statements have reaffirmed and re-instigated the trend towards ever-greater concentration (e.g. Cable 2010). As Lucas (2006) noted, the RAE increased differentiation and hierarchy within and between universities, and more recent trends in UK higher education policy are likely to further exacerbate these inequalities.

Such developments, along with the discourses and practices of new managerialism, have had a profound impact on academics and academic work (Henkel 1997; Morley 2003). Universities, departments and individuals have come under increasing pressure to increase their research productivity and outcomes. As Harley and Lowe (1998: 20) noted back in the late 1990s, 'through the periodic research assessment exercise, academics have been made individually responsible not only for their own fate but also that of their colleagues and their performance has been monitored in a brutal public way'. Henkel (1999: 106) noted that the RAE 'has been a vehicle of professional and personal humiliation', whilst Morley (2003: 87) argued that the 'naming and shaming' of a culture of performativity amounts to a form of 'post-modern torture'. Although academics have, mostly, continued to play the 'research game' (Lucas 2006), there is evidence of contestation and resistance (see, e.g. David 2008), both in public campaigns and in individual academics' refusal to be 'shamed' (see Leathwood and Hey 2009).

In this paper, we draw on email interview data to explore the ways in which academics are positioned as compliant, resistant and/or complicit in such technologies of audit. The data is from a study

designed to explore the implications of current Government research policy for academic research on higher education in the UK. The study, funded through an SRHE Research Award 2011-12, involved email interviews with 71 academics from across Britain who were asked about their experiences and perceptions of recent trends in research policy and the impact upon both the research cultures in which they work and their own research.

Theoretically, we draw on a Foucauldian understanding of governmentality with audit conceptualised as a panopticon-style technology of self-governance through which academics are incited to become ever more striving, self-monitoring and productive. As Shore and Wright (2000, p. 78) note, 'the logic of the modern audit system is to produce not "docile bodies" but "self-actualized" auditable individuals'. Also of relevance is feminist work on the ways in which the discourses, cultures and practices of performativity, and the material conditions of research production, are gendered (e.g. Currie et al. 2000; Blackmore and Sachs 2001; Morley 2007). Finally, our data, reminiscent of earlier work above, also highlights the affective and embodied impact of these policy technologies, and so sociological and psycho-social theorisations of the affective (e.g. Boler 1999; Ahmed 2004; Hey 2011; Gill 2012) are of particular interest.

The majority of academics in this study reported opposition to most or all current trends in research policy. There were some differences, with widespread disapproval of the increasing concentration of research funding and more mixed responses to the 'impact' agenda. Nevertheless, most appeared to be complying with imperatives to perform in readiness for the REF - in particular to strive to improve their publications and bid for external research funding, often despite reporting considerable personal cost in terms of overwork, stress and 'sleeplessness' (see Acker and Armenti 2004). Some, however, refused to engage in these processes, and in the full paper we discuss these different responses and consider the ways in which positionality in the research field, for example in terms of level of seniority and gender, may impact upon academic performativity. Finally, we consider issues of complicity, drawing not only on the data itself, but also by reflecting on our own locations, both as 'insider' researchers in this field of study and as academics fully implicated in these processes within our own institutional locations.

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