

Risky custodians of trust: Instruments of quality in higher education

Ravinder Sidhu
University of Queensland
r.sidhu@uq.edu.au

This article inquires into the “calculative practices” that are used to regulate quality in higher education. After providing a historical snapshot of the antecedents of quality regimes, I discuss university ranking systems (league tables) and the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise. I ask two questions: first, what do the visibilities of quality conceal, and second, what possible effects are quality regimes having on notions of “proper” academic identity? That the quality agenda in higher education is tied to a collective national and institutional aspiration to be internationally competitive is generally recognised as an outcome of neoliberalisation. I argue that there is a need to go beyond considering neoliberalism as an ideology imposed from above. Rather, the techniques aimed at building a competitive, dynamic and accountable higher education system in countries like Australia and the UK are premised on creating flexible identities for academic professionals, using their powers of freedom to further their individual desires, self-interest and self-advancement. This has consequences for the knowledge cultures fostered by higher education institutions.

[Key words: universities, quality, governmentality, neoliberal technologies, performance measurement]

INTRODUCTION

In the two decades since the quality juggernaut swept through the education world, the disciplinary effects of quality systems have been associated with limitations in autonomy and academic freedom, bureaucratisation and threats to the public good responsibilities of universities (Currie et al., 2003; Henkel, 2005; Morley, 2005; Shore & Wright, 1999). Recent policy shifts have seen the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK and the introduction of a revised research performance initiative, Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) in place of the Research Quality Framework (RQF). These developments would suggest the need to re-visit issues of quality and accountability in higher education. In this paper, I examine key “calculative practices” used to regulate quality in higher education. I discuss the effects of practices such as university rankings and research performance on the identities of academics and the knowledge cultures they are fostering.

The article is organised as follows. In section one I offer a historically situated sketch of key “counting and calculative” practices such as audit, benchmarking and standard-setting, which are at the heart of many contemporary quality systems. These techniques have mutated from localised processes of improvement to global technologies used for competitive and strategic advantage. Then in section two, I focus on two sets of contemporary calculative practices, university rankings and research performance measurement. I outline the problems associated with university rankings as a quality measure to determine missions, and the knowledge cultures fostered in British universities by the research performance exercise known as the RAE. As an instrument of “New Public Management” and neoliberal state building, more broadly, the RAE is revealing of

how neoliberal ideas and practices came to be embodied by individual academics, departments and universities. In section three titled “Neoliberal seduction”, I revisit the limitations associated with using existing quality mechanisms to build the research-active academic identity and the globally positioned university, arguing that if we are to resist their negative effects we need to shift analytical attention away from their disciplinary effects to the myriad ways in which they legitimise particular identities for academic staff.

Theoretically, this article has been informed by governmentality, an empirical framework which is notable for revealing the contingency of practices of governance such as the quality schemes discussed in this paper. Governmentality offers insights which are important to counter notions of inevitability and defeatism that routinely accompany pronouncements that quality management systems such as university rankings, league tables and research are “here to stay”.

CALCULATIVE PRACTICES 1: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Situating the metrological imperative

Michael Power reminds us “the urge to quantify and to measure has a long and complex history” (2004: 766). Writing from a European perspective, he locates the emergence of counting, measurement and probabilistic reasoning to the 13th century. The “metrological mood” which now defines western rationality was only loosely related to the high ideals of mathematical or scientific purity, drawing momentum instead from the social laboratories of gambling houses, markets, and merchants’ ledgers (Ibid: 766). By the 18th century the invention of more sophisticated instruments of measurement such as clocks, barometers, and thermometers created the conditions for greater emphasis on precision in measurement. In the 19th century states used various counting and classification techniques to manage populations, both those within their borders and those subject populations in colonies and protectorates. Knowledge rested on the development of “quantificatory epistemes”—objects and events were ordered in ways which suppressed their differences and measurements were applied with the aim of establishing connections between them. Practices such as surveying and mapping, for example, identified and quantified resources for exploitation. Populations once enumerated, classified and territorially using instruments, such as surveys and census, could become targets of intervention (Kalpagam, 2000).

Unlike ethnographic knowledge, which seeks to represent the uniqueness of “otherness”, statistics transform otherness into differences that can be measured and compared (Ibid: 43). Power observes, “to render something countable, a level of abstraction from specific qualities is required; categories of similarities had to be observed” (2004: 767). There is a rich body of literature about the political controversies underpinning classification schemes. Bowker and Star’s (1999) analysis of the epistemic struggles underpinning the classification of diseases is one such work. Power’s historical analysis leads him to conclude that measurement and countability are desired by those in authority long before reliable instrumentation is developed. Thus, although no reliable means existed of measuring categories such as “value added” and “operational risk”, calculative technologies such as accounting have been enlisted and reformed in the service of measuring these categories with mixed results (Ibid: 769). Measurement is given a visible and transparent public face, but this transparency is not a “natural effect of performance measurement, rather it *reflects the influence of specific epistemic communities*” (Ibid: 770, emphasis added).

