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Academic Dystopia: Knowledge, Performativity and Tertiary Education

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Jean-François Lyotard's classic work, *The Postmodern Condition*, was first published in 1979 and has been available in English translation since 1984 (Lyotard, 1984). Intended as a 'report on knowledge', *The Postmodern Condition* has gained a wide readership among critical policy analysts with an interest in universities and research. It is not hard to see why the book has been so influential. *The Postmodern Condition* provides a highly prophetic account of sweeping changes in key areas of economic, social and educational life. Lyotard identifies fundamental shifts in conceptions of the nature, function and status of knowledge that would become clearly evident both within and beyond the confines of the academy. His concept of performativity explains a mode of thinking that has become cemented in the bureaucratic mind and embodied in institutional procedures and priorities. His comments on computerization foreshadow the emergence of the Internet as phenomenon of profound cultural significance in the last part of the twentieth century. Finally, in his discussion of the shifting role of the state and the rise of multinational corporations, Lyotard depicts a possibility that has become a now taken-for-granted reality in many parts of the world.

Lyotard did not frame his work in terms of the organizing themes of utopia or dystopia but *The Postmodern Condition* lends itself readily to analysis from such a perspective. With so much having been written about Lyotard, and *The Postmodern Condition* in particular, it can be helpful to focus on a quite specific context as a means for making some broader theoretical observations. This will be my task in the present paper. I examine developments in tertiary education and research policy in New Zealand, paying particular attention to the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) as an example of performativity, competition and the commodification of knowledge in action. (In New Zealand the term ‘tertiary education’ is employed to cover all post-secondary educational institutions and organizations, including universities, polytechnics, and private training establishments.) I argue that the trends evident in changes under the PBRF constitute a form of academic dystopia. The paper begins with an overview of Lyotard’s position on knowledge, competition and research in a computerized, postmodern world. I then assess the PBRF in the light of Lyotard’s ideas. I comment on the limiting language of ‘outputs’, discuss links between information, interpretation and the ‘unknown’, and consider the impact of research assessment regimes on intellectual life.

Commodification, competition and computerization

In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard argues that knowledge, rather than being seen as an end in itself, has become a commodity: something to be produced and consumed, creating an exchange value (Lyotard, 1984). Knowledge has become a key force of production, altering relations within and between nations. Science has already asserted its superiority over narrative knowledge, and Lyotard predicts that it will ‘maintain and no doubt strengthen its pre-eminence in the arsenal of productive capacities of the nation-states’ (p. 5). This will, in combination with other factors, lead to a growing gap between developed and developing countries. In the global struggle for power, knowledge as an informational commodity will be crucial.

Under these conditions, the role of the state changes. Multinational corporations will exert an increasing degree of influence over investment decisions, and the state will no longer be seen as necessary in the learning process. With the commercialization of

knowledge, social progress is measured, in part, by the ease with which information – as one form of capital – circulates. Lyotard envisages nation states reconsidering their relations with corporations and civil society. He foresees the opening of world markets and a return to vigorous economic competition.

Lyotard points out that in postmodern technoscientific societies there is a heavy emphasis on *efficiency*. Efficiency is determined by the extent to which output (the information or modifications obtained) can be maximized with minimum input (the energy expended in the process). The origins of this view of technical competence lie in the first industrial revolution, where the relationship between wealth and technology was established: ‘[a] technical apparatus requires an investment; but since it optimizes the efficiency of the task to which it is applied, it also optimizes the surplus-value derived from this improved performance. All that is needed is for the surplus-value to be realized, in other words, for the product of the task performed to be sold’ (p. 45). Creating research funds, into which a portion of the sale is recycled, provides one way of further enhancing performance. In this manner, ‘science becomes a force of production, ... a moment in the circulation of capital’ (p. 45). An equation between wealth, efficiency and truth is established:

It was more the desire for wealth than the desire for knowledge that initially forced upon technology the imperative of performance improvement and product realization. The “organic” connection between technology and profit preceded its union with science. Technology became important to contemporary knowledge only through the mediation of a generalized spirit of performativity. Even today, progress in knowledge is not totally subordinated to technological investment. (p. 45)

