The Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK: processes, consequences and incentives to engage

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Introduction

Governments around the world have introduced various forms of research evaluation and accountability systems, ostensibly to both assess and improve the quality of research activity and outcomes in universities. Examples include the Research Excellence Framework in the UK (REF 2019a), Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA 2018), Performance-based Research Funding in New Zealand (PBRF 2018), and the Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise (UGC 2019; see Marques et. al. 2017 for a fuller list including other European examples). These developments have been widely interpreted as evidence of the impact of globalisation on higher education and the incursion of neo-liberal discipline and governance into university procedures and management (Olsen and Peters 2005, Olsen 2016, Naidoo 2018). Indeed, more than this, such research evaluation systems have been seen as a key mechanism for the imposition of neoliberalism on academics and academic work (Smyth 2017). However, as Davies and Bansel (2010) observed some years ago, by engaging with such systems we do this to ourselves, as much as allow others to do it to us, and this paper takes this insight to reflect on the example of the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF). The paper will review the development and current operation of the REF, particularly in the field of Education; reflect on some of the issues it raises including its iterative impact on the process of research involving both intended and unintended consequences; and then consider why it has been so insidiously successful in colonising UK academic life.

The UK Research Excellence Framework

The REF is probably the most long-established and institutionalised of national research evaluation systems. It was first set up as the Research Selectivity Exercise (RSE) in 1986 under the Conservative Thatcher government of the time. Universities were provided with annual grants from government for teaching and research and all public expenditure was coming under increasing scrutiny driven by the 'monetarist' economics of the 1980s. The UK university system under what was then known as the University Grants Committee sought to reassure government that taxpayers' money was indeed

being spent wisely on important research activity. The RSE was conducted in 1986 and 1989 being replaced by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1992 and has been through four further iterations in 1996, 2001, 2008 and 2014, being re-named the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. The next iteration will receive submissions from universities at the end of 2020. Income to universities follows grades awarded to each 'Unit of Assessment' (essentially subject departments) including a 'volume driver' based on numbers of staff returned in the exercise. Thus successive generations of scholars have (had) to engage with the RSE/RAE/REF and successful inclusion in the REF has become an integral part of any academic career path.

The 'REF' itself, as an entity, comprises a steering group of each of the four higher education funding bodies that now reflect the four devolved country-based jurisdictions of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). This in turn is serviced by a large bureaucracy which articulates procedures and guidance and manages the evaluation process (see: https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/governance/). Members of the core bureaucracy and key academic panel members also organise and take part in many preparatory briefing meetings that are organised prior to each iteration of the REF and these individuals effectively become the public face of the regime.

Submissions are made by universities and include evidence of a broad profile of research activities and outcomes assembled by subject-based Units of Assessment (UoAs). Education is one of these UoAs. Evaluations are undertaken through peer review, conducted by subject-based 'expert sub-panels', working under four broad disciplinary-based 'main panels'. Some main panels and sub-panels pay regard to various metrics (citations etc.) relevant to their discipline, but in Social Science, within which Education is a constituent UoA and sub-panel, metrics are not used and all judgements are made by reading the submissions including reading all outputs (papers) submitted (see https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/what-is-the-role-of-expert-panels/).

REF 2014 received submissions from 154 UK universities, including 1911 Units of Assessment (UoAs), involving 52,061 individual academic staff and 191,150 research outputs. These were assessed by 36 expert subject sub-panels comprising 898 academic staff and including a further 259 'research users' (research officials of various kinds in government departments, government agencies, charities, etc. (REF 2014)). Whether such a vast enterprise can be justified in terms of value-for-money for government with respect to monitoring and improving research quality is a moot point. A recent review indicated that the 2014 REF cost £246M. The review also argued that this represents less

than 1% of the total research funds disbursed by government over the relevant six year period so does indeed represent good value (Technopolis 2015). Nevertheless it still represents £246M that could have been spent directly on funding research. What such figures certainly do demonstrate however is that the system involves very large numbers of academic staff across all disciplines and universities. To reiterate, we do it to ourselves.

