LYN YATES

THE QUALITY AND IMPACT PROBLEMATIC IN AUSTRALIA

Developing a ‘Research Quality Framework’ in Australia

From May 2004 to December 2007 Australian universities and education researchers became obsessed with a new government initiative to put in place a new program of research assessment across Australian universities. Australia’s version of this research assessment exercise was labelled the ‘Research Quality Framework’ (RQF). In keeping with research assessment exercises already set up in other countries (Smith and Jesson, 2005; Armstrong and Goodyear, 2006; Ozga, Seddon and Popkewitz, 2006; Power, 1997; Roberts, 2003), it would seek reliable ways of benchmarking the quality and standing of Australian researchers against their international peers, and of ranking them relative to each other in the national context. As with other research assessments, quality of research in a particular field would be assessed in some comparative measure against research quality in other fields. And as with assessments in other countries, government funding allocation in the future would be influenced by the outcome of the exercise. But the Australian RQF would have two novel features. It would rank quality of research not by department or discipline as in the UK exercise, nor, as in New Zealand, by individual researcher and their output, but by ‘research group’. And, more notably still, Australia’s gift to the rapidly growing international research auditing culture would be that it would assess ‘impact’ as well as ‘quality’ as the measure of the research standing of different groups.

The Prime Minister announced the proposal to set in place an RQF in May 2004. An RQF Expert Advisory Group (EAG) was commissioned to give advice on how the assessment mechanisms would work. Forums were held around the country, and the EAG produced a paper of its preferred model in September 2005. Yet more consultations and submissions were invited. In December 2005, the EAG was replaced by a new advisory group (the ‘Development Advisory Group’ or DAG), commissioned to revisit the mechanisms and provide further advice on implementation. Yet more consultations, workshops, submissions followed. In August 2006, the DAG released its own paper on ‘Guiding Principles’, and also set up further working groups to develop criteria and procedures in relation to ‘Quality Metrics’; ‘Research Impact’ and ‘IT Requirements’. On 14 November 2006, the Minister announced that the Government would definitely proceed with the RQF and released another paper, The Recommended RQF. This paper sets out the composition of 13 disciplinary assessment panels that were to make the judgements about the evidence submitted to them (Education was grouped in Panel 11 with...
Law and ‘Professional Practices’). It identifies the work that will be required of universities, to submit ratified metric data about research publications, income, and case-studies of impact for each group they nominate; and it names criteria for each rating on the two 5 point scales against which research would be assessed, one for quality, and one for impact. A timetable for steps to be taken over the course of 2007 was set out; and the deadline for the final submission for the first Australian RQF nominated as 30 April 2008, with a second round to take place three years later, and thereafter at six-yearly intervals.

Meanwhile, universities and professional research associations such as AARE (the Australian Association for Research in Education) had been busy making submissions, holding their own workshops and conferences, setting up discussion groups, arguing about what was positive and what was negative in the proposed approach, and beginning to organize within themselves to prepare their own pre-assessments of their researchers, and the ways they might maximize their outcome. Before the final paper was announced, the Australian Technology Universities (ATN) (which includes a number of the largest education faculties in Australia) had organized their own national trial. Each ATN university identified or created research groups that might be submitted and required them to develop a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate their quality and impact, and this was then assessed by colleagues at a different university. On the basis of that trial the ATN network made strong submissions to the RQF working groups that ‘impact’ should certainly be included as part of the exercise, and that it was possible to provide evidence-based case-studies to demonstrate impact in reliable and meaningful ways. ATN universities had a strong tradition of working with industry partners and state governments, and on applied problems, and saw the addition of an impact category in assessing research quality as a move that would be in their interests. Meanwhile, another group of universities were proceeding down a different path. The Group of 8 universities (the oldest and most elite and research intensive universities, and these too included a number of leading education research faculties) were lobbying strongly against the proposed initiative, and particularly against the inclusion of case-studies and impact as part of the exercise. These universities traditionally dominated existing informal league tables of research, using measures such as competitive grant success, quantum of publications and research income, international peer esteem and the like. Their case was that the RQF would show little that was not already known about the hierarchy of research quality in Australia, and that it was expensive and potentially unreliable compared with simply using existing metrics and data that universities were already required to submit to the Department of Education Science and Training – in particular information about annual research publications, research income, and national competitive grant achievements.

