



The Centre For Business Relationships,
Accountability, Sustainability and Society

Comment and Analysis

The Research Excellence Framework: And
why it isn't



Peter Wells



Disclaimer

The views in this document in no way represent the institutional view of the Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society. The work here is only representative of the opinion and work of the author, Peter Wells.

Copyright

While we encourage the circulation, consideration and citation of views put forward in this document, we naturally request due acknowledgement and would appreciate a copy of material citing this work.

The Research Excellence Framework: And why it isn't.

Peter Wells

It is about time we considered the value-for-money, utility and general worth of the system that we use to measure the value-for-money, utility and general worth of university research. Universities and individual academics have thus far acquiesced in the old Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the new Research Excellence Framework (REF), perhaps believing that it is reasonable to measure and evaluate research performance or perhaps hoping that institutional or individual rewards will follow. Equally, despite widespread disquiet there has been scant public airing of concerns with the system. So in the spirit of open communication and intellectual freedom that has underpinned the UK university system for hundreds of years, this brief paper provides a contribution to the debate with an analysis of the problems of the REF. The comments are largely couched in terms of business school concerns as that is where my work is based, but in many regards can be extrapolated out to other disciplines.

The REF does not measure research

This may seem a fundamental failing in a system ostensibly designed to measure research excellence, but the REF does not actually measure research. What it measures is publication in selected academic journals. The two are not synonymous. An individual can be an excellent researcher and produce interesting and important results, but still not be considered research active or as a person who is producing high quality research simply because the REF measures publications. There are many universities, departments, schools, research units and individuals who are very good at doing research, and whose research may indeed be considered of very high quality by key stakeholders and user groups in society, but who will be penalised by the REF because their particular sort of research does not match the criteria of the journals that are deemed indicators of quality. Publication is generally speaking a very different issue altogether. Excellence in terms of publication may not necessarily require a great deal of research as it is normally understood...indeed time 'wasted' doing actual research may be counter-productive if an individual wants to be seen to be research active in the REF sense. Rather, if anything the REF at best measures the ability to turn research into a certain specialised form of output. In many cases, great emphasis in the REF-admired journals is put on quantification (and methodologies) and theorisation – neither of which necessarily involve a lot of active research in the sense of going out and getting real world information. Hence, some of the most 'research active' individuals in the REF never leave the comfort of their own office. It might make sense to the people that framed the REF, but I suspect to most of the population this falls rather short of what might be expected. The recourse to four journal publications as the measure does not arise out of much by way of logic, and has everything to do with the relative ease of the process. In other words, an inadequate measure of excellence is used because it is deemed to difficult and too expensive to do engage in comprehensive and more accurate assessment.

The REF does not measure excellence

Not only does the REF fail to measure research, it fails to measure excellence also. The mechanism by which excellence is measured, through a limited number of quality journal publications is extremely narrow. To take an extreme example, it is entirely possible that an individual could win a Nobel prize for their work, and still be excluded from the REF as being non-research active if they failed to publish the requisite four journal articles! Similarly, if a journal falls outside some arbitrary definition of the boundaries of the subject then it is automatically regarded as having no intellectual merit. This is particularly bizarre because in another subject the journal in question may be regarded as of the highest possible quality, of world-leading significance or global reach. Moreover, no other measure of research excellence is offered. Hence it is perfectly possible for a research project to be a complete disaster for the funding body, it could fail to deliver what was required, it could be terribly managed, and yet it could be regarded as excellent simply if four journal publications of sufficient quality emerge as a result. The extension of the RAE into the REF of course includes a section on 'impact' which is a crude attempt to get at the relevance and utility of the research, but only for those cases that pre-qualify by virtue of the so-called quality journal articles.

The REF does not provide a framework

It is extremely difficult to see how or in what way the REF is intended to provide a framework. It is not even clear who this framework is for. It must be supposed that the REF is really an analysis tool for policy-makers who are deciding on the allocation of funding, but if that is the case it surely obscures more than it reveals given the other weaknesses discussed in this paper. Certainly the REF is of little help to researchers, either as a guide to daily life or as a tool to help shape their careers. Indeed, as discussed below there are many negative consequences that flow from the REF such that it is less of a framework and more of a straightjacket.