The REF defines 'research' as: "a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared" (REF 2019b p. 90). It defines its purposes as:

> To provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment.
>
> To provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the HE sector and for public information.
>
> To inform the selective allocation of funding for research (REF 2019c).

The first purpose reflects government priorities; the second and third speak to the ways in which universities themselves engage with the exercise and use the results.

The current iteration of the REF (for submissions in November 2020) involves individual subject panels grading submissions from 34 subject based Units of Assessment (UoAs) across four quality categories:

> Four star (4*)
> Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
>
> Three star (3*)
> Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence.
>
> Two star (2*)
> Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
>
> One star (1*)
> Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
>
> Unclassified (U)
> Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.
>
> (REF 2019b p.83)

Obviously such categories beg many questions of definition and interpretation. There is not space here to try to unpack all of them. Suffice to say that currently provided official guidance on

developing submissions for the next REF runs to a total of 255 pages across four 'Guidance' documents (REF 2019a). Perhaps even more importantly, for present purposes, we should note that there is a very significant financial weighting to each quality category such that research rated 4* generates four times as much income as research rated 3*, with no income being allocated to 2*, 1* or Unclassified research:

Quality rating	4*	3*	2*	1*	U
Income weighting	4	1	0	0	0

Thus only 'world leading' research is now really valued in UK universities, but with the concomitant challenge for managers of providing a pipeline and career trajectory for early career researchers whose research is not currently rated as such. A key issue is how to take the overall pot of money per department and not just give it to the individuals who have 'earned' it to further support their research, but to retain sufficient for strategic investment to maintain long term research development at institutional and departmental level.

The submissions themselves comprise three elements:
Outputs (i.e. research publications and/or other artefacts such as software or creative products from subject areas such as Computing or Fine Art);
Impact (evidenced by the submission of case studies demonstrating impact on and utility for research users);
Environment (i.e. the vitality of the research environment and research activity evidenced by amount of external research income won and numbers of doctoral students supervised and doctorates awarded).
These are weighted at Outputs 60%, Impact 25%, Environment 15% and then combined into an overall rating for each UoA. As such, publishing high quality outputs from research remains a core element of research activity – what we might term the classic model of research - publishing for peers in the field so that findings can be both critically scrutinised and used by other researchers. However the applied, practical utility of research is also now very significant - its economic, social and cultural impact – and this in turn will drive different researcher behaviours (as the weighting is intended to do). Impact was introduced as an element in 2014 and its weighting has been increased from 20% in 2014 to 25% in 2020.

Previously universities could select who could be submitted for return in the REF in each UoA, and clearly this carried many implications for individual career development, self-esteem and reputation in the department/university. Internal evaluation of outputs prior to submission (often

supplemented by external 'consultants' or 'critical friends' from other universities), would lead to a core of 'REF-returnable' research and 'REF-returnable' researchers being selected from a wider body of work carried out in the department. Inclusion in or exclusion from the REF is a major determinant of subsequent career path. In 2014 returned staff needed to return four outputs of sufficient quality, effectively 'internationally excellent' 3* and 'world leading' 4* research, and clearly this is a 'big ask' of even very experienced and successful researchers, let alone early career researchers. In 2020 the rules change and "all staff with significant responsibility for research" must be returned (REF 2019b p. 13). The change is intended to dispense with selectivity and 'game playing' which is designed to boost scores and rankings (though this in itself would seem to contradict the second declared purpose of the REF to "provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks" aka game playing). Interestingly, selectivity particularly favoured the identification of small 'pockets of excellence' in newer universities which do not necessarily have the tradition and track record of long-established research-intensive universities. The older universities felt aggrieved that some of 'their' research money was going elsewhere to upstarts (more of which later) and their lobbying clearly carried weight:

> concern was expressed about the practice of making a highly selective submission to the REF that does not represent the overall research activity in that area in the institution.
>
> (Stern Report 2016 p.13).

Whatever is the detailed micro-politics behind the change however, a lot still depends on how universities themselves define 'significant responsibility for research' and some evidence is emerging of universities changing staff contracts to focus on teaching or research, rather than both, and hence building in selectivity ahead of the submission date (Times Higher 2019).