As it became clear that the RQF initiative would in fact proceed, all universities began their own internal assessments of their research strengths, and began to build new administrative and data repositories that could produce the required submissions. Top down and bottom up strategizing and anxiety spread through the system. Would it be better to submit a small elite group and leave a lot of middling
researchers out of the equation, or would that work against the ability to demonstrate scale and impact? Would it be better to submit education researchers as a number of different research groupings according to their disciplinary specialties, or would ‘quality and impact’ be better demonstrated (and potentially rewarded) by taking a whole faculty or department as a unit?

Within the education research community (in particular through AARE), further work was taking place (Blackmore, Wright and Harwood, 2006). Key advisers to the RQF seemed determined to work with citation data and rankings of journals and book publishers, and AARE sponsored its own survey of members about journal hierarchies (Holbrook et al., 2007).

Much discussion took place about the impact scale and whether it demeaned research that was designed to be specific to the local or national context, as well as how it was possible to measure research that produced broad changes of thinking over time, and whether it implied no role for research that was not tied to agendas of government (Yates, 2006; Blackmore et al., 2006). In many cases these concerns echoed discussions that had taken place in other countries, about effects of the UK RAE (Oancea, 2004a, 2004b) and the New Zealand PBRF (Smith and Jesson, 2005), even though the impact agenda had been promoted specifically as something that would give attention to applied benefits of research and not just good publications in good journals and take-up by other academics. The Minister signed off on descriptive rating criteria for levels of impact (Table 1 below) but to researchers and universities it did not seem to be a consistent hierarchy (‘engaged

Table 1: The Rating Scale for Research Impact

<table>
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<th>Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Adoption of the research <em>has produced an outstanding</em> social, economic, environmental and/or cultural benefit for the wider community, regionally within Australia, nationally or internationally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Adoption of the research <em>has produced a significant</em> social, economic, environmental and/or cultural benefit for the wider community, regionally within Australia, nationally or internationally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Research <em>has been adopted to produce</em> new policies, products, attitudes, behaviours and/or outlooks in the end user community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Research <em>has engaged with</em> the end user community to address a social, economic, environmental and/or cultural issue regionally within Australia, nationally or internationally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Research <em>has had limited or no identifiable</em> social, economic, environmental and/or cultural outcome, regionally within Australia, nationally or internationally.</td>
</tr>
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(Australian Government Department of Education 2006) [italics added]

with’ compared with ‘adopted’ compared with ‘produced benefit’); and the ambiguity of how ‘cultural benefit’ or change in ‘attitudes and behaviours’ might
be demonstrated in hard evidence was the subject of countless hours of deliberation (Yates, 2006).

For large research intensive universities, the impact of the looming assessment mechanism was particularly difficult and expensive. Universities in Australia are heavily audited by government, but the RQF would require new forms of data and publication repository, and the building of costly new IT systems. New appointments were made of administrators who would work specifically on the RQF; and researchers themselves had to spend time they might otherwise spend in doing research in submitting data in new forms; checking submissions; attending meetings to strategize. University research leaders were spending at least as much time thinking about how they would strategize their participation in this auditing of research as they were spending in developing and supporting research. All universities were heavily occupied with what to do with current staff who would perform poorly or not be part of the submission; and with poaching other researchers who would enhance their profile.

