

The PBRF: Some Risks of Research Rankings.

By David Small

Abstract:

While the PBRF round and the associated funding is helping to recognise and increase the status of research, it also runs the risks of promoting the amount rather than the quality of research, moving further away from academic collegiality and towards corporate models of management, and allowing some universities to prosper at the expense of others. It also devalues other aspects of university scholarship to the potential cost of students.

Call me an academic snob. But my favourite scene in *A Beautiful Mind* was the one where Russell Crowe's character, John Nash, was summoned to the Dean's office and called to account for being unproductive while all his fellow graduate students had been churning out publications. Nash, a brilliant mathematician who was later to receive a Nobel Prize for his concept of equilibrium in noncooperative games, replied that he had yet to come up with any new idea that was worth publishing.

Woe betide any scholar who takes that attitude to her research outputs in the new environment of the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF). This scheme is being established with the purpose of assessing the research performances of New Zealand universities in order to provide a basis for determining the level of government funding each will receive. Institutional funding is determined by aggregating the assessed research portfolios of the individual employees of each university. On the basis of their aggregated scores, university league tables are generated with the highest being deemed the most prestigious and attracting the most research funding.

There is some merit in the argument that the PBRF is a long-overdue mechanism for making academics, individually and at an institutional level, accountable for what is a significant part of their work. However, questions need to be posed in relation to some of the epistemological assumptions within the PBRF, the impact of the PBRF on the relative status of New Zealand universities and academics within them, and the implications that the PBRF league tables have for students.

The PBRF raises interesting questions about the nature of knowledge itself; the subject matter of philosophy of science. This is not a field of study that overflows lecture theatres or lends itself to expensive research projects, but it has contributed at least one useful concept to everyday language - paradigm.

In the 1960s, Thomas Kuhn argued that human understanding progresses not through an accumulation of knowledge, but through intellectually violent ruptures with the widely accepted beliefs and practices of mainstream research. He referred to these scientific revolutions as *paradigm shifts*. In between these moments of breakthrough, Kuhn argued, much of what passes for research is mundane and formulaic and of little value.

The PBRF will reinforce the publish-or-perish dynamic and this will lead to an increase in research outputs. There will almost certainly be a proliferation of

academic journals making it more possible for academics to increase their publications. But will it do anything to foster the flashes of brilliance that produce radical advances in the ways we understand the world? The panels that assess the individual research portfolios are charged with making judgements on the quality, and not just the quantity of research outputs, and they also consider peer esteem and contributions to the research environment.

However, the pressure will be on academics to be as prolific as possible, and to tailor their research activities to meet PBRF criteria. One implication of this is that academics will have growing incentives to follow intellectual fashions, and may be less likely to challenge prevailing orthodoxy. This carries the risk of impeding independent, radical thought. Care needs to be taken to ensure that the PBRF does not reward the dull but diligent, while overlooking or even obstructing the erratic genius, the future John Nash.

The PBRF is part of a broader government strategy for tertiary education to be “more explicitly aligned with wider government goals for economic and social development” and “no longer solely driven by the choices of consumers as it was during the 1990s”. Given that public tertiary institutions still actively compete with each other and are required to operate as corporates and return TAMU-approved profit margins, the Associate Minister of Education, Steve Maharey, overstated the case to claim the changes constituted a “paradigm shift”. Nevertheless, the PBRF-based changes to tertiary funding schedules, which are becoming favoured mechanisms for financing universities, are a welcome corrective in favour of research.

Taken together with the integration of colleges of education into universities, they should also help to prevent a repeat of the kind of EFTS-dictated logic that in the late 1990s led every teacher education institution to (in most cases, reluctantly) replace four-year pre-service teaching degrees with three-year degrees. The extent to which the emerging funding environment will allow a return to the four-year degree remains to be seen.

While the increased priority that the PBRF gives to research has some merits, there are also quite undesirable consequences of tagging funding to research outputs. One practice that is already under pressure as a direct result of the PBRF is that of providing more junior academic staff with easier access to research and conference funds. This collegial approach favoured by a number of academic departments, was based on the rationale that senior staff with established research records are usually better paid and are considerably more able to access external sources of funding for research and conference travel than their more junior colleagues.

The PBRF runs in the opposite direction. Although the scheme is designed to measure institutional research outputs for the purposes of institutional research funding, the aggregate scores are derived from individual scores. They are, however, not valid measures of comparing the research performances of individual academics. Despite vigilance from the Association of University Staff (AUS) and assurances from some senior managers at some universities that PBRF scores will not be applied to the comparison of individuals, there is a steady trickle of cases where university

managers have sought to do just that. Given the forces at work, it is unlikely that this flow will be stemmed.

The model of university management currently in vogue is reminiscent of the model of the “multiversity” that Clark Kerr outlined in 1963 in *The Uses of the University*. Single universities are broken into quasi-autonomous units (called, in University of Canterbury terminology, colleges) which, in turn, comprise quasi-autonomous departments or schools. Each of these units is headed by a manager (a pro-vice-chancellor or head of department) who is required to deliver a prescribed profit margin. The financial formulae and directives used by this model are designed to be experienced by academic and other staff as imperatives to generate greater financial surpluses within their particular area.