In this language game, ‘whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right’ (p. 45). Support by nation-states and, increasingly, corporations, for applied technological research has been driven by the imperatives of profit and power. A temporary loss (in profit terms) will be tolerated if it is believed that a decisive innovation – and hence a competitive advantage – will result from investment in scientific and technological research. Institutions, organizations and research centers unable to justify their existence on the basis of even an indirect contribution to the optimization of this system’s performance will find diminishing support from the state and the corporate sector. In

these circumstances, idealist and humanist narratives no longer serve a legitimating function and will be abandoned as the quest for (global, corporate) power continues.

When the desired goal becomes ‘the optimal contribution of higher education to the best performativity of the social system’ (p. 48), skills of two kinds become important: those specifically designed to tackle world competition, and those capable of fulfilling a society’s own needs, particularly in terms of maintaining internal cohesion. In the past, this task involved ‘the formation and dissemination of a general model of life, most often legitimated by the emancipation narrative’ (p. 48). In an environment of delegitimation, however, universities and other institutions of higher learning are called upon to create skills rather than ideals. In the future,

... knowledge will no longer be transmitted *en bloc*, once and for all, to young people before their entry into the work force: rather it is and will be served ‘a la carte’ to adults who are either already working or expect to be, for the purpose of improving their skills and chances of promotion, but also to help them acquire information, languages, and language games allowing them to widen their occupational horizons and to articulate their technical and ethical experience. (p. 49)

These changes signal a decisive shift in the nature of instruction. When knowledge ceases being an end in itself, and becomes merely another commodity in the system, ‘its transmission is no longer the exclusive responsibility of scholars and students’ (p. 50). The process of delegitimation and predominance of the performativity criterion signals the ‘death of the professor’. Foreshadowing the rise of virtual universities, Lyotard writes:

To the extent that learning is translatable into computer language and the traditional teacher is replaceable by memory banks, didactics can be entrusted to machines linking traditional memory banks (libraries, etc.) and computer data banks to intelligent terminals placed at the students’ disposal. (p. 50)

Lyotard predicts that ‘a vast market for competence in operational skills’ will be created, and that those who possess these skills will be ‘the object of offers or even seduction policies’ (p. 51). The partial (or complete) replacement of academics and other teachers with machines is intolerable only in the context of grand narratives of

legitimation. But if it is power rather than these narratives that now provides the motivation for acquiring knowledge (or information), new questions arise:

The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?' In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to 'Is it saleable?' And in the context of power-growth: 'Is it efficient?' (p. 51)

In this context, the hardships citizens suffer are addressed only insofar as their alleviation improves the system's performance. When societies are governed by the imperatives of power and performativity, the needs of the most underprivileged are not met on principle, but only to the extent that not satisfying (some of) them could lead to a destabilizing of the system as a whole. Those who exercise power refuse to be ruled by weakness; instead, they redefine the norms of life. 'In this sense', Lyotard suggests,

... the system seems to be a vanguard machine dragging humanity after it, dehumanizing it in order to rehumanize it at a different level of normative capacity. The technocrats declare that they cannot trust what society designates as its needs; they 'know' that society cannot know its own needs since they are not variables independent of the new technologies. Such is the arrogance of the decision makers – and their blindness. (p. 63)

Such a regime is one of terror. A system of this kind involves the elimination or threatened elimination of other players from a language game. Opponents are silenced or consent, not because they have been refuted, but because their ability to participate has been threatened. Decision-making driven by this form of terror says, in effect, 'Adapt your aspirations to our ends – or else' (p. 64). Lyotard concludes *The Postmodern Condition* with a summary of two possible futures. This passage is worth quoting in full:

We are finally in a position to understand how the computerization of society affects this problematic. It could become the 'dream' instrument for controlling and regulating the market system, extended to include knowledge itself and governed exclusively by the performativity principle. In that case, it would inevitably involve the use of terror. But it could also aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions. The line to follow for computerization to take the second of these two paths is, in principle, quite simple: give the public free access to the memory and data banks. Language games would then be games of perfect

information at any given moment. But they would also be non-zero-sum games, and by virtue of that fact discussion would never risk fixating in a position of minimax equilibrium because it had exhausted its stakes. For the stakes would be knowledge (or information, if you will), and the reserve of knowledge – language’s reserve of possible utterances – is inexhaustible. This sketches the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown. (p. 67)

Performance-based research funding in New Zealand

In the 1980s New Zealand attracted international attention for its wide-ranging program of neoliberal reform. A small democracy with few buffers between government and those directly affected by neoliberal policies, New Zealand was able to implement economic change at a remarkable rate (Peters & Marshall, 1996). The rapidity of the reform process was anything but accidental. Roger Douglas, Minister of Finance in the Labour government of 1984-1987, enshrined the principles of acting quickly and decisively – of making changes in quantum leaps, with minimal time for interest groups to mobilize – in political folklore. Douglas lost the Finance portfolio in Labour’s second term in the 1980s as Prime Minister David Lange sought to slow the pace of change – it was time, he felt, for ‘a cup of tea’ – but with the National Party’s landslide election win in 1990 a new phase of the neoliberal restructuring process began.

Where Labour had concentrated on the ‘core’ economic sector, National seized an opportunity to begin reforming the key social policy domains. During three successive terms in government in the 1990s, National applied a philosophy of marketization to social welfare, health and education. The principles underpinning marketization were particularly evident in tertiary education. Tertiary education institutions and organizations were expected to operate like businesses – to apply corporate management practices to their day-to-day activities, to compete with each other, to embrace the language of ‘performance indicators’ and ‘strategic planning’, and to advertise aggressively for ‘clients’ or ‘consumers’. National provided strong incentives for the privatization of tertiary education and created the conditions for a proliferation of new ‘providers’ of degrees, diplomas, certificates and other qualifications (Olssen, 2001; Peters & Roberts, 1999).

The formation of the Labour-Alliance government in 1999 was greeted by many in the field of education with a sense of relief. Keen to distance itself from both the Rogernomics era of the 1980s and the ‘more market’ years under National in the 1990s, the new government adopted a ‘Third Way’ approach to economic and social policy reform, drawing on Tony Blair’s experience with New Labour in Britain but with adaptations for the New Zealand context (Codd, 2001; Giddens, 2000; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Roberts & Peters, 2008). Tertiary education was to become a flagship policy area for Third Way thinking. Choice and competition were to be de-emphasized, new forms of collaboration were to be encouraged, and concentrations of research excellence were to be fostered. A more strategic and integrated approach to tertiary education reform would be taken, underpinned by a ‘shared vision’ of New Zealand’s future. Tertiary education, the government promised, would become a key means for advancing New Zealand as a ‘knowledge society and economy’ (Ministry of Education, 2002). National was returned to power in late 2008 but in most respects the overall strategic framework for tertiary education policy has, to date, remained unchanged (cf. Ministry of Education, 2009).

Shortly after taking office, the Labour-Alliance government announced the formation of a Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC), the purpose of which was to provide a comprehensive review of the tertiary education sector in New Zealand. The Commission produced four reports, varying in length, style and focus (TEAC, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). The last and longest of the reports, *Shaping the Funding Framework* (TEAC, 2001c), concentrated on questions of funding and, among other areas, addressed the issue of research. After careful analysis of strengths and weaknesses in the current funding system, together with consideration of research funding regimes elsewhere in the world – particularly Britain’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – the report recommended that performance-based research funding be established. The recommendations in the TEAC report were taken further by a Performance-Based Research Fund Working Group (2002). The first assessment round under the new Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) was conducted in 2003. A second, partial round was completed in 2006. The next round is scheduled for 2012.