So far the discussion has highlighted some of the problems that emerge with first order measurement—the institutions of classification that make counting possible and give categories their naturalness. Calculative technologies should not be regarded as neutral practices—they are shaped by forces and processes of power and knowledge. To address their shortcomings, attempts have been made to modify measurement systems so as to accommodate greater complexity and

sensitivity. Measurement has subsequently been extended to new domains, including spheres of tacit knowledge. Paradoxically, the mania for measurement means that areas once considered domains of human judgement are being colonised by metrics. In other words, “making the incommensurable commensurable”, opens up an ever-increasing set of possibilities for managerial intervention.

There are also problems associated with second order measurement or meta-measurement. Second order measurement involves the aggregation of numbers through statistical and mathematical operations of ratios and indices, such as averages, correlations, and measures of dispersions. These become part of an institutionalised policy world and end up having a life of their own (Power, 2004: 772). Second-order measures form the basis of “global” knowledges that are increasingly used to compare or benchmark organisations, countries, and regions against each other (Ibid: 772). As second order measures are normalised, they are often applied in largely unqualified forms, ending up as techniques of long-distant control between remote centres of calculation and interventions in organisations (Ibid: 772–773).

Power concludes, “Performance measurement systems function to define performance, direct management attention and induce behavioural change, rather than represent phenomena faithfully” (Ibid: 776). While acknowledging the general cultural acceptance of numbers in most aspects of everyday life, he argues for a critical role for experts:

The task of social science is to open up the black box of performance measurement systems, . . . to denaturalise them and to recover the social and political work that has gone into their . . . construction as instruments of control. (Power 2004: 778)

What follows is a brief description of two calculative techniques—benchmarking and audit—both of which now have a salient role in university life. My intention here is to adopt a nuanced approach to the quality agenda which includes recognising the “productive” possibilities it might present for individuals and organisations.

Audits: Checking for Quality

As a key technique that is used to assure quality, audit is noted for its reliance on practices of surveillance. To its defenders audit regimes provide an administrative and pragmatic transparency that make the quality of products and services visible. To its critics, audits create “managerial proceduralism” which has negative consequences for trust (Ibid: 771). Marilyn Strathern (2000) suggests that although audits are publicised by governments as instruments of accountability and trust, their meta regulatory functions mean that they are more likely to function as “rituals of verification” and “certificates of comfort”. Put simply, the audit rests on an inherent paradox: It is promoted as an instrument of accountability based on the view that auditees cannot be trusted to do their jobs but the same audited subjects are expected to be trusted to prepare honest auditable accounts of their work (Charlton, 1998; see also Shore & Wright, 1999).

Standardisation and Benchmarking: from “local” to “global” comparisons

As a calculative practice, benchmarking, essentially a technique of comparing, is noted for its reliance on performance statistics. Benchmarking is not recent; practices of comparing to identify a standard of quality can be traced to the pre-modern civilizations of Egypt, Sumeria and Rome where attempts were made to standardise and benchmark stones, wooden gouges and chariot axles (Higgins & Tamm Hallstrom, 2007; Thonhauser & Passmore, 2006). Standardisation and benchmarking gained momentum with the emergence of industrial capitalist models of production. Seeking to improve industrial efficiency, and promising to re-write relations between labour and capital, engineers such as FW Taylor and Henri Fayol used foundational knowledge from their parent discipline to contribute to the development of a new discipline—management

(Higgins & Tamm Hallstrom: 691). It can be argued then that engineering and management functioned as vanguard disciplines in facilitating global flows of knowledge on benchmarking, standardisation and performance measurement. Significantly, they exerted their effects largely through a series of horizontal linkages across industries rather than through vertical, state-driven policy associations although key events such as the two world wars and the Cold War witnessed closer steering by states of knowledge production systems.