In November 2007 there was an election. The incumbent government lost. On 21 December 2007, the new Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, announced that the government would not be proceeding with the RQF. Senator Carr said cancellation of the RQF was because it is fundamentally flawed. “The RQF is poorly designed, administratively expensive and relies on an ‘impact’ measure that is unverifiable and ill-defined,” he said [...] “I want to implement a less cumbersome and less costly process that still provides the Australian Government and taxpayers with an efficient and transparent process. A process that ensures valuable research dollars are allocated to the university sector using internationally verifiable measures.”

In other words, what the new Minister was announcing, was a rejection of the form of the previous government’s RQF, not a rejection of the commitment to government-led research assessment and benchmarking, including the criteria of the need to justify the detailed allocation of research spending to taxpayers. He has subsequently announced the replacement for RQF will be ‘ERA’ (‘Excellence in Research in Australia’) – the details of this are still to be announced, but it seems it will incorporate many of the agendas of the RQF in modified form; and many of the team involved in developing the mechanisms for the RQF are now working on ERA.

RESEARCH ASSESSMENT, GOVERNMENT RESEARCH STEERING, AND EDUCATION RESEARCH

I began with this summary narrative of recent developments in Australia because it sets the scene for issues I want to explore further in this chapter, and also because, even in this briefest synopsis of events and activities, we can get some sense of the sheer weight of money, technologies, human resources and effort that have been devoted to assessment, auditing and benchmarking of research, and have impacted on the work of universities and researchers over the past decade. Both the prominence of the new imperative to assess and rank, and the costliness and infrastructure and manpower and huge array of material and technical practices that are required for this activity, are readily apparent. Australia, like many other
countries, is entering a period when there is more direct intervention into and coordination by government of the ways assessment of research quality will take place, an intervention in which concerns about international comparison, cross disciplinary comparison, and the value to the national economy of the research being done will all play some part (Power, 1997; Ozga et al., 2006; Helgoy et al., 2007). At the same time, the three years of intensive work on the RQF, and the committees and briefing papers they produced show the difficulty of fulfilling the intention by government to pin down rankings objectively and unambiguously, and the ways in which the enactment continues to be fraught with ambiguity and practical and technical challenges for those who must marshal the evidence. Universities were spending millions of dollars preparing themselves for compliance; and the government department, DEST, which was driving the RQF too was consuming huge amounts of spending. Indeed one of the reasons the incoming government had announced its own party political rejection of the RQF was a report by the Productivity Commission in Australia that had deemed the particular strategy not at all cost effective in terms of its stated ends. Despite this, the desire to audit and benchmark remains strong with governments, and the cost and ambiguity and intended and unintended effects of the measures tends to feed an ongoing cycle of review and submission and tweaking, that is, of large amounts of researcher and university energy being directed to the assessment needs and technologies, rather than any move away from a belief that this centralized assessment is a proper and necessary role for government.

The issue then that will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter is what effects are these interventions having on the practices of research in education? Do they represent merely an intensification and new explicitness of existing processes by which those who work as education researchers have always been tacitly governed, or are they redefining in significant ways what will begin to count as quality? How, in practice, has quality been assessed before such ‘research assessment exercises’ came to be mounted? What are the specific mechanisms, and proxies and people and networks that come into play?

In taking up these questions I will consider two further matters that are of concern in this volume. One is the specificity of education research as a field of activity. In my brief story about Australia in the grip of the RQF, we catch a glimpse of some issues that are of concern for education research as a specific field, as governments move towards national schemes of research assessment. For example, in the differing responses by Australian universities to the mooted RQF, some (especially the ATN universities) saw the attempt to explicitly include impact in the assessment as a major advance for fields of professional research activity such as education where researchers do have to spend time working with and writing for people other than other academics; while others (the GO8 universities — or at least the senior administrators of these) argued that impact was a fuzzy means of letting all kinds of poor quality research (and ‘lesser’ institutions) make a claim for research funding. In some cases education researchers themselves wanted education research to be judged primarily against the contribution it was making to the field of education; in other cases, arguments were made for the importance of
disciplinary differences within education research, and for grouping researchers by their disciplinary orientation outside as well as inside education – that is, for a legitimate criteria to be the way in which education sociologists were advancing their discipline, for contribution to theory-building to be an alternative or even more important criterion than applied advancement of education practice.