New Zealand’s PBRF includes a number of elements of similar overseas research funding schemes. In the assessment rounds of 2003 and 2006, individuals in participating

tertiary education institutions were required to complete Evidence Portfolios (EPs) with a list of research ‘outputs’ (e.g., publications and presentations), four of which had to be nominated as their best. This section counted for 70% of an individual’s grade. In addition, there were sections devoted to peer esteem and contributions to a research environment, counting 15% each toward the final grade. The EPs were assessed by expert panels selected by nomination from universities and other tertiary education institutions. In the first quality evaluation, individuals received a grade of ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ or ‘R’, the first denoting world class research, the last indicating little or no research activity. A new category was introduced in the 2006 round to deal with ‘new and emerging’ researchers.

The results held few surprises, with the traditional universities well ahead of polytechnics, Auckland University of Technology (a ‘new’ university, formerly Auckland Institute of Technology), and other tertiary education organizations (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004, 2008). Funding through the PBRF was based not just on the results of the assessment exercise but also on research degree completions (Masters and doctoral theses) and on externally generated research income. The older, well established universities were dominant in these areas as well. Universities have been quick to exploit their PBRF results, highlighting on their institutional websites and in student and staff recruiting campaigns either their overall supremacy or their performance in particular subject domains. Competition between the top performers has been fierce, with, for example, the University of Auckland the University of Otago engaging in a ‘war of words’ over the results of the 2006 assessment round. Institutions are now devoting considerable resources to the preparation of researchers for the 2012 evaluation exercise.

Liotard, tertiary education and the PBRF

Reflecting on Liotard’s account more than three decades on, it seems, in many respects, to have been tailor made as an explanatory framework for New Zealand’s approach to economic and social reform. The theme of vigorous international competition remains very much to the fore in New Zealand. Senior government Ministers of recent years, under both Labour (1999-2008) and National (2008-), have stressed the need for New

Zealand to move up OECD tables of economic performance. Knowledge, as Lyotard predicted, has been seen as central to this process (Gilbert, 2005; Roberts & Peters, 2008). Moves have been made to maintain social cohesion after the divisive effects of the market driven policies in the 1990s. At the same time, there has been a push, albeit somewhat belatedly in tertiary education, to improve ‘efficiency’ in New Zealand’s economic and social systems. Great faith has been placed in technology as a means for New Zealand to distinguish itself in commerce and the arts. And, of particular interest given the focus of this paper, a new research fund – the PBRF – has been created as part of the process of enhancing New Zealand’s performance on the international stage.

In its broad outline, then, the picture Lyotard painted more than a quarter of a century ago seems to provide an uncannily accurate portrait of what was to come in this country, and remains as relevant and helpful today as it was then. This does not mean Lyotard’s analysis is without its weaknesses, or that *everything* in Lyotard’s account holds true. The discussion that follows elaborates on these points, paying particular attention to the themes of commodification and competition. It is acknowledged that other theorists could also have been helpful in evaluating New Zealand’s approach to performance-based research funding. Elsewhere, ideas from Foucault (Middleton, 2005) and Nietzsche (Roberts, 2008), for example, have been employed to frame critical discussions of the PBRF. Other thinkers such as Kierkegaard (Senyshyn, 2005), Marx (Harvie, 2000) and Derrida (Stronach, 2007) have served as reference points in analyses of the RAE in the UK.

Lyotard is, however, particularly valuable in getting to grips with changes in the nature and status of knowledge under new conditions of work. What Lyotard offers, and this is not so for (say) Foucault or Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, is a direct focus on the commodification of knowledge, the logic of performativity, and the impact of new information technologies on teaching and research. Lyotard also sets his philosophical analysis in a broader policy context, in a manner that distinguishes him from these thinkers. Most importantly, for present purposes, his portrait of education and society in the postmodern condition speaks powerfully to what can now be seen as emerging academic dystopia. There is merit, therefore, in pursuing his ideas, while recognizing that this provides just one avenue for potentially productive critical inquiry.