Benchmarking and standardisation remained largely national in focus even though international standard setting bodies such as the International Standards Organisation (ISO) started to gain prominence after the Second World War. Benchmarking against international standards rose in prominence in the early 1980s, facilitated by a series of revolutionary technological changes, rapid economic integration, and the drive to liberalise trade. The prominence of competitive benchmarking and strategic benchmarking was partly facilitated by concerns in the 1980s about the decline of American competitiveness especially in relation to Japan (Larner & Le Heron, 2005). A watershed moment in global benchmarking was the move in 1970 by the ISO to go from issuing recommendations to publishing standards. Another event of significance was the 1987 publication of ISO 9000, which set in train a global trade in management standards and certification. ISO 9000 facilitated and furthered the internationalisation of labour manufacturing; it also created the conditions for the emergence of international management and accounting standards, a development which was portrayed as reducing the risks involved in strategic alliances and merges and acquisitions by firms (Higgins & Tamm Hallstrom, 2007). By the 1990s, then, benchmarking had mutated from a set of practices of *internal* comparison to enable product improvements by a firm to a set of practices that used international or global points of reference. The globalisation of competitive benchmarking which compared across industries and across nations was also enabled by university business schools, using the now universal management case study approach (Higgins & Tamm Hallstrom, 2007; Larner & Le Heron, 2004; Mattli & Buthe, 2003).

The effects of organisations like the ISO as agents of globalisation, working through nationally-situated, voluntary technical committees is the source of a small number of studies. Boli and Loya (1999) draw on a functionalist “world society” sociology to conclude that benchmarking against a universal best practice is the means for various stakeholders to achieve modernity, progress and egalitarianism. Accordingly, international standard setting and benchmarking are portrayed as an apolitical sphere, devoid of contestation and conflict. By contrast, those working from a “realist” tradition of social science consider benchmarking and standard setting as signs of the political and economic might of particular states in setting the agenda. This view is also analytically limiting especially given that global standards bodies such as the ISO base their legitimacy on consensual and voluntary participation and the offer of technically optimal solutions. Higgins and Tamm Hallstrom (2007) and Larner and Le Heron (2004), on the other hand, argue that quality assurance standards such as the the generic and abstract ISO 9000 and the management practices that they sponsor function not by encouraging better products or services but by providing the context for corporations, professionals and individuals to constantly re-make themselves according to comparative data.

Universities have played their part in benchmarking and standardisation. Some subscribe to ISO standardisations to assure stakeholders of the world-class, international status of their services. This factor and greater industry representation on university academic boards, industry liaisons including the influence of professional associations, as well as the rise of New Public Management, have contributed to the arrival of a benchmarking rationality in higher education. The ISO’s recently inaugurated Award for Higher Education Standardization recognises the contribution of universities to standardisation, a process also acknowledged by the ISO as a tool for “making world markets accessible” (ISO 2007: online). Additionally, universities subscribe to global standards and practices through their memberships of various standardising organisations,

by aligning themselves with accreditations regimes and more recently through their desire to participate in various league tables. University business schools, for example, increasingly benchmark against the standards of organisations such as the American Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business and the European Foundation for Business Management to improve their competitive positioning in an overcrowded market for business education. All of these practices can be said to contribute towards the globalisation of systems of quality.

This brief account illustrates how benchmarking has gone from a technique concerned with internal comparisons to an “aspirational technology” aimed at embedding an ethos of continuous improvement and international competitiveness. Benchmarking’s power rests on its mutability. Although it was once used to compare like with like, it is now deployed in the service of comparing “organisationally discrete and spatially disparate objects” in the service of attaining (inter)national competitiveness (Larner & Le Heron, 2004: 215). In recent times, there have been calls for global benchmarking models in higher education, the argument being that where once national regulation frameworks were adequate to govern quality, in light of student mobilities and the use of information and communication technologies to deliver education programs, there is now a need to re-scale quality mechanisms. Global referencing systems such as global university rankings are increasingly promoted by organisations like the World Bank as benchmarks for quality (Salmi & Saroyan, 2006). The assumptions underpinning this position resonate with themes from earlier debates on globalisation—the limitations of the machineries of the nation-state and the need for “readability” for a wider group of stakeholders and transparency in the global marketplace. However, many of the norms and standards labelled global are not context-less—ultimately they come from somewhere (Larner & Le Heron, 2004, 2005). For example, the “global” norms used by league tables that identify the world’s best universities are drawn from the technoscience-oriented, English-speaking, and more specifically elite American and British research-oriented universities (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). They may be appropriate benchmarks in some instances, but not in others.

To conclude, benchmarking is not a passive, or neutral technique. It shapes expectations, behaviours and values; it contributes towards the development of new organisational principles, and new professional subjectivities (Larner & Le Heron, 2004). Benchmarking resonates easily with intellectual work as it rests on a context of constant learning, and improvement. However, it risks departing from the scholarly realm when the imperative to measure comes to govern all other considerations.

Calculating Quality in Higher Education: Contemporary Practices

University Ranking Tables

National rankings of higher education institutions made their first commercial debut in 1984 in the United States when the magazine *US News and World Report* produced a “good universities” guide.