The second issue is the national context of developments in Australia, its specific history, culture, and political and demographic constraints. Clearly, in moving to take up new co-ordinated forms of auditing and benchmarking, Australia is following some international trends. (Power, 1997; Ozga et al., 2006) But the practices and detailed specifications of how such assessment will be enacted, and their likely impact on researchers, are also shaped by national factors, such as the relatively small population of higher education versus the cost of mounting assessments that require discipline-sensitive peer review driving a search towards use of cheaper template metrics, and less subtlety by field; and a political and cultural history of anti-intellectualism where universities have traditionally been seen as institutions of the elite, institutions whose practices are considered with some skepticism by voters, and where further investment by government or industry requires a great deal of careful justification in terms of their instrumental value to the economy.

I will begin with some remarks about education research as a field of activity in universities, and then consider the recent history of Australian higher education to give some sense of both the continuities of what is being enacted in the current research assessment exercises, and what may be reshaped and distorted by them.

WHAT IS ‘QUALITY’ IN EDUCATION RESEARCH – AND HOW AND BY WHOM IS IT JUDGED?

Education is a normative field; and it is a field in which different judgments (and judges) of quality come into play. In my book, What does good education research look like? Situating a field and its practices (Yates, 2004) I developed four themes that are relevant to the consideration of how education researchers are assessed in practice prior to the national codification exercises. First, political values and judgments drawn from outside the research field itself are an ambiguous and inescapable part of how good research is judged, even in arenas of peer review (put another way, in the case of education, judgments about whether something matters are not simply the result of conversations within the research community). Secondly, in the Australian Higher Education context, education researchers are often ‘hybrid’ workers who effectively work across some different arenas of judgment of their work – academic peer review of various kinds, decisions of the professional and political field about whose work will be drawn on, the media and public discourse. Thirdly, in each of these fields, the judges (those awarding grants or promotions or appointments) bring to the task their own experiences and history, which may be gendered or framed by the ways they themselves have been successful; and the judgments they make are framed by their own current contexts of work. Fourthly, the judgments are not simply direct judgments of research and
its outcomes, but are mediated by researchers’ skills at mastering the appropriate textual presentation for a particular purpose, and by networks of association.

The normative in judgments of quality

Judgments about what questions are important (what matters), and about values, enter quite broadly into the processes that decide which researchers are deemed to be doing ‘significant’ work. Sometime, this is quite direct, as when government departments decide to whom to award consultancy contracts, or when a newspaper consistently advocates particular approaches to literacy and demeans other approaches (Snyder, 2008); but even in prestigious academic arenas, senior academics from fields other than education who are drawn on to panels to decide national competitive research grants or promotion within a university bring their own non-academic views about education to the decision-making, in ways they are less likely to do when judging competitive applications or promotions in fields such as nanotechnology. In the Australian Research Council for instance, grant applications are scored on a number of criteria: significance of the proposed project; quality of the research team; approach and method; and ‘national benefit’. Having served on this panel for three years, I argued that in the case of education applications, ‘significance’ and ‘national benefit’ are not well distinguished from each other, and ‘significance’ itself is left open for the assessors to interpret according to their own beliefs and experiences:

Does it mean important? or major? or crucial? Does it mean ‘within the context of research to date’? or ‘within a program of research endeavour’? or ‘within the context of making a difference to the world, or improving people’s lives’? And does it mean ‘significant given designated political agendas and values for research’? (Yates, 2006).

So, even in arenas of ‘peer’ review, judgments of quality for education research may give greater weight to non-technical judgments of social need or importance than in some other fields (science, technology, economics, for example) that allow greater latitude for focusing on how a particular technical question is being advanced.