Outputs, quality and knowledge

At the heart of the PBRF assessment process is the notion of ‘outputs’. While this term is mainly applied in relation to the first section of PBRF evidence portfolios, it has also become common jargon in describing the forms of research work set out in the second and third sections of the EP. Thus conceived, an output can be almost any measurable research-related item or activity created or undertaken by an individual or group of individuals. Supporters of the PBRF have been careful not to tie outputs exclusively to the most common forms of academic written work: journal articles, books, chapters in edited collections, technical reports, and the like. In the PBRF, an output can, in theory, also be a musical performance, a play, a painting, a carving, a sculpture, a speech, or a website, among other things, provided there is a demonstrable research component in each case.

On the face of it, this appears to be an expansive and inclusive approach to a research evaluation process: one that recognizes the many different forms of intellectual work undertaken by those in tertiary education institutions and organizations. Yet, the very idea of conceptualizing research activity in terms of outputs is itself limiting. It encourages an instrumentalist approach to research and represents a further step in the process of commodifying knowledge. Of course, the idea of promoting the production of ‘outputs’ by academics is not new; the ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon has been a feature of university life in many Western countries for several decades. What distinguishes the current era from earlier times is adoption of a more systematized, standardized means for embodying the principle of ‘publish or perish’ in a research funding regime and in institutional practice.

Lyotard saw that knowledge in its commodified form becomes virtually indistinguishable from information. Where knowledge in the past might have implied the existence of a knower and something to be known, now neither of these are necessary. Once it has been reconceived as information, knowledge can circulate, be traded and exchanged, without the presence of a knower in any traditional philosophical sense. Knowing, in most schools of epistemological thought, implies something more than mere

apprehension or skill in dealing with information. Information takes the form of a product, while knowing is a process.

This difference is reflected in the PBRF. Overall, the PBRF demands that research be conceived more in ‘product’ than ‘process’ terms. The scheme takes account of the processes involved in undertaking research only insofar as they can be *reconfigured* as products. Thus, publishing a book, supervising a doctoral student, organizing a series of research seminars, being invited to give a keynote address, and receiving an award or favorable review all become products: measurable units to be listed, one by one, as individual outputs or items in an evidence portfolio.

Even where the form of measurement is less explicitly quantifiable than a count of publications or dollars earned or postgraduates produced, the logic is similar. The developers and supporters of the PBRF have, in one sense, accepted that more is not always better. They have stressed the importance of quality over quantity. Yet, with the widespread use of journal rankings and citation indices, qualitative judgments can quickly become quantitative measurements.

‘Quality’, as has been argued elsewhere (Roberts & Peters, 2008), is one of the most vacuous, ill-defined policy terms. Along with the term ‘relevance’, it has a long history of unreflective overuse in policy documents. ‘Quality policies’, as applied in institutions such as universities, are highly problematic (Vidovich & Porter, 1999). Appeals to ‘quality’ immediately beg further questions: Quality as defined by whom? For what? In relation to what else? Everyone, it seems, supports ‘quality’, but what is its opposite? In other words, if quality is what is wanted, what is *not* wanted? And, where do the divisions between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ quality lie? The PBRF Evidence Portfolio form simply asks individuals to tick a box indicating whether an ‘output’ is ‘quality assured’ or not. Criteria are supplied for determining what counts as ‘quality assured’, but this somewhat crude, binary division between ‘quality assured’ and ‘non quality assured’ does little to inspire confidence that the complexities associated with judgments about quality have been considered.

The ambiguity associated with the term ‘quality’ assists in the rhetorical wars over the PBRF. When prospective students see advertisements by universities claiming, on the basis of PBRF results, to employ the highest quality researchers, it is *assumed* that the

readers of the advertisements, those being regarded as high quality researchers, and those who assessed the researchers all share the same view of quality. But even if they do not, the effect of the advertisements need not alter. Terms such as ‘quality’ can still perform the same work in winning over potential students, or corporate backers, or additional government funding, provided no one pauses to problematize the term.