Having said this however the REF clearly expects more staff to be submitted than in 2014 and has reduced the number of required outputs accordingly, so that subject panels are not overwhelmed with additional reading. In 2020 UoAs will be required to submit an average of 2.5 outputs per submitted member of academic staff including a minimum of one and a maximum of five from each member of staff. Thus for every member of staff submitted with one output (perhaps an early career researcher?), another will have to be submitted with at least four (perhaps a full professor?) to maintain the average of 2.5. The quality must be maintained at 3* and 4*, in order to generate reputation and income, but there is clearly some element of wriggle room here for a more equitable system to emerge if ECRs only need submit, say, one 3* output, while professors are expected to submit four or five outputs at 3* and 4*.

Another new element of the REF is that returned outputs produced after April 2016 must be 'open access' i.e. available to be read by all. This can be achieved either by paying journal article processing fees (APCs, very expensive), or by depositing accepted manuscripts in university Open Access Repositories. The argument is that income derived from the REF originates from taxpayers so the products should not remain behind paywalls. The argument is a strong one and there are exceptions to the policy (essentially it applies to journal articles) but overall it reinforces the idea that research activity is a national investment to be managed rather than an independent and disinterested scholarly endeavour.

Consequences of the REF

The impact and consequences of the REF are many and varied, for whole institutions and for disciplines, subject departments and individuals. A major issue, with funds following grades and volume of submitted staff, is concentration of research funding on a small number of old(er), traditional, research intensive universities. Previous iterations of the RAE/REF have produced a situation where four universities received 32% of REF research income, with 25 universities receiving 75% of the total (Torrance 2014). The Times Higher in 2015 reported that "the share going to the largest 10 institutions [is] 51.6 per cent…the share going to the Russell Group [a self-selected lobbying group of 24 research intensive universities] [is] 70.8 per cent" (2015). Compare this with the 154 universities which submitted returns in 2014. In the field of Education Marques et al (2017) report that 53% of funding for the discipline went to only 10 out of 76 departments (UoAs) which submitted a return in 2014. Such massive concentration of research resources begs many questions about how the system as a whole continues to develop a high quality research base. Concentration is regional as well as institutional (essentially in what has come to be known as the 'golden triangle' of London, Oxford and Cambridge) further exacerbating a north-south divide in UK economic development, and also potentially restricting the emergence of new disciplinary and inter-disciplinary groups and topics of investigation. Even older research-intensive universities are feeling the pressure of this degree of selectivity and concentration. Inge (2019) and UCU (2019) report that research time allocations to staff at the universities of Birmingham and Liverpool (both members of the Russell Group) are being reduced because the REF income cannot cover the full costs, with more emphasis being placed on winning external research grant income.

A related issue deriving from the financial focus of only valuing 3* and 4* research is that 2* and 1* research is not valued, or at least not valued enough, neither in itself despite perhaps having local relevance, nor as a 'stepping stone' on the road to a successful research career. We have already noted the potential consequences for early career researchers seeking to establish their own

intellectual trajectory. Additionally, the overall outputs of 2* research are not valued. What we might call the 'bedrock' of research – the dull-but-worthy underpinning routine outputs of science – are not valued. Replication is not valued, negative results are not valued, only what can be presented as 'world leading' in its originality and significance. A recent British Medical Journal (BMJ) study of scientific abstracts reported that:

> The absolute frequency of positive words increased from 2.0% (1974-80) to 17.5% (2014), a relative increase of 880% over four decades…particularly the words "robust," "novel," "innovative," and "unprecedented," which increased in relative frequency up to 15,000% (Vinkers, Tijdink and Otte 2015, p. 351; see also Jones and Kemp 2016).

A further issue is that the very parameters of a successful research department, and indeed a successful individual research career, are now shaped by the significance of both the Impact and Environment elements of the REF. Previously many scholars could argue that they required little more funding than a good library and some time to undertake specific investigations of the relevant literature and theoretical issues in the field. Now a 'rounded' research profile requires evidence of impact on research users, i.e. on policy and practice, not 'just' on debates in the field, coupled with external research funding. The very definition and composition of research is changing from that of an individual scholarly undertaking to that of a managed corporate activity:

> The audit process constitute[s] some of the ways in which the academic career is being 'deprofessionalised', or stated differently, by which professionalization is being redefined (Olsen 2016, p. 135).