Embodied experiences

Many of the arenas in which quality of research is judged (competitive grants; promotion and tenure in universities; journal publications) traditionally use some form of peer or expert judgment as the basis on which the imprimatur is given, and we need to consider what characteristics such experts may share (including gender and ethnicity; their own experience of success). If the assessors that are asked to rank quality heavily over-represent certain experiences and kinds of research then this may have some influence on what understandings they bring to the task of judgment. I have discussed this elsewhere in the case of the Australia Research Council, in which a single panel is responsible for assessments across the social
sciences, and where the panel of 12 included only 3 women and only 3 whose field was not primarily in quantitative research (Yates, 2006), and similar cases have been argued about doctoral assessment (Leonard, 2001) and academic promotion (Millen, 1997).

Contexts of work

The case of senior academics with experience of management and many demands on their time, who need to work at speed and who therefore can more readily digest clear cases with well honed indicators than ones where a case about quality and significance needs a detailed story to be made; the case of policymakers who need to be sure that the researcher can reliably deliver commissioned work, both in terms of meeting deadlines and in terms of findings that will not be embarrassing to the commissioning body; the case of a school principal whose interest is that the researcher can produce usable findings, whether or not these are original; the case of publishers and the media whose interest is in the breadth of sales and readership; a piece of research may generate, are all examples of how the conditions of work of those making judgments affect the research that gets selected and promoted (Yates, 2004). In some cases originality or 'international' recognition and prizes are central criteria, and in other cases virtually irrelevant; in some cases the personality of the researcher will play a part in the decision, and so on. Technical standards must not be obviously breached, but the expertise with which these are judged will differ in different contexts.

Not all of the contexts I have discussed here are commonly discussed in relation to 'quality'. The reader might ask whether I am discussing something different: what makes an education researcher successful, or popular, or able to sustain their activity. But what I am drawing attention to is that 'quality' is not simply an abstract concept, but something that can be approached by considering how it is enacted, what practices and effects are associated with it. Non-codified practices of judgment, for example using peer review without using journal rankings or citation indices, allow for some ad hoc experiences of those making the judgments to enter; driving behaviours via national research assessments has the power to reduce the diversity by which quality is assessed by narrowing and emphasizing certain indicators.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: INTENSIFICATION OF THE COMPETITIVE QUEST FOR STATUS; AND OF INCOME AS A MANDATORY CRITERION OF DOING QUALITY RESEARCH

Until the late 1980s, Australia had a binary system of higher education. Teachers' colleges, funded by and directed by state governments, provided preparation of primary and secondary teachers, primarily pre-service, but with some further and higher qualifications offered. Universities, funded and governed by the commonwealth government, were teaching and research institutions, and commonly offered smaller one year programs of teacher preparation for those who had
completed bachelors degrees in science or arts or commerce, as well as higher
degrees and research training in the field. (Marginson, 1993, 1997) Some staff who
worked in teachers’ colleges undertook research; and some staff who worked in
university departments of education did little or no research, but the government
funding formula for universities assumed that in part their role was to do research,
and the funding until the 1980s was designed to allow academic staff to take
sabbatical leave to further their research, and to allow departments to provide small
internal research grants to staff. In universities, research performance was traditionally
the main criteria for promotion up the academic hierarchy. In teachers’ colleges,
staff could do research but this was not a requirement. They traditionally had
heavier contact hours with students; and promotion was often on the grounds of
good performance in teaching or administrative roles, or for making strong
contributions to the profession of education (serving on curriculum and assessment
bodies for example).