The REF suffers from cataclysmic reductionism

It will be apparent by now that the REF is an exceptionally narrow means to measure research activity and excellence, and in effect reduces everything to the sacred four journal articles. In the case of business schools however it is worse, because of the Association of Business Schools list. Business schools are unusual in having adopted a defined list of acceptable publications along with a ranking or scoring system. This rather spurious quantification has become the sole means by which journal quality is assessed. A journal that falls outside the ABS list is a non-journal; it does not exist for the purposes of the REF. A journal that scores a two or less is equally a non-journal because to get a high enough score to be REF-eligible an academic has to average a three or more on the ABS list from their four journal publications. This of course in effect means that the vast majority of journals are a) not worth writing for and b) presumably also not worth reading either because they contain research that is not of a high quality.

I have not done the maths, because I am a bit busy doing research, but I would guess that something like 75% of the journals of the ABS list are therefore worthless... as are of course the many thousands of academic journals not even on the list. The discipline has been reduced to a rump. It is interesting to consider the nature and character of the remaining journals. Casual observation suggests that they are a) old,

b) American and c) quantitative. These core journals tend to be long-established and in the centre of the older disciplines within the broad subject of business studies. Vast swathes of knowledge are thereby excluded because they are too recent, or because they are on the edges of the subject area. Interestingly, the list does not really grow but as more countries and institutions adopt practices akin to the REF so the supply of papers seeking publication does grow. The absolutely inevitable consequence is that fewer UK academic institutions and their staff will be published in the relevant journals simply because the competition is going to be greater. Hence, with no real loss of quality in our work, there will be a measured reduction in quality as seen in terms of leading journal articles.

The REF has multiple negative consequences

If the REF were simply a rather ineffective device for the measurement of research quality then it could perhaps be tolerable. Unfortunately it has a deeply pernicious negative impact on all aspects of contemporary academic life, to a degree that might surprise outside observers. Here are a few of the more obvious negative consequences:

The REF is divisive for active and non-active staff

It is hard to escape the feeling that the REF acts to divide staff within a faculty, school or department into 'active' and 'non-active', a feeling that is further encouraged by the various attempts to exclude certain staff in order to drive up the overall average score of the remaining staff submitted. Inevitably, universities end up scrutinising the rules and manipulating their figures to achieve the best possible result – one could hardly expect any different behaviour. The impact on staff, however, has to be one of the most negative consequences of the entire process. Essentially, at one stroke it undermines and undervalues teaching, long considered a core university activity. Non-active staff is given higher teaching loads and more administrative work, thereby increasing the perception of being second-rate citizens.

The REF encourages work-to-rule mentality

The REF rule is very simple: get your four high grade journal publications and that is it. University life is of course massively wider than that, and depends upon the self-motivation of staff to go beyond a narrow concept of the job. The REF encourages a pragmatic self-interested minimalism for individuals, and is a further step to over-pedantic micro-management by university administrations. Academics may increasingly be asking themselves why do anything if it is not REF rewarded? All those other tasks might get in the way of getting the precious four journal papers written. Why sit on any committees? Why attend degree award ceremonies? Why meet the students for a glass of wine at a reception? Why bother about poor teaching scores? The pre-eminence afforded to the REF is such that all other issues pale into insignificance compared with it.

The REF strangles innovation

Research used to be about risk. The point was, it was more or less a venture into the unknown, an exploration with uncertain outcomes and inevitably a given number of failures along the way. The REF is part of a wider process of risk-averse research funding whereby the answer should be known before the question is even asked. Indeed I have myself been advised to work backwards from the 'quality' journal to

the research proposal, thereby tailoring a piece of research only to meet the requirements of a specific journal. This strange form of horse-before-cartism is the logical result of the reification of a select number of journals and of defining research as publication. I was recently at a presentation from an academic from Taiwan, whose entire research career was based on stepping up the ladder of journal ratings. The intrinsic interest and value of the research was entirely absent from this depressingly instrumentalist account of life on the modern research frontier. Only baroque innovation is permitted, elaborations of ever-decreasing utility within the narrow confines of the discipline that can find a home in the core journals.

