

Reconfiguring research in New Zealand: education, politics and performativity

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Introduced a decade ago, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) has had a substantial impact on research in New Zealand universities. The PBRF now provides the primary means for supporting research in tertiary education institutions, having replaced a system where funding was tied to student numbers. The PBRF is based on the principle of peer review, with expert panels in twelve different disciplinary groupings assigned the task of grading evidence portfolios (EPs) submitted by individual researchers. EPs comprise three main sections: (i) a list of research outputs (books, articles, conference papers, and so on), four of which are nominated by the researcher as his or her best; (ii) a section on ‘Peer Esteem’; and (iii) a component for ‘Contributions to the Research Environment’. The weightings in determining the final assessment are 70 % for the ‘outputs’ section, with 15 % each for the other two parts. In addition to the review of EPs via the quality evaluation exercise (accounting for 60 % of the total PBRF funding allocation), participating institutions and organisations are assessed on the basis of research degree completions and external research income. Three quality evaluation rounds—in 2003, 2006 (a partial round) and 2012—have been completed to date.

Seddon and her colleagues have noted that, under Australia’s Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative, research in Education has been assessed as ‘below world standard’ (Seddon et al. 2012, p. 5). Education has also received a comparatively low subject area ranking in the latest round of the PBRF: 34th out of 42 (Tertiary Education Commission 2013, Appendix A, p. 89, Section 11). From the beginning, one of the key stated aims of the PBRF was to improve the quality of research in New Zealand. According to the Tertiary Education Commission, this goal is being achieved: ‘The measured research quality of the sector has increased over time: the new average quality score ... in 2012 is 4.66 compared to 4.40 in 2006 and 4.30 in 2003’ (p. 7). There was little change in the average quality score for Education

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between 2003 and 2006 (in fact, there was a small decline during this period), but a significant improvement has been made between 2006 and 2012 (Appendix A, p. 89, Section 28). Nonetheless, when considered in relation to other subject areas and other disciplinary panels, Education has consistently ranked near the bottom (Appendix A, p. 89, Section 9; Appendix B, p. 90, Sects. 7–9). What are we to make of this?

‘Quality’ has been a tertiary education policy buzzword under both National and Labour governments over the last decade in New Zealand (see, for example, Ministry of Education 2006, 2009), but appeals to this much overused and often ill-defined notion mask deeper changes at work in the reconfiguration of research and researchers. These have been felt especially keenly in Education, where, one-by-one, all of the former stand-alone teachers’ colleges in New Zealand have been amalgamated with universities. The first such amalgamation occurred in the early 1990s and the last in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century. This has been, in part, a shift from a strong practitioner culture to an environment where research is expected to be an integral part of the job. Some who worked in teachers’ colleges were already active in research but many others saw themselves as teachers first and foremost. Those in the latter category often drew on research findings to inform their teaching, and sometimes conducted informal research via their classroom activities, but seldom published in international academic journals or gained large research contracts or supervised doctoral students. In the more recently amalgamated institutions in particular, considerable effort has been devoted to strengthening research and intellectual cultures, not merely as a means to improve PBRF scores but as part of a broader commitment to the value of Education as a subject in research universities. This is, however, a process that cannot be rushed; transitions of this kind can take decades, and performance-based research assessment systems will not wait for such long-term change to occur.

The conversion of research activity into the language of outputs and itemised lists under the PBRF makes the assessment process more efficient, more easily translatable into numbers that can be used to rank and compare performances (Roberts 2013). The PBRF fosters a spirit of competition and productivity. It provides a means for more directly monitoring and disciplining under-performers. Under the PBRF, Education becomes one of those under-performing domains of university study and is punished for this (Smith & Jesson 2005). The PBRF turns research into a marketplace—not of ideas, but of saleable commodities (cf. Lyotard 1984). The practice of aggressive ‘branding’ and marketing that has chewed up such substantial sums of institutional money since the late 1990s is now a taken-for-granted element of tertiary education life (Roberts & Peters 2008). But with the PBRF, researchers are given every incentive to see *themselves* as commodities with an exchange value in a highly competitive tertiary education world.

