

Evaluating quality practice-led research: still a moving target?

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts the evaluative regimes of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Australia's (forthcoming) Research Quality Framework (RQF). It considers their foreseeable futures; and the fact that each framework is scheduling a 2008 data collection and evaluation. Interestingly, the shared commitment to evaluating the quality of research has, in both countries, opened a space for consideration of 'non-traditional research outputs', including those created by practice-led research in the Creative and Performing Arts. In the UK this recognition has led to the inclusion of practice-led research in the RAE since 1996; in Australia such recognition is about to happen for the first time in a sustained and rigorous way.

Paper

This paper ties somewhat loosely into the theme of the BEAP-CADE conferences by arguing that the quality of practice-led research is the still centre of a hotly-contested debate around the recognition of practice-led methods as a way to achieve rigorous research and robust outputs. Whilst people generally agree that practice-led research has quality and produces new knowledge – and this is implicit in the recognition of practice-led research projects as appropriate vehicles for some higher degrees by research – practice-led research has often been dismissed as not generally contributing to research quantum. This paper takes the quality of some practice-led research as the point of stillness in the eye of the storm which is raging about appropriate policies and practices when it comes to evaluating the quality of creative arts research in the UK and Australia.

Both Australia and the UK stand poised at the brink of a major assessment of the quality of research funded in each country by the public purse. In the UK, after 20+ years of qualitative assessment, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is operating for the last time in its current form. It is about to be replaced by 'lighter touch' assessment as a way of answering arguments about the cost of the RAE process, assessed as GBP 77M (RQF 2006) and, partly as a result of that cost, the temporal gap between assessments and a perceived lack of responsiveness to changing circumstances. As an indication of this unresponsiveness, the most recent RAE was in 2001, with funding implications flowing from 2002 through to the present day. The world – and research about the world, its arts and its cultures – has changed dramatically in the course of those years yet the funding decisions made on the basis of the 2001 RAE continue to resonate throughout the UK's higher education system. A more incremental regime which responds appropriately to changes in circumstances has now been promised.

The RAE and the RQF

For the UK, the experience of the RAE was to a large extent one of make-or-break. Members of Panel O, for example, protest strongly that their role was simply to assess quality: they had no say in the funding model that eventually flowed from the deliberations. For institutions in the UK – and in their footsteps, in Australia – this creates huge uncertainty. Is it better to include a larger cohort of staff and outputs for evaluation, or is a smaller, higher-quality submission the way to go? In the UK, the answer turned out to be 'smaller/higher quality'. No funding was made available to institutions rated at 3 (where 5 and 5* were deemed to be internationally excellent and 4 was deemed to display "national excellence in virtually all activity with some evidence of international

excellence”). As the Vice-Chancellor of Newcastle commented after the outcomes and the subsequent white paper (Edwards, 2004):

It is quite possible, and indeed there are many examples, of individual departments being rated Grade 4 which actually contain a larger number of staff who are internationally excellent than a small department rated 5. The White Paper is wrong to describe a unit scoring 4 in the 2001 RAE as a “non-research intensive department”.

In the event, 80% of Panel O funding went to the 5 and 5* rated departments with the remaining 20% shared by departments rated 4 (Brown 2007). Overnight, a number of highly productive and well-thought-of UK research departments, judged to be nationally excellent, lost all their government research funding. Five years later it has not returned.

Times in Britain are changing, however. UK Sciences – and this will look familiar to Australian academics – face a funding model post-RAE 2008 based on an annual collection of data, driven primarily on a quantitative and indicative basis using a combination of: bibliometrics; research income; and graduations of higher degree by research students. In fact, the UK is moving quickly towards the research evaluation protocols that Australia seems keen to relinquish. When I discussed this with Paul Hubbard, a policy maker in the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), and the manager of RAE1996 (Hubbard 2007), he commented that the mission of the RAE had been achieved: quality was the first and foremost thought when it came to assessing research and this would continue to be the case, even when the funding drivers changed to reflect cruder, quantitative, evaluations. According to Hubbard, the conclusion that had been drawn was that UK research can now capitalise upon success and move towards a less costly, more frequently utilised, evaluation system.

The UK’s Arts and Humanities researchers, however, were less keen to embrace convenience. Instead, they argued successfully that bibliometric data were much less appropriate and reliable for their research outputs than they were for the scientists’. Some UK research areas consequently have until 2013 to come up with a ‘lighter touch’ formula for the measurement of quality which – according to opinion leaders such as Brown – is likely to be a system of “peer review informed by metrics”. Peer review will remain important given that the acid test of quality research is that it achieves one or more of:

- The production of new knowledge;
- The recovery of lost knowledge;
- Testing the limitations of existing knowledge;
- Popularising complex knowledge and
- Building a knowledge infrastructure (Brown 2007).