<u>Impact of the REF on the field of Education</u>

These issues carry particular implications for the field of Education. In many respects Education is a paradigm test case for both REF-related funding and the impact of the REF on how a discipline responds to normative research evaluations. Education is a professionally and vocationally oriented field, often recruiting academic staff in mid-career, direct from school teaching or administration, albeit, possibly, after completion of an EdD or PhD. Many entrants to the academy will have backgrounds in the Arts or Natural Sciences (English teachers, Science teachers, etc.) rather than Social Science (the generic 'Main Panel' to which Education as a disciplinary sub-panel is aligned). Thus many staff start a long way back when it comes to producing 'world leading' research in Social Science. Moreover, while Education as a field may be thought to have particular strengths in orienting its research to impact on the policy and practice of curriculum, assessment, school leadership, etc, often this involves small scale 'close to practice' local investigations which might again be found wanting when the requirement is for 'world leading' (i.e. field changing) research.

The demand is for 'world leading' research having an impact on major national and international (globalised) policy development, not small scale research that helps local teachers solve a particular problem. In this respect it is interesting to note that Education as a field in the UK has suffered very similar criticisms about quality, scale and method as have been apparent in the USA and elsewhere internationally (Walters, Lareau and Ranis 2009, Torrance 2018). It is notable that successive Education REF expert panels have drawn attention to the need for, and over time the increasing development and visibility of, large scale quantitative studies and a focus on the 'what works' agenda:

> The growing volume of outputs deriving from large-scale datasets and longitudinal cohort studies was particularly impressive, and a high proportion were judged to be internationally excellent or world leading (Education REF Panel 2015).

Thus, despite an explicit commitment to recognise all forms of educational research equally and treat them on their merits (REF 2019d), it is clear that some forms are (subconsciously?) understood to be more important and valuable to the field than others, given the context of the politics of scientific knowledge and university disciplinary pecking orders. It further follows that such large scale and time-consuming research requires and rewards extensive social science trained teams concentrated in large research-intensive departments.

The pressure of successive selective REFs has thus led to a reduction in the number of Education staff identified as 'research active' and a concentration of activity on producing particular forms of output. Marques et al (2017) report for example that even as total staff numbers expanded over a 20 year period, the total number of Education staff returned in the REF pretty much halved, declining from 2790 in 1995/96 (48% of total staff employed) to 1442 in 2013/14 (25% of total staff employed). Moreover, returned staff are not equally distributed across all submitted Education UoAs (n=76 in 2014). The largest submission included more than 200 staff (the Institute of Education at University College, London), the smallest was 4, with 25 UoAs returning less than 10 staff and the median being 12 (Education REF Panel 2015, REF 2015). In effect what has been produced is a bifurcation between research-intensive departments in older universities which focus on research, and recruit large numbers of international fee-paying Masters and doctoral students; and large domestic teacher training-focussed departments which return very few staff and score lower grades. Thus the research base of the UK teacher preparation system is being progressively diminished.

Furthermore the number of books and book chapters submitted has significantly declined over the same period while the number of journal articles has been maintained (from far fewer staff) and thus these are now much the most important research output produced by Education departments

(Marques et al 2017). This provides further evidence of the reshaping of the field (Marques et al 2017 call it 'reverse engineering' p.823). Whereas, previously, research active Education staff were quite likely to have produced books in their area of expertise, (teaching English, addressing special educational needs, and so forth), often based on years of working with their students and local schools, the 'good' educational researcher now produces journal articles for a globalised field, which in turn are expected to impact on major policy developments. This is the manufacture of a traditional 'scientific' model of knowledge production and application – research, development, dissemination – RDD. Ironically, very well-known and well recognised field-defining edited collections from previous eras (e.g. Young 1971) and currently (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln 2018) would probably not be considered returnable in the REF since the 'research base' of the contributions of the individuals concerned (Young; Denzin and Lincoln) would not be immediately obvious. Their individual research-based contributions would have to be identified as either their editorial introduction (but this would probably not be recognised as original research) and/or a contributed chapter, rather than their overarching scholarly shaping of a whole field. Meanwhile many staff not returned in the REF may well be continuing to produce 'professional' books and textbooks in their areas of expertise, but these may not be recognised as based on high quality research as defined by the REF, and in turn may not be recognised as meeting promotion criteria within institutions. Hence is a wedge driven between research and teaching and the conditions created for producing 'teaching only' contracts.