Beginning in the 1980s two things happened that fundamentally altered the
conditions in which education research in higher education took place, and these are
one important background story of the ‘quality and impact’ debates associated with
the RQF (Marginson and Considine, 2000). One development was a deliberate move
by the government to create a single unified system of higher education, in which
university and college amalgamations were encouraged, and in which all institutions
offering higher education became universities, with some of the general expectations
of universities (that all staff should do research) but with some of the historical
conditions of colleges of advanced education (higher student load, and an expectation
of heavy contact hours). Associated with this and intensifying throughout the 1990s,
governments significantly reduced the amount of recurrent funding allocated to
universities. On the one hand then, a lot more people were now formally involved in
education research. On the other, a lot less money and time was readily available to
researchers in higher education to support their activities. From this flowed two
further characteristics of the context for education research: competition between
institutions became more intense, including a push by all institutions to rank higher in
terms of their research achievement because this was taken as a general measure of
status, and means of attracting students; and the need to bring in research income
became important because general recurrent funding of universities had declined and
a part of university funding was now calculated according to the institution’s
quantum of national competitive grants, publications and PhD completions. All
institutions and individuals now were driven to emphasize the need to gain external
funding for research. So, through the 1990s and beyond, there was a large escalation
of the quantity of applications for external competitive grants, since these tended to
be used not just as a means of getting funding for worthwhile projects, but, in
quantum, as a de facto measure of status between universities.

Pre- and post- national research assessment

Looking at this situation from the ground up, in this pre-RQF context, there was no
national unified or co-ordinated or government-driven named research quality
assessments scheme, but assessment of quality was nevertheless taking place in a number of different ways. For the individual researcher seeking promotion or employment, quality was commonly measured by proxies: number and location of publications in peer reviewed journals, international invitations, success in competitive grants, record of consultancy and policy-related work for state and federal bodies. There was some diversity as to how they might choose to do this, and some diversity in what different universities might see as their mission, and emphasize in making appointments or promotions. Some researchers would work primarily on local work with schools or an education department, from time to time producing a book about that work; but not focusing too much on publication in academic journals. Similarly, before the 1980s, an academic in some parts of education research (for example a philosopher, or a policy critic or historian) might build a senior career and be recognized as a leading researcher, without grants being a mandatory or significant part of how they were assessed. Their conditions of work did not require them to earn external funds to buy time for their writing; workload measured by staff:student ratio was less than half what it is today, and universities were funded to allow for periods of sabbatical leave for all staff.

With the move to a unified national system of higher education some implicit measures of research assessment between institutions and research fields began to be put in place at least a decade before the current explicit moves to a named research assessment. The gathering of audited data on publications and on national competitive grant success underpinned the ‘Research Infrastructure Block Grants’ (RIBG) for universities, and the contribution of individual researchers to this became a tool of scrutiny and governance within universities and within departments, and the comparative data on achievements measured for this purpose began to be a form of benchmarking and comparison inside and across universities. So a form of national assessment and incorporation of education researchers within a general template for measuring research productivity has been well-established well before this is named as an activity in its own right, but the specifics of this annual auditing are ones that the RQF was in part designed to re-align. The RIBG reporting emphasized quantity rather than quality (or status of the outlet) or impact (such as citation) in relation to publications; it involved only indirect peer review (in the form of reporting successes in national competitive grant schemes) and the assemblage of data (for example regarding a publication) emphasized technical criteria that were audited by companies of accountants rather than academic reviewers. Concerns about producing ‘impact’ or even engagement with commercial and social productivity were left to schemes outside the annual reporting.

At the department level, the drivers embedded in these implicit measures of quality were difficult to manage (Yates, 2006). ARC competitive grants were highly desirable as explicit markers of status, but, in contrast to similar schemes in other countries, ARC grants were not full-funded grants: they provided only a small and indirect contribution to infrastructure via the RIBG and they would not fund any salaries of chief investigators, except in a few opportunities for a full research fellowship. From the point of view of a Dean, ARC grants cost money rather than brought money in. By contrast, contract research might fund the researchers and
infrastructure more fully, but it was likely to be much more constrained in terms of
the issues that might be pursued (and the opportunity to gain elite and international
recognition of quality research), and would not normally see academic publication
as part of what would be funded by it. In terms of research publication, serious
books or well refined publication in high status journals might be needed for success
in competitive peer grant applications; but in terms of ongoing benchmarking and
direct infrastructure (that is, the RIBG grants that came back to universities),
producing multiple quick publications might be a more profitable strategy.