In the PBRF, the focus shifts from undertaking research as an end in itself to producing outputs for someone or something else. This move toward a more instrumentalist approach has been under way for some time, as Lyotard noted, but the PBRF pushes it to a new level. Lyotard’s principal concern was with changes in the function and status of knowledge; policy developments such as the PBRF prompt a rethinking of the very idea of what it means to be an academic. Lyotard’s announcement of the death of the professor may be proven correct in the longer term, but at present it seems unlikely that either teachers or researchers will be entirely replaced by machines. Nonetheless, there is every possibility, if trends already underway continue, that researchers will be encouraged to become more *machine-like* in their activities. This is a frightening prospect, but it is not inconsistent with other ‘terrors’ of performativity (Ball, 2003) and neoliberalism (Giroux, 2005).

The logic of performativity, Lyotard pointed out, demands that outputs be maximized relative to inputs. Performance based funding for research provides strong incentives to produce more and more, either in terms in quantity or in terms of quality. Provided overall performance, assessed in these restrictive terms, keeps increasing, intellectual growth becomes irrelevant. Even where individual academics see themselves as researchers driven by strong intrinsic motivations to pursue the truth, or to make new discoveries, or to continue an intellectual conversation, or to pass on what they know to others, the system demands something else from them.

The PBRF assessment process does not ask academics to demonstrate, directly and explicitly, depth or breadth in understanding, or to show how their work contributes to an ongoing scholarly dialogue, or to provide evidence that they are committed to the process of knowing. The PBRF does not seek to enter the interior landscape of the academic mind or to ask researchers why they undertake their work. It does not involve talking to those who have been taught or mentored by a researcher. Indeed, there is little scope for

discussion of any kind by those completing EPs in the PBRF assessment exercise. Narrative knowledge, as Lyotard observed, has become devalued. What the PBRF demands is not a rich, well rounded, complex portrait of a research life, but simply a *list*. It is measured *performance* that matters, not the knowledge or ideas, research cultures or commitments, that give meaning and substance to lists of items and outputs.

Information, interpretation and the unknown

Lyotard's final assessment of possibilities for computerization is perhaps one of the weakest parts of *The Postmodern Condition*. Reluctant to commit himself fully and overtly to an ethical position, perhaps in part because this would be inconsistent with his critique of metanarratives near the beginning of the book, his preference for 'a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 67) remains somewhat vague and underdeveloped. He does not provide a robust account of either 'justice' or 'the unknown'. Nor does he explore the ramifications of his political preference for education or research.

It is important to contextualize Lyotard's work here. *The Postmodern Condition* was a commissioned report and it was not until later publications such as *The Differend* (Lyotard, 1988) that Lyotard adopted a more deliberate, self-consciously 'philosophical' approach to his work. *The Postmodern Condition* was not a specialist treatise on either politics or ethics. Lyotard's political writings were to appear in another collection, not published in English until 1993 (Lyotard, 1993). All the same, his brief remarks on providing free access to 'the memory and data banks' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 67) are fascinating in the light of subsequent developments in networked computing, and have important implications for educationists in a PBRF environment.

Lyotard was writing more than a decade before the phenomenal growth of the Internet in the 1990s. The Internet certainly has aided some groups in their discussion of 'metaprescriptives' and in some cases has provided such groups with access to information they usually lack for knowledgeable decisions (as Lyotard hoped would be the case with computerization). But there is no neutral provision of information (Roberts,

2000), and the Internet has furnished plenty of examples of information being used in misleading, defamatory, shallow, or incomplete ways.

This is where the importance of education becomes most evident. Lyotard theorized the imminent ‘death of the professor’, yet the need for professors and other teachers is perhaps more obvious than ever in the age of the Internet. For the challenge now is not so much gaining access to the information, but finding ways of distinguishing some forms of information from others. Teachers, especially at tertiary level, have a potentially significant role to play in guiding others in this process. As Zygmunt Bauman (1988, 1993) has argued, academics and other intellectuals may have had their status undermined in a marketized world, but they still have something to offer in teaching the ‘rules of interpretation’. There is, of course, no *one* approach to interpretation; indeed, this is one of the principal lessons a student or a group can learn from a good teacher. Among the qualities that can be fostered, however, are those with clear value in navigating our way through a sea of information. The development of a searching, probing, investigative, questioning, *critical* frame of mind is arguably vital if the kind of knowledgeable decisions Lyotard had in mind are to be made.