The limitations of league tables have been well studied and elaborated and will only be briefly visited here (see Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Usher & Savino, 2006). It should be stressed that some of the harshest criticisms of league tables apply to national ranking systems that have been devised by commercially-oriented media companies. Briefly, the most common flaw in national (and global rankings) is poor construct validity. League tables rarely succeed in comparing like with like given the quite significant diversity between and within institutions even if attempts are made to get as close a fit as possible, as is the case with the more reputable global rankings systems. What is concealed by these comparisons is the problem identified earlier in the paper, namely the abstraction of specific differences and construction of similarities in order to render universities rank-able. Second, league tables assign weightings in what is ultimately an arbitrary manner as no league table can take into account all quality perspectives for all interest

groups given the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in higher education. Under existing reward structures we can expect academics to rate universities for research, while students and parents will rate them for teaching, positional status and employability or graduate outcomes (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

The two most prominent worldwide university rankings are the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) developed in 2003, and the Times Higher Education Supplement's World University Rankings (THES), published in 2004. ARWU is not a holistic ranking of universities. Instead it emphasises elite science research and, in doing so, it classifies research as the single most important determinant of university reputation (Liu and Cheng, 2005). This focus is hardly accidental given that ARWU was initially devised to benchmark China's universities against world-class norms to enable them to make up for time lost as a result of the country's political upheavals. Unlike the THES which relies on data obtained from universities and from e-mail surveys, ARWU uses an index with the following weightings: citation in leading journals (20%), articles in *Science* and *Nature* (20%), number of highly cited researchers as determined by Thomson's ISI index (20%), and winners of Nobel prizes in the sciences and economics (30%) (Liu and Cheng, 2005). Why a 30 per cent weighting for Nobel laureates and then why for prizes won in the sciences/economics but not peace or literature? That China seeks to benchmark against existing indices of "excellence" instead of using its growing geopolitical and geoeconomic profile to establish different indices is also noteworthy. It suggests that the discursive practices that have underwritten the knowledge cultures of Anglo-Saxon scientific imperialism and fundamentalism are unlikely to be challenged, at least not in the short term.

Because it privileges elite science research, relying heavily on Thomson Scientific's coverage of highly cited researchers (HiCi), ARWU does not rank institutions specialising only in the Social Sciences and Humanities as well as those that specialise only in the fields of science, technology and medicine. Also as with the major media-based league tables, ARWU's rankings deploy measures of citation which privilege research conducted in the English-speaking world. Research results from the non-English speaking world do not score as high on citation rates, as they are not published in English-language journals to the same extent, conferring English-speaking universities with competitive advantage because of their language (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

In sum, there are indicators that ARWU has mutated from an instrument originally devised to provide international comparative data to further China's national development into something else. ARWU holds out ambiguous possibilities including the chances that governments of middle educational powers such as Australia will streamline research funding to create one or two national universities with global elite status. Rankings also have the potential to create the conditions for institutionalised performativity. The ARWU index is less subjective than the THES rankings (discussed below), however, like many performance measurements, it is flawed, and should not be promoted as the solution to problems of quality in higher education.

THES' World University Rankings, the other significant worldwide ranking system, compares poorly with ARWU on most indices. It privileges reputation and uses an opinion survey of academics as its methodology, giving a 40 per cent weighting to their views. At one level, this type of measurement appears positive in that it acknowledges the importance of experts in the ranking of top universities. However, given the geographic unevenness in the quality of global knowledge networks, evident in the dominance of the English-language journals and English speakers within journal editorial boards, it is inevitable then that the THES rankings assume a bias towards the English-speaking world (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). In addition, 20 per cent weightings are given to research citations per staff member (using the Thomson data base) and 20 per cent to staff-student ratios, regarded as a proxy measure for teaching quality. A 10 per cent weighting is accorded to the findings of employers; 5 per cent each for international students and

international staff. The emphasis on internationalisation is less a quality measure and rewards those institutions that are active in cross-border trade in education rather than those which have highly selective processes to attract quality international students. Marginson and van der Wende thus conclude that this composition bias favours the UK and Australia which end up with better-than-deserved rankings.

Where then can the concept of university rankings take us? The answer inevitably rests with which stakeholder responds to this question. For sections of Chinese academe benchmarking against a set of global norms creates possibilities to depoliticise research and intellectual work more generally, to reduce the influence of patronage politics and to slide away from the stranglehold of a state with a history of animosity towards intellectual freedom. Similar sentiments are expressed in countries like Malaysia where a racialised governmentality has been associated with weakening the missions of national universities. The prevailing rationality in sections of the Australian policy and higher education community is that comparative information—common data sets—are necessary to secure financial resources and legitimacy from the state, and to improve market positioning of Australian universities in a competitive global education market. As a consequence, rankings are critiqued, and thereafter suggestions are made to innovate and reform them with better measures rather than adopting the more radical alternative of abandoning rankings altogether. University rankings are thus becoming naturalised and taken for granted by epistemic communities.