Metrics may help evaluate quality research, but peer review remains indispensable when it comes to gauging the expanding of knowledge.

The UK RAE and the Australian Research Quality Framework (RQF) systems are both described as being future-driven: not retrospectively valuing past behaviours, but identifying and rewarding the seeds of potential. The University of Newcastle’s response to the UK Government’s White Paper (Edwards 2004) indicates how fraught the judgement calls can be, however. “Many units graded 4 in RAE 2001 may have structured their submission because they consciously flagged the high quality younger researchers being developed as future research leaders. Highlighting this succession planning was particularly encouraged by HEFCE”. The implication is that these institutions might have scored better had they excluded their fledgling leaders and relied instead upon the established

old guard. The politics of the submission are clearly crucial: following guidelines is no guarantee of playing the best possible game, especially when not all the rules and interpretations are publicised at the outset.

There is a significant difference between the RAE and RQF systems in terms of the information available to support this kind of political decision making, however. The “panel criteria and working methods” for Panel O of the RAE (covering sub-panels 63—7: Art and Design; History of Art, Architecture and Design; Drama, Dance and the Performing Arts; Communication, Cultural and Media Studies; and Music [RAE 2006]) run to 90 pages and were released in January 2006, after extensive consultation, for a data collection deadline in 2008. In contrast, the full guidelines for the RQF Panel 13 (Creative Arts, Design and Built Environment including Performing Arts, Visual Arts and Crafts and Cinema, electronic arts and multimedia: RQF Panels 2006) are not expected to be released *for consultation* until at least July 2007 for a data collection deadline of 30 April 2008 (FAQ 2007).

As can be appreciated, the unknowns facing academics in the UK seem akin to certainties-set-in-concrete in comparison with the fluidity of the situation in Australia. The yet-to-be-determined issues concerning the RQF are legion, and for a number of reasons:

Firstly, the RQF has had two starts to life. Education Minister Brendan Nelson set the ball rolling in May 2004 and recruited the UK’s Sir Gareth Roberts to head up the ‘Expert Advisory Committee’ and develop the detail of the quality framework. Not surprisingly – given that Sir Gareth had led the UK Government’s 2003 review of Research Assessment – the model that evolved was closer in feel to the UK’s RAE than to any alternative model. As it so happened, the RQF Expert Advisory Committee report was handed down at the same time that Minister Nelson moved to Defence; and the Education portfolio was transferred to Julie Bishop. Minister Bishop commissioned an ‘implementation’ phase and the RQF ‘Development Advisory Group’ was formed, chaired by Australia’s Chief Scientist, Dr Jim Peacock. To those affected, this new committee rewrote many matters that had seemed settled, and put the whole structure into contention once more.

Secondly, as well as being contested ground within the ruling Coalition party, the RQF has become a political football between the Coalition and its opposition, the Labor Party. Indeed, the Labor Party has said they will scrap the RQF if they win office. Since there is an election due before the end of the year, and since the opposition has recently been leading in the polls, a change of government is a significant possibility. Even so, the Labor Party has stopped short of supporting a return to the status quo (where university research is funded in proportion to publications, grants, patents and higher degree by research completions). Instead, Labor has indicated that they too wish to assess the quality and impact of publicly-funded research as part of the allocation of future monies: just not through the use of the RQF. Unfortunately, with a January 2008 deadline for an ‘Expression of Intention to Submit’ for each RQF portfolio (and there are nine possible such portfolios in ECU’s Faculty of Education and Arts alone), and with those portfolios due to be lodged for evaluation between March and April 2008, most of the preparatory work will have been completed before the outcome of the election is known, and prior to any possibly-new Education Minister calling the process to a halt.

Thirdly, as previously indicated, the guidelines for the RQF are a work in progress. At the time of writing (May 2007) the RQF Specifications remain “in draft form until the completion of sector consultation, Reference Committee endorsement and Ministerial approval” (FAQ 2007). Government-funded RQF pre-implementation trials are underway, supposedly to test the RQF submission guidelines. The RQF guidelines were to be examined in the context of complex areas,

such as claims for the quality of non-traditional research outputs; and/or cross-institutional research groupings. The trials were due to be completed in early May. As it happens, the trial timelines have been extended: their original timeframe has run through to completion without the draft specifications (which they were designed to test) becoming available. Once the trials are finished and the results known, the RQF specifications will be refined and offered for comment. The process promises to become protracted. (This is one of the few certainties in a morass of unknowns.)