Incentives to engage – why do we do it to ourselves?

Despite the many significant problems identified with the REF, outlined above, it not only survives but prospers and has developed substantially more system-changing elements with each iteration. Many reasons for engagement have been articulated already:

the direct financial reward of retaining and possibly increasing research funding (in older research-intensive universities) or generating new and additional income in newer universities - and with respect to new universities even a very small pot of new money is better than none at all;

the reputation and kudos generated by success, and again, in newer universities, even modest success renders research visible in a way it perhaps was not previously; and with a growing research reputation comes the possibility of securing additional (fee paying) research students, external research grants, and so forth;

the long-standing nature of the REF and its predecessors means that it is now completely embedded in the expectations of university management and individual career development; research is

regarded as an integral part of university activity so not to 'play the game' would be effectively to label your institution and your department not really operating as a 'university' at all.

Beyond this however, the REF operates on institutions and individuals in myriad fashion. The general reasons for engagement are played out in many different circumstances and in many different ways – an almost perfect exemplification of Foucault's (1975) notion of 'capillary power'. A key issue here is that the REF does not take place in a vacuum. If it was a more discrete and delineated intervention it might be more easy to either ignore, resist, or at least manage as a separate activity in order to mitigate its negative effects.

The REF takes place in the context of both general, globalised developments in higher education and the specifics of the contemporary UK higher education system. Thus it reflects government concern with the globalised knowledge economy and the potential contribution of research to national economic development. In turn it responds to trends in the international movement of capital and labour, particularly intellectual labour, in order to attract individual 'talent' and investment to the UK and, via reputation, to particular institutions. This absolutely reflects the formative influence of neo-liberalism, realised through the implementation of Public Choice Theory (PCT) and the New Public Management (NPM) techniques of identifying and measuring inputs and outputs, objectives and targets, in order to determine efficiency and effectiveness of investment and productivity. Researchers – scientists – can no longer simply be allocated funds and trusted to act in the public interest and the public good (indeed, in PCT there is no such thing as some independently existing 'public good' there is only what the market determines should survive). Researchers must compete for funds and be held accountable for their disbursement (see Olson and Peters 2005, and Gilbert 2013, for a longer discussion). Interestingly, academics have long competed over ideas and what conceptual and empirical work should be developed to advance a field. So the seeds of a more overt and material competition might be said to have been sown on already fertile soil.

Within the UK, the REF also take place in the context of a mass expansion of higher education, funded by the withdrawal of government teaching grants and the imposition of student fees, supported by government loans to individual students. The number of universities has expanded from 40+ in the 1960s to 150+ today. In the 1960s less than 10% of the age cohort attended university, today it is close to 50%. The whole system cannot be supported to the same extent by government as it was when much smaller, hence the introduction of student fees and the distribution of research funds competitively, rather than through allocation to all. However in this

context the privileging of research in university planning, via the visibility of the REF, leading to a perceived and in many cases actual reduction in the importance of teaching (as noted above), could not be left unaddressed by government. Subsequently two additional 'EF's have been brought forward as policy – the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF). You couldn't make it up, could you. But somebody has! There is not space here to go into further detail but the point is that the REF now sits within a series of policy interventions that have to be managed at institutional level and in turn generate even more normative expectations of what university activity, and university academic life, now entails. Such changes also reflect the hyperactivity of government endlessly trying to chase down the unintended (but very predictable) consequences of policy. The REF focusses attention on research. Attention must be re-focussed on teaching (and knowledge exchange i.e. knowledge transfer for product development). Instead of changing/abandoning the REF, the policy impulse is to develop further competitors, the TEF and KEF, to alter the balance of incentives in the system. In this context we might also note that Public Choice Theory is never turned on itself and its proselytizers – economists and politicians. They would never be so base as to simply pursue their own interests and insist upon more, politically regulated, economic competition, creating more financialised opportunities for investment.