The old ethos that led academic staff to collaborate and to want to promote the overall well-being of the university, is now giving way to much narrower notions of patch protection. In the current climate, approaches that might once have been seen as positive practices of collegiality, are now more likely to be viewed as negative practices of cross-subsidisation.

Given this context, it is not surprising that the growing proportion of university funding being channelled through the PBRF is being used to develop systems of rewards and incentives for different parts of the university. The logic driving this allocation of PBRF money is that it should be returned to those parts of the university in the proportions that they “earned it”.

The obvious extension of this logic, which has been attempted but not yet successfully implemented at the University of Canterbury, is for the research and conference funding policies within departments to return the funding to those individuals who “earned it”. This reorientation of individual research funding, which is being promoted in many quarters, would make it even more difficult for younger academics to break through. And this at a time when the lot of a junior academic – surviving years of student poverty, saddled with debt and with salaries far lower than those earned in comparable professions – is in serious need of enhancement.

Moreover, the more that core university funding becomes fragmented and individualised, the harder it becomes to maintain fundamental principles of collegiality, that are already being undermined by corporate models of university management.

Academics should be encouraged to perform well in every facet of their work, with their research, teaching and community contributions being mutually reinforcing. However, appointments and promotions criteria have long been weighted towards research. A research degree is a prerequisite for academic appointments but a teaching qualification is not. Academics who are excellent at research but not at teaching, hold professorial posts in many universities. However, staff with a lesser research record do not get promoted beyond a certain level, no matter how good their teaching and other contributions.

By attaching even more prestige and funding to research, the PBRF risks creating a gulf between academics with high teaching loads and little time or resources for

research, and those who will be able to attract sufficient outside research funds and PBRF money to minimise their teaching or avoid it altogether. The PBRF also minimises the scope available for innovative approaches to managing the teaching/research nexus.

One such model that is currently being implemented at RMIT in Melbourne, is the Boyer classification of scholarship. This is an attempt to take seriously Boyer's argument that scholarship embodies four mutually reinforcing kinds of activity: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Boyer insisted "We need scholars who not only skilfully explore the frontiers of knowledge, but also integrate ideas, connect thought to action, and inspire students." The PBRF moves New Zealand universities away from the balance and synthesis of the Boyer model, and firmly in the direction of the researcher supreme. This is further illustrated by the apparently fizzled out state of what was to be the teaching equivalent of the PBRF.

With the highest ranked researchers now having incentives to focus exclusively on PBRF-recognised research, where does this leave students who seek a university education? Are we in danger of drifting towards a situation where undergraduate students are taught by contract teachers and have no direct contact with the academics who are most actively engaged in research? Will we end up reminiscing about the old days when professors used to give lectures to first-year students, or write articles on matters of social importance for the mass media, or serve on school boards of trustees? Perhaps not in the near future, because the prevailing ethos among academics remains one that attaches significant value to these other aspects of their work.

University league tables are here to stay. The *Times Educational Supplement*, for example, publishes a global list of the top 200 universities in the world, based on citation information and surveys of 1300 academics from 88 countries. The PBRF is closest to Britain's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the sixth round of which will be produced in 2008. Germany's Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) produces a similar research-weighted league table.

However much the government may wish to see the tertiary sector operating in a complementary way, league tables, by their very nature, reinforce competition between institutions. Already we are witnessing the emergence of, or at least the appearance of prestige gaps between universities. The moment the final PBRF rankings were released, the marketing managers of the institutions that came out on top began trumpeting that fact. With the prestige (and some additional funding) they acquired from their early lead, they are now also moving to consolidate and enhance their advantage by aiming to retain and attract high PBRF-scoring staff.

At least one university is, for example, using a head-hunting strategy of designing advertisements for senior positions to match perfectly the precise areas of expertise of particular targeted individuals from other universities. The move by the University of Auckland (the institution leading the PBRF rankings) to break with the process of establishing a national collective agreement for university staff could also be interpreted as an attempt to defend and consolidate its own position of strength at the expense of the general well-being of the New Zealand university sector. And, depending on the relative sizes of the institutions involved, deliberations over

proposals to merge colleges of education with universities have been influenced by the anticipated impact such moves would have on the PBRF ranking of the university.

The PBRF may provide a useful measure for distinguishing between universities and other tertiary institutions that do not have a research culture. However, it is far from clear what purpose is served by the inter-university race for prestige that the PBRF has fuelled. In the absence of a more balanced alternative measure, PBRF scores will be used by the public to rank the country's universities.

It may have been just another national myth that New Zealand students could attend their local university, safe in the knowledge that the education they would receive there would be of a comparable standard to that of any other university. And, with the current managerial and competitive orientation of the country's universities, this may now be so unrealistic that it is barely worth aspiring to. However, there would be something awry to have a university system that would influence public perceptions and choices with a status index that was disconnected from the experience of students. In other words, students who are enticed to enrol in the country's top-ranked universities are entitled to be taught, and taught well, by those on whose research expertise the university's reputation is based. This, however, is not an entitlement that the current corporate model will deliver.

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