The United States is associated with some of the more extreme manifestations of university league tables, “winner-takes-all” markets—those which allocate substantial rewards to a small and select group at the top end of the market (Frank & Cook, 1996). League tables have consolidated and strengthened the gatekeeper role of elite educational institutions for society’s most sought after jobs (Ibid: 12). Public institutions increasingly mimic the behaviours of elite institutions in order not to be eclipsed in importance, bidding aggressively for staff deemed to have “market value”. These practices are associated with escalating the costs of higher education while contributing to socioeconomic stratification in the student body. Where once universities provided needs-based financial aid, this practice has been eclipsed by the desire for students who could boost league table ratings. “Merit based financial aid” is increasingly used to justify financial assistance to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Kirp, 2003), a practice that is also being emulated by key Australian universities. The American experience suggests that market-sponsored notions of quality and seemingly neutral instruments like media-inspired university rankings which are ostensibly formulated to sell more magazines and newspapers have undermined gains in equity and social justice.

Some of the worst excesses of winner-take-all markets are materialised in the practices of American business schools, which routinely alter their behaviours to achieve high scores in magazine-generated league tables. According to Frank and Cook (1996), critical comments from one graduating class led the University of Virginia’s Darden Business School to write to the next class cohort to be evaluated by the Business Week magazine to remind them that their evaluations could have direct repercussions on the economic value of their degrees. In this case, the calculative rationalities of league tables have been embraced and institutionalised by multiple stakeholders, all acting under the aegis of self-interest.

A further warning against calculative practices that are commercially driven emerges from Rakesh Khurana’s timely and historical analysis of American business schools. Titled *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*, Khurana (2007) puts forward the provocative viewpoint that business schools have re-constructed themselves into sophisticated trade schools whose mission is to facilitate access to elite networks and credentials and prepare students for careers that create private wealth for themselves and for shareholders. Business Schools have lost any sense of their

societal responsibilities to professionalise the discipline of management and to enable management practitioners to contribute to good citizenship.

Perhaps the most salient and formalised of quality system in higher education is the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), a state-driven initiative, which is now discussed.

The Research Assessment Exercise: Reformulating Experts and Expertise

The introduction of the RAE has to be read against the emergence of “New Public Management”, which was formulated to overcome the interventionist liberal welfare state in the United Kingdom. The expensive, cumbersome “social state” had to be renovated into an “enabling state” where mass education could be provided at a greatly reduced unit cost (Shore & Wright, 1999). This required changes to academic work to make it a more flexible enterprise, and corresponding changes to academic identities (Henkel, 1999, 2005). At the same time, there was a need to encourage new regimes of calculation premised on competition, accountability and consumer satisfaction.

It was in this context of managerial and bureaucratic accountability that the Research Assessment Exercise was introduced in 1986. The original architect of the RAE, Professor Peter Swinerton-Dyer, then chairman of the University Grants Committee observed:

[The] situation was ok when there was a lot of money in the system but when the big squeeze of the 1980s came, we had to find a system for justifying the allocation of money. It . . . had to be fair but certainly not egalitarian, as research quality varied enormously in universities. (cited by Major, 2001: online)

Swinerton-Dyer would later confess surprise at the longevity of the RAE as he devised it as a temporary measure. From its relatively modest beginnings in 1986, where 50 universities participated and academics submitted their five best papers, by 2001 some 200,000 papers were offered for assessment. The RAE had become a very costly mechanism to decide how to disburse research funding. The direct costs of administering the 2001 RAE were estimated at £5.6 million (A\$17 million), while the indirect costs were estimated at £45 million (A\$135 million). The 2001 RAE found some 55 per cent of universities were in the 5-5* range—the highest tier of performance, with 80 per cent of institutions being ranked in the 4-5* range (Major 2001). Amidst Treasury reports that there would be not be sufficient money to support all of the high achievers, the 2008 RAE was declared to be the last. Subsequently a cheaper, metrics based system would be utilized that would be less reliant on peer review and would draw more heavily on statistics (Lipsett, 2007).