The more pertinent point to our discussion however, is that the REF now sits within a network of policy developments in UK higher education that require detailed engagement for the institutions to continue functioning. The challenge is to try to manage universities and departments within budgetary constraints and policy drivers while still retaining their core mission of knowledge production combined with a critical social and economic commitment to helping to create an informed citizenry. And it is here that the essence of neoliberalism is realised in universities. Resource constraints and policy demands lead management to (try to) streamline and orchestrate activities in order the better to support them. In tandem, national audit exercises such as the REF produce systems and templates to make the evidence comprehensible and comparable. Diverse disciplines and research activities are rendered commensurable (cf. Rizvi and Lingard 2009). As Davies and Bansel (2010) have noted:

> Academics are persuaded to…complete the same forms, make applications to the same funding bodies…in short to reproduce the same practices in order to re/organise themselves to fit the template of best practice…[ ]…technologies of audit…are…technologies for the production of responsibilised and accountable subjects…In being taken up as one's own ambitions, the ambitions of government become a technology of the self (pp 7 & 9).

Recent contributions from Ball (2016), Morrissey (2015) and Warren (2017) similarly address the lived reality of neoliberalism and the ways in which it works through subjectivity on the "micro-political economy of academic life" (Warren 2017 p. 128). They variously identify and discuss the overwhelming presence of performativity, the "embodied reality of neoliberalism" (Warren 2017 p. 129), and the ways in which it might be resisted at local level:

> subjectivity is a key site of political struggle in the context of…neoliberal governmentality …[]…in neoliberal economies, sites of government and points of contact are also sites for the possibility of refusal (Ball 2016, pp. 1129 & 1143).

However their arguments still, ultimately, tend to retreat into an 'us and them' frame of reference, where the (compliant) managers impose the processes and procedures of neoliberalism (in the case of this paper, the REF), on unwilling conscripts. But as a Professor and hence (compliant) manager in two different institutions (Sussex and Manchester Metropolitan), and former head of a university research institute (the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Met), my observations are that it's much more complex than this. (Yes, I know, 'he would, wouldn't he', but bear with me.) I would argue that different circumstances of operationalisation render the insinuation of neoliberalism into university management as a more variegated and complex phenomenon.

I have already noted that the REF produces the possibility of new income and improved reputation for newer universities, from which individual staff research activity and careers can benefit, as well as those of the institutions and their managers. A particular example might be the Education and Social Research Institute (ESRI) at Manchester Metropolitan University. Manchester Met is one of the newer UK universities, established in 1992 from a former higher education polytechnic institution which largely taught undergraduate students. Engagement with the REF has brought ESRI reputation and income, which in turn has generated further reputation and income through increased external funding, research student recruitment, and the attraction of additional very successful research active staff, including from overseas (most recently Australia, Canada, USA and various European countries). However this is not just a tale of success, for the sake of success. The research group was established and has developed as a way to create, maintain and further expand an intellectual space for thinking differently about education and social research, with particular reference to theory and methodology (see Torrance 2013 for a fuller discussion). As such the group quite self-consciously tries to use the competitive mechanism of the REF against itself – to promote the new while also taking advantage of the circumstances of the new – a new state regulatory system operationalised in a new place (not just a traditional university) where the possibility for innovation is perhaps more available. This might be proposed as an example of what Ball (2016, Ball