And in terms of publications, the criteria and points awarded were heavily based
on the sciences (and the government ‘auditing’ of whether a publication met the
criteria for its category was carried out by a firm of chartered accountants rather
than by academics). For example, a book would gain 6 points if it were deemed a
research monograph and 0 points if it were deemed a textbook, a difficult juggling
act for education researchers, where publishers drive authors and blurb writers to
emphasize the biggest possible audience for their work, and where other government
directives want education researchers to demonstrate their relevance to the
professional field, and not just other academics. To compound this problem, the
government further deemed that only publications published by a commercial press
would be eligible for recognition and associated infrastructure funding. The
definition allowed a wide range of quality in presses that were deemed eligible
(and did not exclude those that required subsidy from intending authors) but it
excluded books published by professional associations within education whose
motive was not profit, but dissemination.

In practice then, before there was an attempt at a co-ordinated research quality
audit, the processes of employment and promotion and income-generation in
Australia were already setting in train some aspects of the two ranking conceptions,
‘quality and impact’, that were to be named in the RQF. In the panel assessment
practices by the Australian Research Council, and in the criteria for book
publication, there were incentives for researchers to be engaged with and directing
their output to the international audience rather than the local one. But in other
categories of the ARC process (‘significance’ and ‘national benefit’) and in the
imperative for departments to earn more money than was possible through ARC
grants, there was incentive to be seen to be doing research that has a demonstrable
(and primarily short-term) applied outcome (or at least take-up), and that is seen to
be addressing designated national research priorities, rather than mounting research
that is long-term, or stands back from policy or implementation questions, or is
primarily critique of current common sense. Because benchmarking was often done
between departments or universities on crude measures of total income, there was
further incentive for researchers to be engaged in large-scale and expensive
projects, rather than do work that is primarily philosophical or historical.

Research drivers and Australian education research:

In this chapter I have been emphasizing some continuity in the directions and
policy assumptions that have been steering higher education research in Australia
over the past three decades. In particular, and persisting through changes of government, there has been a concern to construct justification for research support in terms of its contribution to national productivity, and solving national economic and social problems. There has been too a longstanding concern about how Australian researchers measure up in the international arena, and to find ways of benchmarking and auditing what is ‘world class’ and what is not. And there has been an increasing move toward more explicit political management of research focus, naming national priorities, attempting to drive greater scale and concentration of research activity. (Yates, 2007)

But I have emphasized too that the specific details through which these directions are managed also do drive particular behaviours and opportunities for education researchers. Prior to a national assessment exercise, funding schemes provided incentives for researchers to take on particular types of project and disincentives to universities to employ researchers who were not successful in bringing in income, but these were not intensively and publicly managed and co-ordinated to the extent that is now proposed: they were only some of a range of clients and drivers to which particular institutions might direct their efforts. The RQF exercise in Australia, and its successor, ERA, are likely to have two effects. First, because universities in Australia remain closely oriented to the government policies of the day, and because there is far less diversity of funding sources for research available than in the USA or Europe, these assessment programs have the effect of driving universities to a single template of how ‘quality and impact’ are to be operationalised. And secondly, the form of these assessments is one that frames research as a monolithic entity, tied to national productivity, in which conclusions will be able to be drawn about how Education research stands up in achievement and against world benchmarks compared with Australian medical research or research in creative arts. Although both the RQF and the ERA acknowledge disciplinary differences and look for ways of accommodating these, science and patents (or economics and direct policy advice) remain the models.

To give an example of how this affects education. In 1999, the Australian Higher Education division of DEST commissioned a major report on the impact of education research in Australia (Australia. Department of Education, 2000). This 671 page study produced some interesting insights about how impact works in the field of education. For example, one study showed that in Education, where the majority of PhD students are part-time, and holding senior positions in their own workplaces, higher degree research is a major source of influence on the professional field. It is not a matter that first there is research then there is impact, but of practitioners who are simultaneously involved in both. But once an RQF or its successor tries to find a template for assessing impact, it is the vision of the young scientist who produces a breakthrough that is commercialized and its dissemination measured in hard cash and patents that is the implicit standard for the indicators that are developed.