The REF ossifies disciplines

If anything were to reinforce the retreat into the bastions of the discipline, and the myopic stumble up the ivory tower of irrelevance, then it must be the REF. Clearly the REF already favours certain parts of the discipline over others, and of course therefore militates against most cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary work. For those engaged in the study of subjects that lack a clear disciplinary 'home', such as sustainability, this retreat is particularly frustrating. Such comments often also apply to emergent disciplines and novel theories, ironically arising out of real innovation in the research frontier. Proponents of new sciences have to fight for recognition at the best of times, but are particularly handicapped by the REF.

The REF discourages productivity

Ironically, some of the greatest performing of academics in REF terms are actually under-counted because of the imposed limit of only four publications. In this sense, the REF of course fails once again to measure real quality. Putting this problem to one side, however, it is also apparent that the process actively discourages productivity, even in the narrowest of terms relating to academic journals. There is scant reward within the REF for going beyond four publications. Why not reward over-achievers by putting all their publications in? Why not use a weighting system such that one top quality publication ranked as worth four points is equal to four publications ranked as worth one point? In fact, other organisations within academic life but not the REF use a much more holistic and inclusive approach to measurement. Whether it be the ESRC looking at the performance of their investments in research centres or indeed university promotion committees it is universally accepted that while academic publications are important, they are not the sole indicator of relative worth. This discouragement of productivity is particularly unfortunate given that the public purse is under increasing pressure to deliver (and prove it has delivered) increased value for money. It is also unfortunate for many universities and their staff, where productivity has gone up significantly over the years.

The REF discourages engagement and the social relevance of research and expertise

Interestingly, the REF in so far as it works seeks to measure research excellence. This is a rather different quality to that of expertise. Expertise represents a deep body of knowledge and understanding built up by years of study, engagement in the subject, teaching, practice and of course research. Expertise therefore is a thing that requires to be nurtured, gestated over the course of a career and hopefully culminating in a degree of wisdom, insight and experience that can make a genuinely useful contribution to society in multiple ways. In many respects, this is the traditional scope of an academic career in which a lifetime of work would culminate in a magnum opus (rather in the manner of Darwin and his work on evolution). The REF has nothing to

contribute to this vision, or any means to reward those who take their expertise into the wider world and thereby contribute genuine social relevance. If one word were to sum up the academic agenda outside the REF in the last ten years it would surely be 'engagement' and yet none of this activity is seen as contributing to research excellence.

The REF discourages collaborative writing with ones colleagues

The equation is simple. A paper co-authored with somebody from outside ones own academic institution can be counted by both authors. On the other hand, a paper co-authored with somebody from within ones own department has to be allocated to one author or the other, not to both. Colleagues who research together and, inevitably, write together therefore have to produce twice as much. This sort of distortion has absolutely nothing to do with quality, and everything to do with the way in which the rules are constructed. If two authors write four papers over the required time period, and then just before the REF one of the authors leaves for another institution, then overnight the number of quality journal publications apparently doubles because both are able to count them. While there is nothing wrong with cross-institution collaboration, it seems perverse that collaboration within an institution should be penalised unless that was intended.

The REF impact measure does not measure impact

In view of previous criticisms of the RAE being too narrow and academic, the new REF has apparently taken on a weighting that reflects 'impact'. Except of course, it does not; or only does so in such a way as to reinforce the obsession with the four journal articles. 'Impact' in this sense means that a piece of research must be published in a leading academic journal, and then be traced to observable and measurable take-up by stakeholders. Of course this must sometimes happen. Yet in reality impact occurs in many ways, maybe tangential to research, maybe in parallel with research. Outcomes may be entirely unexpected and may occur a long time later...one only has to consider the invention of the laser to realise that sometimes an innovative piece of research has little or no immediate application, but comes to be of huge importance later. This of course is one reason why Nobel prizes tend to be awarded late into an individual's career; it takes a lifetime sometimes to judge the true scope and impact of some work.

