

# In REF we trust? Some reasons to be cheerful

David James

REF UoA 23 subpanel chair

# How did we get here?

- Research Assessment Exercise, established by Thatcher government
- RAE took place in 1986, 1989\*, 1992, 1996, 2001 & 2008
- REF: 2014, and 2021.
- Development over time but one constant central purpose – e.g Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, who chaired the 1986 exercise, described the objective as being ‘...to establish a measure of transparency to the allocation of funding at a time of declining budgets’.
- “Producer capture”?

# Purpose of the REF 2021

‘The primary purpose of the REF 2021 is to produce assessment outcomes for each submission...(these) deliver the wider threefold purposes...

- a. ...to inform the selective **allocation** of (funding body) **grant** for research to the institutions...
- b. ...to provide **accountability** for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment
- c. ...to provide **benchmarking** information (and) reputational yardsticks...within HE and for public information’ (REF 2021 Guidance on Submissions, p. 4).

# Some of the problems

- Institutional mediation: How REF 'tangles' with other processes. REF is used by some as mechanism for performativity and managerialism, which may affect ECRs disproportionately.
- Distortion? E.g. recent view from Willetts; elements of Wilson report (but beware false dichotomies!)
- REF is still more 'disciplinary' than the actual nature of research
- Institutional preparation for REF is very expensive
- Effects consolidate hierarchies of institutions, are (too?) deep and long-lasting
- Some argue that impact now has too much emphasis

Impact: ever central for many in social science



Prof Anna  
Gilmore, Bath

Dr Rachel Aldred,  
Westminster



Prof Emma Renold,  
Cardiff

# Under-appreciated features

- High degree of continuity as well as development
- The process and the rules were subject to extensive consultation
- Embodies serious attempts to minimize gaming
- Positively bureaucratic, avoidance of conflicts of interest
- Robust expert peer review by nominated individuals

Highly distinct from most other mechanisms for quality assessment across a range of education and wider public services.

# What does 'robust fresh peer review' actually entail?

- Reading everything
- Calibration
- Allocation
- Assessment
- Moderation
- Collective responsibility
- International comparison
- Avoiding conflicts of interest

# The significance of peer review for legitimacy of the process

- Imagine a REF-like process which relied solely on metrics such as journal impact factors, citation counts, book sales...or one in which a small inspectorate in a government agency is charged with all quality assessment...
- A quality assessment disconnected from the fundamental *modus operandi* of scientific research communities will quickly lose legitimacy



With apologies to  
Winston Churchill

As he might put it:

The REF is the worst  
possible system for  
assessing research  
quality, apart from all the  
others.

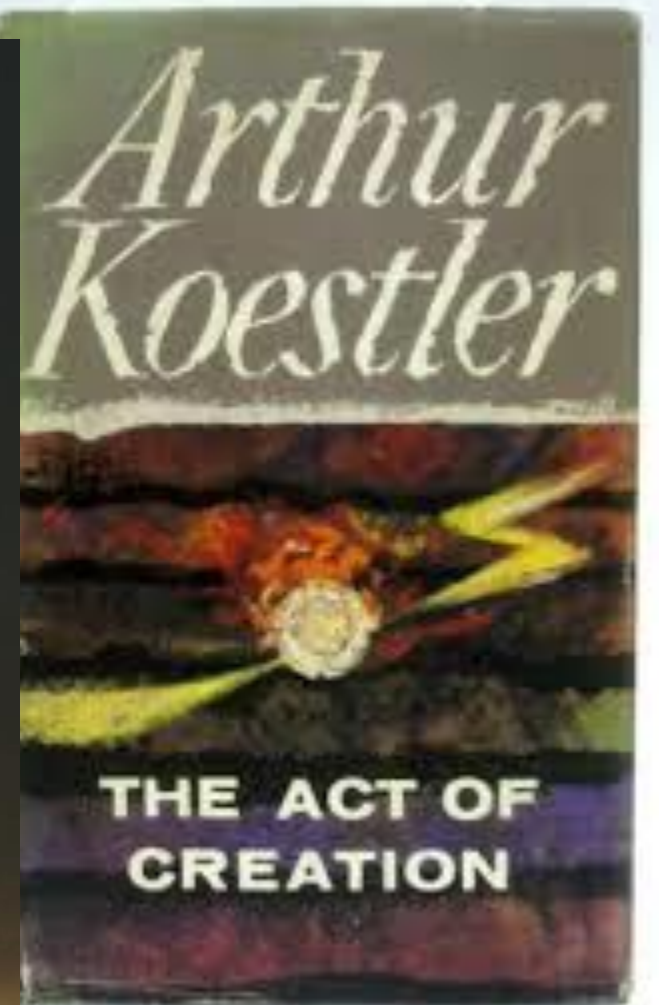


"You can't use up  
creativity. The more you  
use, the more you have."

- Maya Angelou

"The worst enemy to  
creativity is self-doubt."

- Sylvia Plath



# How REF celebrates creativity

- What concepts of creativity are most helpful here?
- Perhaps 'Bisociation' (e.g. Koestler, 1964)
- Creativity of this kind is a widespread feature across the more innovative and exciting research in the social sciences.
- REF quality criterion for outputs of 'originality' – high degree of creativity is one way of demonstrating this.

# Educationalists note: our discipline has the conceptual tools to understand REF

- The definition of research and the quality criteria are both written down, but there are limits to such codification (Cf. Eraut, or Sennett) and anyway, their meaning is a matter of negotiation, participation and reification in a community of practice (to use Lave and Wenger's terms)
- Research assessment has strong parallels with well-known work on HE student assessment (e.g. Sadler, Boud, and many others) – judgement of quality is *always* more than the rigid application of well-defined criteria. Connoisseurship matters.

# REF can support independent and critical research for 'deep democracy'

In the digital age we have unprecedented access to research, but also (and more readily) to a constant stream of opinions, views, preferences, and – paradoxically – to intolerance. We are also exposed to new and subtle attempts at manipulation

Major political figures like Trump can dismiss the science on climate change as something they simply don't agree with – and get away with it

A rise in political populism – and also by austerity and rising inequalities

In this context, high-quality, independent and critical research is ever more vital – not only to answer specific well-defined questions about learning etc., but to provide forward-looking, imaginative but well-grounded thinking that might generate new concepts of learning or forms of education

A mechanism to benchmark such research is essential

Many thanks for listening!

Questions and comments?