



Editorial: PBRF Changes – Encouraging On-Going Fiddling with the Rules While the Academy Burns?

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Although the politics of academic research may appear distant to classroom teachers, nonetheless academic research affects both what they teach – the content of the curriculum – and indirectly, through research into the practices of teaching and the processes of learning – how they teach. So it is important to us as a profession that the context of academic research should be both fair and constructive. Over the last 18 years successive governments have tried various schemes to reward and encourage good research, without actually conducting much research into the effectiveness of the rewards and discouragements inherent in their schemes. Universities have been very quick to analyse where the weaknesses in the successive formats gave them opportunities to promote their stronger players, and hide their weaker ones, to the point where the focus of universities seems to have become playing the rules, rather than actually supporting good research.

The government has not been unaware of the distortions created by the Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) scheme. Hence, the Minister has commissioned a review of the PBRF in 2018 and the Minister of Education, Chris Hipkins recently provided a final report back to Cabinet on the 2020 Report of the PBRF Review Panel (Ministry of Education, 2020). The 2018 Terms of Reference (Ministry of Education, 2018) of this review were not framed to threaten the PBRF's neoliberal antecedents, and indeed, the Panel, it was thought, would simply tweak the PBRF (Benade et al, 2019). The Tertiary Education Union, for its part, wanted to see the entire PBRF dismantled, and was scathing in its critique of the Review Panel report (TEU, 2020). Following the Minister's final report, the TEU has redoubled its critique, now claiming that the 'government fiddles while the tertiary sector burns' (TEU, 2021).

While we are pleased the Minister has, for now, not recommended that the acronym, 'PBRF' be replaced by the questionable Panel alternative of 'TREE' (Tertiary Research Excellence Evaluation), we note that he has accepted several other recommendations, including strengthening the Crown and Māori partnership through the PBRF guiding principles and increasing support for Māori and Pasifika researchers. It comes as no surprise, however, that critics (such as the TEU) will see the government as simply tinkering at the edges, as the Panel recommendations effectively suggested only improvements and enhancements to the existing scheme. Nonetheless, according to Minister Hipkins, the "proposed changes will strengthen and build on the successes of the PBRF while

also prioritising continuity, stability and clarity for our tertiary education system” (Ministry of Education, 2021, “Executive Summary”, Pt 19, p. 3).

There are several recommendations, accepted in full or adapted form, that will be of interest to the readers of this journal, though we will comment only on some of these. For a full description of the changes suggested, see the link in the references (Ministry of Education, 2021). The first among the notable changes refer to the enhanced support for Māori and Pacific researchers and research. While the Panel recommended that in both cases, a funding weighting of 2.5 be applied, the final decision to attach a weighting of 2.5 to Māori Evidence Portfolios and a lesser weighting of 2 in the case of Pacific researchers, recognises the status of tangata whenua in our society. In relation to the former, Minister Hipkins acknowledges that participating wānanga will experience some shift in funding in their direction. Notably, it is not only Māori and Pacific researchers, but also any research concerning kaupapa Māori and mātauranga Māori that is seeing increased recognition. This corrects what is seen as the “undervaluing of mātauranga Māori, kaupapa Māori research and Pacific research” (Ministry of Education, 2021, “Executive Summary”, Pt 37, p. 6), though also opens the possibility of superficial appropriation of Māori language and concepts as a form of gaming the system.

While these measures may require some considerable period of time to be fully embedded or to take full (positive) effect, they may, arguably, attract some unintended consequences in the short-term. These include possibly increased (neoliberal) competition among universities to secure the services of Māori and Pacific staff members. While this might provide an incentive for universities to attract more Māori and Pacific academics, it likely does little to address the inevitable cultural labour these staff members are required to carry in their (Pākehā-dominated) workplaces. Furthermore, creating this kind of ranking within the system can breed resentment among those who do not understand or appreciate the historical impact of colonisation on Māori (academics). This resentment may fuel neoliberal agendas and potentially undermine positive effects intended by this change. The underlying issue of the harmful impacts of a neoliberally driven education sector is, as pointed out by the TEU, not addressed by these intended changes to PBRF.

Of interest to individual academics are the proposals for designing amendments to the Evidence Portfolio in time for the 2025 round. These changes are proposed in light of the recommendation, accepted by the Minister, that the definition of ‘research’ be broadened. Thus, ‘Nominated Research Outputs’ (ie, the four NROs that have previously carried the weight of each individual’s portfolio) will be replaced with Examples of Research Excellence (Ministry of Education, 2021). Four examples of research excellence will be headlined instead, and the intention appears to be that these examples could go beyond ‘traditional outputs’, though precisely what that means is unclear. The shift in emphasis from ‘research output’ to ‘examples of research excellence’ continues into the ‘Other’ and ‘Research Contribution’ section. Researchers may expect even greater emphasis on the ‘resulting impacts’ (Ministry of Education, 2021) of their research work. The notion of ‘industry engagement’ and ‘impact factors’ for some disciplines, such as education, is problematic however (Benade et al., 2019). This is due to the likely instrumental and performative character of the application of these items of evidence, and their use will interfere with the

legislative intention that tertiary academics be the ‘critic and conscience’ of our society. Generating ‘impact’ on an industry is not likely to grow from a critique of that industry. Nor do the proposals address the legitimate role of ‘translators’ of academic research for a wider readership. It is often the great communicators – like Siouxsie Wiles and David Attenborough – who have the greatest ‘impact’. But ‘impact’ in the academic world is not a product of widespread recognition or readership, but of the fairly limited ‘impact factors’ which publishers identify as a result of citations in other academic journals, or downloads. Great communicators may or may not be active original researchers, but their expertise in their field, as well as in their articulate delivery of ideas, makes a huge impact on public perception and hence action. Indeed, the impact of academic research is potentially dependent not on its intrinsic value, but upon the skill and enthusiasm of those who understand and communicate its potential significance.

Finally, the recognition of the need for greater flexibility in assessing ‘Extraordinary Circumstances’ acknowledges the uneven playing field for female academics (who are more likely to require time away from their jobs, and/or who are more likely to be employed part-time). This recognition is laudable, as women in the workforce generally have to make difficult choices and compromises to balance their commitment to both family and career. On the other hand, this concession does not go so far as to address the unjustifiable contractualisation and casualisation of the academic workforce that is increasingly the norm.

To some extent, the TEU is justified in its contention that PBRF is fundamentally flawed. PBRF continues to be a neoliberal project, based on the notion that the academic will only work self-interestedly, for example, to gain promotion, and/or that academics require constant surveillance to achieve their compliance. PBRF effectively incentivises academics, subjecting them to a performative mill. The mill now features a new wheel, called ‘research excellence’. Nonetheless, PBRF has served those who quietly research and publish, sometimes without due acknowledgement by their School or University. This benefit has, however, come at the cost of a ridiculous amount of work, not to mention substantial gaming of the system. It is not certain any of this will change in 2025.

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