Some of the effects of the recent drive to a co-ordinated and public research quality assessment are already becoming apparent. At a time when potentially there is an opening up of knowledge via the potential of online searching, the moves to
develop a template for each field in order to rank publications using automated tools puts pressure on researchers to publish in journals ranked as most important in a previously decided typology. Journals become positioned as a means of asserting status, rather than a means of disseminating research to the appropriate conversation, or of developing research dialogue. The power of commercial publishers and keepers of citation data is increasing. This drive to see the proxies of quality (journal status or citation) as the object of the researcher’s activity, rather than an outcome of their achievement in doing quality research is already apparent in how departments and universities are now managing their communication with researchers; and in how research students and new researchers are being trained.

In the current directions for research assessment in Australia, demonstration of international esteem for the researcher’s work, and demonstration of the value of that work outside the academic research community seem likely to remain as core indicators as well as objectives of the scheme. This clearly benefits some forms of research and is a discouragement to others. What is also firmly on the agenda is an intent to explicitly compare and rank. Both imperatives confront some ways education research in Australia had been developing as an entity. AARE, for example, had steadily moved away from its origins in the 1970s as an elite and selective professional association to become one that emphasized the breadth of education research activity, and that aimed to be widely inclusive. Its conferences now emphasized participation rather than selective ranking (Yates, 2006a). Over the same period, the decline in large-scale quantitative research expertise in the sector, and popularity of qualitative and small-scale and poststructural research of various kinds had been widely noted. So the RQF raised issues for AARE as the professional body representing education researchers as to how it should now proceed. (Blackmore et al., 2006; Yates, 2006a; Holbrook et al., 2007) It became an active participant in making responses to the various iterations of criteria for ranking, and sponsored its own conferences and research related to these agendas. As with its UK counterpart, BERA, the government-managed research assessments have, to some extent, co-opted the professional bodies to participate and try to make the best of the exercise. The assumptions about scale and impact and international esteem that govern the policy agendas are likely to begin to encourage a move away from the case-studies that have been such a popular form of research in the Australian context.

For those becoming education researchers, the current phase of research assessment in Australia is likely to have two effects. First, the ‘rules of the game’ by which their performance will be judged are being made more explicit; new faculty will be less dependent on the lottery of mentors to know what will be expected of them. But along with this, the ways in which new researchers are given opportunities to develop their career are likely to be narrowed. There will be a more explicit template of acceptable form and rate of publication, grant achievement, and the like. And this in turn, as Leonard has argued (Leonard, 2001), is a model that sees research as a process of a certain type (training and competence as a researcher is now emphasized), rather than through a lens
previously accepted in the humanities where creativity and new voices were highly regarded.

But the directions outlined in this chapter are not likely to be resolved in a single way. Australian universities (and the government) are influenced by rankings arising outside the processes described in this chapter, by the Times Higher Education rankings, the Shanghai Jiao Tong index and the like, and these too use indicators that can be manipulated and made the object of the behaviour to be driven (Marginson, 2007). In Education frequent reviews of the quality of teachers and teacher training drive their own agendas on what academics in higher education should be doing – often ones that do not sit comfortably with the research-driven imperatives.

‘Quality’ (aspiring to be world class) and ‘impact’ (research matters in so far as it contributes to economic or social outcomes) have long been part of the tacit arena in which education researchers in Australia operate, and in which decisions about their employment and promotion are made. The codification and management of these agendas in the form of a national research quality assessment is an intensification of processes already well under way. But the attempt to produce monolithic and technical measures that can be used cross-field runs the danger of making the audit specifications rather than research questions the object of researcher effort.

NOTES


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