Fourthly, the RAE has – until now – continued unchallenged under both major UK political parties, and there has been a confident expectation of survival or adaptation within accepted (and consultative) frameworks. There was general agreement that the RAE could learn from history and be improved with each iteration. Given that ‘quality research’ has been assessed in the UK for two decades or more, and the higher education sector has engaged in a spirited dialogue with the government and the funding bodies as the assessment exercise evolved, it is hard to find parallels with the current RQF scenario.

Fifthly, the RQF aspires to judge not only quality, but impact (‘a world first’: but why has it not been attempted before?). The system also has an each way bet on quantity as well. The evidence portfolio, as near as can be deduced in the absence of firm guidelines, is ‘cluster specific’. Each cluster tends to be located in one institution – although cross-institutional clusters are one of the areas to be investigated in the pre-implementation trials – and is reported upon in terms of RFCD codes (research fields, courses and disciplines). In this context it is almost irrelevant that these codes are accepted to be entirely out of date (excluding as they do such new areas of scholarship as ‘Creative Writing’) and are currently under review by the Australian Bureau of Statistics with the results of consultations due in 2009 (CHASS 2007). In any case, every research cluster creates an evidence portfolio which includes quantitative data on the number of researchers involved in the group, grants won, research students graduated, dollar value of competitive grant income, etc and a 10-page statement from which the impact of the cluster will be judged. This will largely be done through the details of up to four impact-related case studies. Additional to this context statement, each researcher associated fully with the cluster will list all their research outputs for the data collection period (2001—6) as well as, assuming that the researcher is ‘RQF-returnable’ (definition and implication still not crystal clear), the four best-quality outputs for that individual. In combination with the other quality returnable-outputs, these four pieces of work will be assessed using an accessible digital repository (requiring a whole separate set of ongoing trails and evaluations) to determine the panel’s quality judgement relating to the cluster. There are separate and even more complex rules for researchers who contribute to two clusters (only recently established as the maximum permissible spread).

Given these many issues and concerns about the RQF, it is to be expected that Australian academics are despondent. This might especially be the case with those from the 29 universities that garner approximately one quarter of government research funding (as opposed to the ‘Group of 8’ which receives the lion’s share). There is extensive anecdotal evidence of a flight of research talent from the ‘Group of 29’ to the ‘Group of 8’. The poor effectiveness of anti-poaching regulations that try to prevent richer institutions capturing the productive research staff of less-well-funded universities is only one talking point, however. It seems that many academics are interested in a process that allows potential pockets of research excellence to claim recognition – to some extent, without regard for their location but upon their own merits. Resilience is an unpredictable quality and the interest in the unfolding RQF process is tangible. It is not only that the RQF is proving difficult to treat reverentially (and can thus sometimes be construed as fun): there is something exciting for many of us about discussing the nature of research, and what constitutes quality and impact. Interestingly, and of particular relevance to CADE, the debates are particularly intense around the the methodological framework of practice-led research; the research outputs of Visual, Performing

and Creative Arts and the RQF's inclusion of Panel 13: Creative Arts, Design and Built Environment.

Practice-led research in an RQF environment

Comparatively, Australia lags behind equivalent nations in the acceptance and treatment of practice-led research (Green 2004, 2006). Apart from the evaluation of Creative Doctorates (typically comprising a thesis that takes the form of a creative work plus an exegesis or written exposition), there is no widespread experience within Australia's academic community of the qualitative assessment of research outputs of practice-led methodologies. In Australia, practice-led research is not constructed as contributing to universities' research performance. Instead, research performance in the tertiary sector has been overwhelmingly assessed via quantification of publications and research income. The tiny proportion of central funding flowing from the successful completion of higher degrees by research that use practice-led methods has a negligible impact on the sector. The RQF "offers an immense opportunity for those who advocate – and those who use – practice-led research. For the first time in Australian research history, practice-led research has been allocated an arena in which its unique approaches and advantages can be appropriately explored" (Green 2007, p. 5).

Although promising, this situation stands in stark contrast to that in the UK where the RAE has included practice-led research outputs since 1996. UK systems have been evolved to develop and refine the handling of these non-traditional outputs and additional funding has been made available that has effectively hot-housed conceptual work on the methodological rigour of practice-led research (eg PARIP 2006). Further, plans for the treatment of practice-led research in the 2008 data collection (RAE 2006) are well advanced and informed by feedback on the 2001 data (RAE 2001). The take-home message is that the UK has developed robust confidence in practice-led research methods to the extent that 47% of eligible UK Art and Design academics made submissions to the 2001 RAE – more than double the proportion characterising other disciplines (Rust & Mottram 2007). Such inclusivity in research culture encourages the promotion and recognition of diverse research methods, projects and outputs. In turn, practice-led perspectives enhance the strength and vitality of UK research.