For its supporters, the RAE's primary strength was its unique peer review system that allowed academic staff to exercise judgment over quality, ahead of other forms of measurement that might have been mechanistic and formulaic (Bekhradnia, 2000). For some in the post-92 universities, the RAE challenged the traditional intellectual hierarchies which excluded the “new” universities from participating in the creation of knowledge. No longer restricted to being purveyors of knowledge, the RAE enabled post-92 institutions and their academics to compete for funding, recognition, and prestige with generally positive consequences for growing their esteem and that of their graduates (Fullbrook, 2000). Some saw the RAE as promoting interdisciplinary work, others were undecided. Those departments which emerged successful regarded the Exercise as less costly time-wise, and enabling greater discretion than that afforded by normal grant applying rituals. In a climate of fiscal restraint, the argument made was that the RAE enabled policymakers to identify and direct resources to centres of excellence which in turn would attract top researchers, and maintain the international competitiveness of individual departments, universities and UK research more generally (Berenger, 2000). The RAE was also credited as enabling the management of research in strategic and effective ways, and in doing so, making the United

Kingdom into “a successful, research-intensive society”. Portraying the United Kingdom in heroic terms, the RAE’s supporters argued that the country produced eight per cent of the world’s scientific papers and nine per cent of world citations despite having only one per cent of the world’s population (O’Prey, 2000).

To its critics, the RAE presented philosophical and practical objections. It created the conditions for safe mediocrity; it encouraged the publication of work before it was ready and hence diminished quality; it distorted the rhythms of research and encouraged short-termism as researchers selected projects that could be completed and published within the five-year period (Power, 2000; Martindale, 2000). RAE culture within universities was criticised for perpetuating disadvantage of women researchers and young scholars particularly those with family responsibilities, as it treated every five-year period in an academic’s career equally (Martindale, 2000; see also Morley, 2005). The RAE culture was also implicated in reducing the commitment of university medical schools to clinical education. Academics engaged in this type of work were seen as “dragging down” university departments because they prioritised clinical education ahead of research (Mumford, 2000). A similar perspective criticised the RAE for “swinging the balance damagingly away from teaching” and supervision by subordinating everything to publishing (Bernard, 2000). In a similar vein, Strathern (2000) argues that the performance culture fostered by the RAE has discouraged indigenous forms of evaluation, producing a social climate that encourages “performance hype”. She notes, “Whether with students’ examinations or colleagues’ papers, selectivity is crucial to the academic enterprise and one has to be prepared to say that things are no good” (Ibid: 139).

British publishers associated the RAE with article obesity—huge increases in the quantity of articles submitted for publication—which put significant pressures on reviewing procedures, delivery dates and schedules. RAE-savvy academics were criticised for offering work prematurely and being unwilling to complete revisions recommended by series editors and advisors. In some instances publishers lost books for insisting on revisions, and in other cases, publishers capitulated to the moral pressures “since careers and departmental resources were affected”. In attempting to measure quality, the RAE came to be seen as lowering quality (Mynott, 2000).

In 2006, the House of Commons and the House of Lords heard about the RAE’s association with these criticisms and a range of other perverse institutional and individual behaviours. Members of both Houses (several such as Baroness Sharp, Lord Giddens, and Lord Desai who were former academics) heard of journal editorial boards that privileged the citation impacts of their journals ahead of reporting new and original research. Research quality was now re-defined as publication in a prestigious journal. The primary concern of the most adroit players in the research performance games was to write for so-called experts and to be cited by them. Practices of self-citation were said to be flourishing and “article obesity” was associated with disrupting the timely exchanges of research findings.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: NEOLIBERAL SEDUCTION?

So how can we understand the widespread uses of practices of quality assurance in higher education? In trying to make sense of these developments, it is important not to hearken back to a mythical era before quality management when scholars were academically free to produce excellent teaching and research. That stated, there is a need to acknowledge that performance measurement systems rarely adhere to their blueprints; that the effects of these regimes remain contingent and unpredictable, thus creating opportunities for resistance. At the same time, it is now clear that it is inadequate simply to dismiss the various quality systems and strategies as ideological and examples of disciplinary neoliberalism. This analysis has its place but I would argue that there is an urgency to go beyond the idea of audits and benchmarking as agentless disciplinary instruments. We need new ways of analysing and resisting the kind of knowledge

cultures that are fostered by audit technologies and global benchmarking. This requires us to re-examine the complex ways in which identities are moulded to support and legitimise neoliberal ways of acting and being. Academic audits like the RAE and the now jettisoned RQF cannot function properly without voluntary compliance and self-policing. Indeed as Power observes, “academics and their institutions are colluding in the very processes that they are criticizing” (2000: 135).

The literature on quality, then, does not give sufficient importance to the roles played by other ‘modalities of power’—the desire for self-advancement, the seductiveness of participating (and for some, winning) in competitive games such as bidding for and winning ever more grants and consultancies, notching up more books and journal articles, and the competitive impulses that increasingly inform the remunerations of trophy professors and executive managers. The issue of patronage—how excellence is increasingly framed by patronage is also an area that so far has been understudied. For Charlton, audits like the RAE create “pathologies of creative compliance” with dire consequences for the scientific disciplines: “successful scientists are those who develop survival skills to demonstrate their attainment of targets and games are played around an indicator culture where auditable performance is an end in itself and real long-term planning” (1998: 252).