The REF is locked in an outdated vision of academic life

One of the better features of working within an ESRC-funded research centre is the very broad view taken of academic life in general and research in particular. The approach of key performance indicators (KPIs) that are inclusive of all staff is a much more honest and comprehensive judgement that allows for the fact that certain staff may excel in certain areas. In other words, the KPI approach offers a vision that is both inherently more diverse and more democratic, while simultaneously allowing a high degree of quantification. Outputs from research NOT considered by the REF include the following:

- Books, which actually have a tendency to be more cited than papers. The average academic paper is cited less than three times. A major research book is a real indicator of a substantive body of knowledge arising from the programme of research.

- Chapters in books. Often these arise as contributions to an emergent field and are therefore also an indicator of research activity. While they are not necessarily peer reviewed, there is usually some form of quality control process with the editors and publishers.
- High quality academic journal publications outside the field. As noted above, these are not counted in the REF but can be counted with the ERSC KPI system.
- Conference papers. These are generally highly variable in quality and scope, but participation at significant research conferences is part of the academic knowledge dissemination and exchange process.
- Innovative outputs (webinars, etc.). Inevitably, the REF is locked into a quaintly historic view of publication and knowledge transfer that completely fails to capture the richness of available media today.
- Government / client reports. As noted above, expertise is not rewarded in the REF and hence these demonstrations of practical application of research are not recognised, despite constituting a vital element of social relevance and engagement.
- Policy advice / committee work. As with client reports, work on committees or reviewing policy proposals is a matter of expertise rather than research per se, and yet the two are closely linked.
- Industry / professional publications. These are really regarded as cheap journalism under the REF. This stance ignores the skill required to bring what is often esoteric research knowledge into practice fields, and also ignores the important contribution to society that such publications make.
- Industry conferences. As with industry publications.
- Seminars and other dissemination events. There are multiple ways to bring the findings of research to the wider world, from workshops in schools to management training seminars. These are often more than one-way communications. As with other engagement activities, there is a two-way flow of information, insight and understanding that enlivens research, sharpens its relevance and helps ensure applicability.
- Exhibitions. Events such as photographic exhibitions or Social Science Week are vital for bringing the work of academics into the public domain and for testing the 'quality' of research in a more public forum compared with the rather safe world of peer reviewed academic journals.
- Media appearances. These are critical as a means of establishing expertise and credibility in the wider world, and hence serve the twin purpose of promoting and disseminating research, while simultaneously laying the foundations of acceptance for the next phase of research.
- Action research. The REF ignores a key trend in recent years - that of the encouragement of action research, where the researcher is actively engaged with and part of the subject of research in a continuous and inter-active manner. In contrast, the implicit model in the REF is strictly linear: research is done, then it is published, then an impact is made on the (passive) recipients of research.

The REF is a waste of money

If I had the time I would do more research on the subject of how much money is spent upon the REF. It has become an industry in its own right, generating full-time jobs for

submission manipulators to sculpt their departmental efforts. Large numbers of senior academics are engaged in measuring the performance of their peers and then compiling their judgements. There is even, ironically, a growing number of academic journal publications on the subject. Every pound spent administrating, measuring and quantifying within the REF is money that could be spent on actual research. If it actually worked this would not be so bad. Unfortunately it is such a chronic failure that it apparently only remains in currency because too much political capital has been invested in it, and to do anything else is too difficult. Neither of these are good reasons to carry on with a system that has so many flaws.

Dr Peter Wells is a Reader at Cardiff Business School and a member of the ESRC-funded BRASS Centre and of the Centre for Automotive Industry Research. Since the last RAE (end of 2007) he has published one authored book, seven academic journal papers, three contributions to edited works, six management reports in the public domain, 51 professional journal articles, seven academic conference papers, eight industry conference papers, chaired three webinars, and had 12 internet publications. He has also contributed to a research project for Greenpeace International on carbon emissions from cars in Europe. He has acted as a reviewer for the ESRC, many academic journals and the International Energy Agency 2009 forecast. He has been quoted as an expert on the automotive industry by many newspapers and magazines including The New York Times, International Herald Tribune, Economist, Berliner Zeitung, Wall Street Journal (and Asian edition) and even the Journal da Comarca, Palmital, Brazil. He has similarly made many media appearances for television and radio, in the UK and beyond. He is unlikely to be considered research active in the next REF.