At the point that practice-led research outputs were first included, UK higher education institutions already had 10 years' experience of this kind of qualitative research assessment (the Research Selectivity Exercises in 1986 and 1989 preceded the RAE), so the demands on the sector to develop new ways of validating research were incremental. The submission of practice-led work for assessment in 1996 allowed continuous learning via: exposure to accessible repositories of a range of practice-led research claims; the feedback of panels of expert reviewers; and, the refinement and restructuring of research proposals and practice to address the required indicators. Even so, 5 of the 7 areas identified by HEFCE as areas of research weakness requiring additional resources for development fall within the RQF's Panel 13 discipline areas of the Creative Arts, Design and Built Environment (Cunningham 2007).

There is an important difference between the work to be done for the RQF Panel 13, and that required for Panels 1-12. Participants in Panels 1-12 already share accepted protocols for the recording and evaluating of research outputs falling within their relevant RFCD codes: the current endeavour for leaders in these research communities is to re-visit assessment practices within the context of the RQF. In contrast, academics in Panel 13 have no shared experience of peer review of their practice-led outputs and need to develop these understandings in tandem with establishing ways in which these protocols can be related to the RQF framework. Consequently, the RQF provides an Australian context in which the issues raised by the evaluation and recognition of practice-led research become pressing and critical.

All Australian academics active in quality research are engaged in learning about, shaping (and second-guessing) the RQF process over the 2008—14 period. (Assuming continuous Coalition government, 2014 is currently gazetted as the second Australian RQF round: Bishop 2006.) Academics involved in practice-led research will also be carrying out a parallel engagement with issues relating to the validity, rigour, recording and assessment of practice-led research outputs. Indeed, this discussion is well under way (for example, the Carrick Institute has funded some research concerning teaching and assessment in the area, and the Hatched '07 Arts Research Symposium partly addressed these issues [Green 2007]).

In terms of Electronic and other Performing and Visual Arts in particular, and practice-led research in general, academics start from a situation where fifteen years of Australian discussion and engagement (eg Richards 1995, Strand 1998, Wissler 1998, Wissler *et al* 2004) have failed to get non-traditional outputs characteristic of research in creative fields measured and rewarded as part of the university sector's research output. Australian academics are being asked to participate in the evaluation of the quality and impact of research that has been nationally constructed as 'not really' being cost effective to measure.

The use of peer review to assess practice-led research constitutes a huge investment of resources in evaluative processes. Indeed, this was the primary reason given by the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee for the non-inclusion of such outputs in previous Department of Education, Science and Training assessments of research quantum. The significance and importance of the qualitative assessment of research is evident in the extensive changes made between each round of the UK's RAE. Since 2006 (RAE 2006), following discussion with the sector, a 12-point evaluation framework is to be applied to all research outputs – traditional and practice-led – in the Creative and Performing Arts areas. The evaluation framework is driven by the 70% weighting to be applied to the outputs themselves (RAE 2006, p. 20), but also addresses research environment and esteem:

Research outputs	Significance	Originality	Rigour	70%
Research environment	Strategy	People	Structure	20%
Esteem indication	Recognition	Influence	Benefit	10%

In a further departure from the 2001 RAE, higher education institutions will not be allocated a single grade, but will be assessed according to performance against a continuum of four benchmarks: world leading; internationally excellent; internationally recognised and nationally recognised. The upward revision of these standards ('internationally excellent' was the highest accolade in 2001) is attributed to the high quality of work offered for evaluation in the last RAE round where over half of the inputs assessed in these fields were judged to reach international excellence. Results for both Research outputs and Research environment will be represented by a continuum (eg 30% world leading, 30% internationally excellent, 20% internationally recognised, 20% nationally recognised etc), whereas the Esteem indication will be assigned a single value. These kinds of refinements are unimaginable in the current RQF context.

Haseman has argued (2006) that practice-led research constitutes a new methodology alongside quantitative and qualitative research. Such debates will have far more purchase once Australian researchers have expended the work required to integrate practice-led research within the panoply of accepted research methods. With a world looking for new answers to established research questions, and with pressing requirements for developing integrative and transformative understandings in social, cultural and environmental contexts, we cannot afford to ignore practice-led research methods. Indeed, it maybe that the kinds of perspectives that can be generated from

practice-led approaches might have disciplinary impacts well outside the certain value to be derived by Creative and Performing Arts research clusters.

The stillness of humanity amidst the hustle, bustle and speed of the electronic – the motivating theme for the BEAP/CADE conference – may yet prove a useful metaphor for the stillness of the qualitative evaluation of practice-led research outputs amidst the confusion and competing demands of the RQF. We can only hope that we will not still be chasing a moving target this time next year.

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