At the heart of the processes that underpin quality technologies is a kind of flexible professional identity with the will and ability to invest in practices which bring maximum returns to the self even while criticising the technologies of rule that steer one towards the market. The competitive anxiety of not being left behind, along with the capacity to re-make themselves using performance statistics has created spaces for self-advancement for a select but growing group of academics who have the capacities to deploy the “powers of freedom”, or in Baroness Sharp’s words, “play the game”. Taking a similar stance, Power thus writes about the RAE savvy academic who is:

professionally focused on career development, and making the right moves, strategic in terms of thinking about publication, highly promotion conscious, confident and demanding in personal negotiations about finances, teaching and administrative loads. They are . . . Thatcher’s children, conscious and confident of their bargaining position in the RAE-system. (Power 2000: 136)

Although Australia has used less intrusive forms of performance measurements, we cannot discount the possibility of similar effects. The career paths forged by those who direct their energies towards the new habitus required by the managerial and evaluative university require ceaseless networking, ever more marketing of the self, and constant (re)positioning. Those who embrace the symbolic capital demanded of the managerial university can expect a fairly rapid ascent through the hierarchy. They can replace the grinding hard work and rewards associated with teaching and supervising students with a range of abilities, with credentialising them in an efficient manner.

In her comments on the UK higher education sector, Deem (2006: 219) warns against a university where who one knows becomes more important than the what and the how of university work.

There are signs that the contemporary Australian university in Australia has foregrounded certain professional identities for its academic staff in order to ensure its survival: they should be rational and self-interested, flexible, have market-ready attributes, or at the very least have the aptitude to cultivate market attributes; they should also be spatially mobile with the vision to grasp opportunities wherever they might be. These aspirations, informed and propelled by mundane practices such as performance measurements of productivity and efficiency in their various guises have played their part in enabling the large-scale, state-initiated interventions that we label “neoliberalism” to be adopted so widely and readily.

Naturally, a range of contrasting subjectivities are also implicated in the contemporary university, the recalcitrant “unproductive” and “difficult” academic who won’t play along with the rankings

and citational games and deals with the consequences of being left behind on the professional ladder; the overworked, poorly paid, casual staff member who despite the right credentials is relegated to sessional teaching work, disciplined by a plethora of timesheets and casual contracts; the student who is constructed by university executive managers as a mobile, discerning, choice maker, seeking convenience and a value-for-money degree who was to be kept “happy” and non-complaining. Under existing circumstances, credentialising such a student has come to be the more efficient endeavour than investing the time to enable deep learning.

According to Rose (1999), the management of the liberal state from the 18th century onwards required empowered experts who would establish particular sets of social norms and thereafter act upon individuals accordingly. This was an approach to government that secured order and yet enabled liberty in matters relating to the economy. Advanced liberal governance, on the other hand, requires experts to assemble, use and disseminate new technologies of rule, using freedom, self-interest and self-advancement. It requires experts to participate in processes, and produce knowledges, values and norms that are broadly supportive of market citizenship.

If as argued by many that we are well on our way to an era beyond modernity, whether these collective transformations are described as the knowledge economy, postindustrial society, information society, or risk society, what can we observe about the cultures that give symbolic meaning to practices such as league tables and the RAE, the “knowledge cultures” so to speak that make up the knowledge society? We might want to ask as Knorr-Cetina (2007) does, what kinds of social, political and economic lives are fostered by this kind of knowledge culture? And how will the epistemic environments in our universities shape the macro-epistemic context of society?

The first tentative steps to securing change in universities might involve critical scholarly attention to practices such as research performance exercises and league tables, taking into account the modalities of power that shape the ‘successful’ researcher and academic. O’Farrell’s (2007: 26) “modest suggestions” of how to resist the managed university are also useful: a refusal to play along with performativity, re-claiming the sociability of academic networks which have become spaces of “relentless competition and ostentatious display” and “seizing back the enjoyment of the scholarly process of reading, research and writing”.

REFERENCES

- Bekhradnia, B. (2000) The RAE and its intellectual consequences. *History of the Human Sciences*, 12(4), 113–116.
- Beringer, J. (2000) A scientist’s view of the intellectual consequences of the RAE. *History of the Human Sciences*, 12(4), 121–122.
- Bernard, G. W. (2000) History and Research Assessment Exercises. *Oxford Review of Education*, 26(1), 95–106.
- Boli, J. and Loya, T. (1999) Standardization in the world polity. In J. Boli & G. Thomas (eds) *Constructing World Culture: International Non-governmental Organizations since 1875*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bowker, G. and Starr, L. (1999) *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Charlton, B. (1998) The audit society: rituals of verification. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, 4(3), 249–253.
- Currie, J., de Angelis, R., de Boer, H., Huisman, J. and Lacotte, C. (2003) *Globalising Practices and University Responses*. Westport, Conn: Praeger.
- Deem, R. (2006) Changing research perspectives on the management of higher education: Can research permeate the activities of manager-academics? *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60 (3), 203–228.