Unlike some other performance-based research assessment systems, the PBRF takes the individual researcher as the unit for analysis. Researchers receive a rating ranging from ‘A’ for exceptional, world-class performance, to ‘R’, designating insufficient research activity to warrant a C grade (the level at which funding begins). ‘A’ grades are rare (fewer than 10 % of Education academics have achieved them in any round of the PBRF), but those who are awarded them are at liberty to market themselves on the basis of their rating. The researcher can thus

become a kind of academic entrepreneur (cf. Ozga 1998), armed with a portable mark of quality, on the basis of which he or she can better compete for jobs, research contracts, promotions, and the like. Equally, those who are awarded 'R' grades (initially interpreted as 'research inactive') must live with the 'shame' this brings—and researchers in Education have been particularly vulnerable to this in institutions that had recently undergone amalgamation. Academic staff originally appointed to positions not requiring research were, following a merger with a university, expected to compete with those who had long track records as researchers. In many cases, such staff did not have doctoral degrees, and some did not have masters level qualifications.

A key finding in the *Living in a 2.2 World* report on Australia's research assessment process is that the ERA is reframing 'differently anchored relationships, social categories, and understandings of educational research'. The ERA, Seddon and her colleagues conclude, 'is driving institutional changes that affect priorities and resourcing of educational research ...' (Seddon et al. 2012, p. 26). New Zealand educational researchers can learn a great deal from the report. Gaining a clearer picture of the topography of educational research is necessary in New Zealand, as it was in Australia. The report also demonstrates the significance of tensions between the framing of educational research for assessment purposes (using Field of Research codes) and the actual practices and commitments of educationists in their different academic organisational units. More broadly, the report highlights the importance of exploring changing locations and patterns of knowledge building in educational research communities. Finally, the report allows educationists in New Zealand to see how and why strategic enhancements to research capacity will be needed. New Zealand education academics are well aware of this in their own contexts but there is further work to be done on what this means for research leaders in the field.

In some respects, the PBRF works against optimal, coherent development of the educational research sector. There are few incentives in a system driven by the principle of competition for senior researchers to work collaboratively in sharing ideas for the overall improvement of educational research in New Zealand. Having said that, organisations such as the New Zealand Association for Research in Education have made some headway in seeking to traverse institutional boundaries and encourage cooperation and dialogue between leading educational researchers. But the barriers to collegiality and the growth of a sense of collective research commitment go well beyond the PBRF. Ranking systems, both within and between nations, are now a key feature of the international higher education landscape (Marginson 2007) and cannot be ignored. They have a bearing on what comes to count as worthwhile knowledge, and they influence where and how academics and postgraduate students choose to undertake their research. That such systems demand careful scrutiny and critique is apparent to most educational researchers, but there is a need for ongoing investigation in getting to grips with the way such rankings are changing patterns of institutional activity across the globe.

With the PBRF having been in place for considerably longer than the ERA, some trends that may become more marked in Australia in the future are already fully evident in New Zealand. The face of Education as a subject for academic study has been significantly influenced by the PBRF. The PBRF plays an important role in

determining who will be hired to new positions in Education in universities. It is now virtually impossible to gain employment as an academic in Education without good prospects of earning a funded PBRF grade (C, B or A). Priorities for funding new research initiatives are often set at least partly on the basis of PBRF-related criteria: e.g., the ability to attract external research income and research students, together with the likelihood that high status publications and the like will be produced. Those new to research have been forced to adapt quickly to the demands of a performance-driven research regime, or risk losing their jobs. The high-powered ‘research team’ has become the standard for building intellectual connections with other colleagues; lengthy, meaningful, open-ended conversations about areas of mutual research interest are, if not a thing of the past, certainly viewed by some as inefficient—perhaps even pointless—in today’s fast-paced, highly organised research world. The PBRF process alters not only the way we think about research but also the way we think about ourselves. Continuing critical reflection on the ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political implications of the scheme (and others like it) will be a necessary but difficult task in the years ahead.

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