and Olmedo 2013) calls 'micro-resistances'. Yet the success of the group's strategy, and its intellectual agenda, has not undermined the REF. How could it – it is a minute element of a huge enterprise – taking advantage of that enterprise, but still part of it. Our visibility is a correlate of our success in the exercise (and no doubt other research groups will have similar stories to tell as they too seek to take advantage of circumstance). Thus even using the REF against itself plays to and is absorbed into the wider neo-liberal project. So while we might claim the heroic narrative of 'micro resistance', what we actually have here is more an example of 'micro-compliance' – engagement for, we would argue, a distinct and creative and positive purpose, but which nevertheless, at one and the same time, further ensconces the power of the regulatory mechanism. Neoliberalism realised in action. Interestingly, the feedback from the 2014 REF Education panel on Manchester Met's Education submission noted that "The sub-panel judged that the work of the cross-cutting research group Theory, Methodology and Knowledge Production underpinned the production of a significant number of world-leading and internationally excellent outputs". So it is apparent that the Panel itself (at least in 2014) also recognised the importance of new ideas in a disciplinary field and was willing to identify and endorse them. In this we can gain a glimpse of the ways in which expert panels also themselves might use the REF process to advance their discipline and accentuate its visibility in relation to other disciplines in the university firmament.

Conclusion

So the REF carries benefits as well as costs, rewards as well as sanctions. It has certainly disrupted ideas of academic freedom and individual scholarly inquiry but it is hard to see how these can be recovered in any traditional sense. Rather they must be pursued under different circumstances. The REF (and neo-liberalism more generally) also has the rhetorical advantage of transparency of process and procedure. In a mass higher education system more, and different, students and staff are included in the endeavour, and the criteria for judgement are available, albeit still interpreted by expert panels and with more losers than winners:

> Managers, academics and students all work to co-produce the drivers, structures and templates of competition…winners and losers are entangled in an affective economy"
>
> (Naidoo p. 611)

The institutions of the 1950s and 1960s essentially ran on the trust inherent in a smaller system, but equally that trust might now be understood as bias located in an essentially exclusive, white, male, structure. It can be argued that one flawed system of resource distribution (the neoliberal REF) has simply replaced another (the 'old boys network') but there is no going back, and, with respect to narrow elites rewarding themselves, nor should there be. Indeed, it might be argued that the old,

(elite, exclusive) 'craft knowledge' of university governance has been replaced by a more visible albeit more rigid and more demanding regime of managerial expertise. Thus audit has replaced traditional assumptions about how professionals (researchers) can and should be trusted to do their jobs properly. In turn we can note that neoliberalism doesn't just appeal to economics and managerialism, it appeals to clarity, inclusion and the fairness of extant due process. The challenge is to think about what academic work means in new times and new circumstances. What knowledges about university governance are being lost and what new knowledges are being generated by the REF? I have hinted at some of them above – with respect to more explicitly supporting early career researcher development, and capturing resources for innovative work. Might these new knowledges be put to better use – to genuinely produce better research, rather than just more intense competition and anxiety? Could the REF be different? Is it, indeed, now so exhausted and conservative in its influence that it should be dispensed with, but with new and more explicit understandings about effective research management being retained and utilised to reconnect with a commitment to the public sphere (cf. Holmwood 2017)? Can we construct equitable resource distribution mechanisms, at scale, which produce new research ideas, rebuild scholarly cultures, and generate collaborative practices with local communities to address enduring problems – impact from the bottom up, rather than the top down? At minimum, how can universities at least engage with the REF in ways which produce more positive than negative consequences? Performance-based accountability and funding measures have their supporters in higher education (e.g. Dougherty and Natow 2019), and other elements of neo-liberalism have previously been identified as potentially positive with respect to increasing equity, especially in the context of post-colonial social and educational endeavours, perhaps rendering a more open space for new social and economic formations to emerge (Gilbert 2013). Andreotti et. al. (2015) even talk of 'hospicing' the old in order to try to bring forth the new:

> Hospicing demands a critique that is self-implicated rather than heroic, vanguardist or innocent…In practice, this means that experimenting with alternatives is perceived as important not for generating predetermined solutions, but rather as a means to be taught by the successes and failures of the experimentation process…for exploring the depths of the existing system, and for learning to discern between its poisons and its medicines (Andreotti et. al. 2015, p. 28).

These are challenges which, in the UK at least, have now to be addressed by a generation of researchers who have known little else but the REF. Neoliberalism has embraced us all, but its impoverished vision of human interaction need not determine the future if we look beyond the immediacy of competition to the purpose of our research endeavours and the role of research in producing an informed and active citizenry, not just knowledge for a managerial state.

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