- Frank, R. and Cook, P. (1996) *The Winner-take-all Society*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Fullbrook, K. (2000) The RAE & post 92 universities. *History of the Human Sciences*, 12(4), 123–124.
- Henkel, M. (1999) The modernisation of research evaluation: the case of the UK. *Higher Education* 38(1), 105–122.
- Henkel, M. (2005) Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment. *Higher Education*, 49, 155–176.
- Higgins, W. and Tamm Hallstrom, K. (2007) Standardization, globalization and the rationalities of government. *Organization*, 14(5), 685–704.
- ISO 9000 (2007). ISO award for higher education in standardization. Accessed 18 January 2007, <http://www.iso.org/iso/pressrelease.htm?refid=Ref1040>.
- Kalpagam, U. (2000) The colonial state and statistical knowledge. *History of the Human Sciences*, 13 (2), 37–55.
- Khurana, R. (2007) *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands: The Social Transformation of American Business Schools and the Unfulfilled Promise of Management as a Profession*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Knorr-Cetina, K. (2007) Culture in global knowledge societies: Knowledge cultures and epistemic cultures. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 32(4), 361–375.
- Kirp, D. (2003) *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Larner, W. (2000) Neo-liberalism: Policy, ideology and governmentality. *Studies in Political Economy*, 63, 5–26.
- Larner, W. and Le Heron, R. (2004) Global benchmarking: Participating at a distance in the globalizing economy. In W. Larner and R. Le Heron (eds.). *Global Governmentality*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Larner, W. and Le Heron, R. (2005) Neoliberalizing spaces and subjectivities: reinventing New Zealand universities. *Organization*, 12 (6), 843–862.
- Lipsett, A. (2007) League table predicts RAE forerunner. *Education Guardian*. Accessed 30 October 2007, <http://education.guardian.co.uk/RAE/story/0,,2201416,00.html>
- Liu, N-C and Cheng, Y. (2005) Academic rankings of world universities: Methodologies and problems. *Higher Education in Europe*, 30(2), 127–136.
- Major, L. (2001) Rateable values. *Guardian Unlimited*. Accessed 30 October 2007, <http://education.guardian.co.uk/citationanalysis/story/0,,620139,00.html>
- Marginson, S. and van der Wende, M. (2007) To Rank or To Be Ranked: The Impact of Global Rankings in Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11, 306–329.
- Martindale, C. (2000) The RAE: past its sell-by date. *History of the Human Sciences*, 12(4), 125–126.
- Mattli, W. and Buthe, T. (2003) Setting international standards: Technological rationality or primacy of power. *World Politics*, 56 (October), 1–42.
- Morley, L. (2005) Opportunity or exploitation? Women and quality assurance in higher education, *Gender and Education*, 17(4), 411–429.
- Mumford, (2000) Knowledge for what? The intellectual consequences of the Research Assessment Exercise. *History of the Human Sciences*, 12(4), 111–146.
- Mynott, J. (2000) Publishing: the view from Cambridge University Press. *History of the Human Sciences*, 12(4), 127–131.
- O'Farrell, C. (2007) Conformity blunts the creative edge. *Higher Education, The Australian* 12 December, 2007, p. 26.
- O'Prey, P. (2000) The RAE: protecting basic research excellence. *History of the Human Sciences*, 12(4), 131–133.
- Power, M. (2000) Research Assessment Exercise: a fatal remedy? *History of the Human Sciences*, 12 (4), 135–137.

- Power, M. (2004) Counting, control and calculation: reflections on measuring and measurement. *Human Relations*, 57 (6), 765–783.
- Rose, N. (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge University Press.
- Salmi, J. and Saroyan, A. (2006) League tables as policy instrument. Paper prepared for OECD/IMHE. Workshop 4 December 2006, Bonn.
- Shore, C. and Wright, S. (1999) Audit culture and anthropology: Neoliberalism in British higher education. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 5, 557–77.
- Strathern, M. (2000) Criticising best practice. *History of the Human Sciences*, 12 (4), 139–140.
- Thonhauser, T. and Passmore, D. (2006) ISO 9000 in Education: A comparison between the United States and England. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 1 (2), 156–173.
- Usher, A. and Savino, M. (2006) A world of difference: a global survey of university league tables. Accessed 10 January 2008, <http://www.educationalpolicy.org/pdf/World-of-Difference-200602162.pdf>