These points have relevance for the PBRF. The volume of official documentation, institutional communication, and academic interaction devoted to the PBRF process has created a sense that these changes to research policy are important, with far-reaching consequences for institutions and individuals. With so much information, retaining a clear picture of the key changes and mechanisms, and a strong sense of control over the process, becomes more difficult. The PBRF process has also added significantly to workloads, with considerable time that might be spent *undertaking* research having been spent on reading and responding to research policy.

It is to the Tertiary Education Commission’s credit that key documents have been made available to the public, in the manner Lyotard envisaged, via the Internet. But in the face of such a sea of information, it is easy to lose sight of ‘bigger picture’ questions relating to the PBRF. We can tend to become caught up in the detail, debating differences between subject areas, or the structure of the Evidence Portfolio form, or the composition of the PBRF panels. Discussion at this level may result in minor changes to

the way the system operates but it does not contest the underlying ethical and epistemological assumptions behind the PBRF or place it in its broader political context.

Lyotard's references to accessing information and respecting the desire for the 'unknown' hint at something else of importance for researchers. The PBRF does not make knowing – and particularly *knowing for its own sake* – a priority, but neither does it place any substantial value on 'unknowing'. The PBRF can, in some senses, be seen as an attempt to move closer to the ideal of establishing a language game of perfect information. Decisions about grades, to be sure, remain matters of judgment, but the increasing systematization of the evaluation and preparation processes signals a move to reduce some of the more idiosyncratic and subjective elements of research evaluation. The tendency is toward greater (apparent) certainty for both researchers and evaluators. Work that is 'risky' – that falls outside the usual boundaries for judgment, that takes too long to complete, that questions the very foundations on which the PBRF rests – becomes marginalized.

The 'machine-like' nature of PBRF activity, to which I referred earlier, becomes evident here. There are strong incentives in the system for both individuals and the institutions within which they are housed to produce more and more, in ever more predictable ways, with a certain kind of relentless monotony. A perfect PBRF, it might be imagined, would be one where everything could be known: the rules for judgment, the categories for classifying research work, the differences (in precise numerical detail) between institutions in their results, and the extrinsic benefits that might be expected to flow from those results. This would be, perhaps, a perfectly 'just' system in PBRF terms. What is *not* wanted is the messiness, the unpredictability of a system that places a premium on the unknown. This, in PBRF terms, is not merely inefficient but unjust. The implied expectation of the PBRF, and of the broader rhetoric of advancing New Zealand as a knowledge society and economy, is that performance will be improved constantly. For this to occur, planning is necessary, and taking the unknown seriously makes that much more difficult. Lyotard, then, may not have fleshed out his political ideal, but it seems clear that the PBRF is at odds with what he had in mind.

Changing intellectual lives

We might agree with TEAC, the PBRF Working Group and the government that the previous system of funding research – a system based largely on student enrolments – was seriously flawed. This approach to funding encouraged a ‘more is better’ attitude toward tertiary education and failed to distinguish between institutions that were active in research and those that were not. We might concede that the PBRF is, in *some* respects, a fairer and better means for distributing the limited funds made available for research. We might, moreover, be grateful that New Zealand has not followed the path of much cruder and more deeply problematic systems of performance measurement. Britain, after many years of the RAE, appears to now be placing its faith, at least in some areas of research, in a metrics based system. Purely quantitative approaches, especially those based on citation counts, can provide a misleading, inaccurate and incomplete picture of research achievements and should arguably be avoided at all costs. If the value of performance based research funding is accepted, the PBRF can be seen as fundamentally sound (see, for instance, Adams, 2008).

Yet, none of this ought to deter us from asking fundamental questions about the PBRF specifically and research funding in general in New Zealand: Why is so little money, in international terms, devoted to research in this country? Why is there such a heavy emphasis on improving research ‘performance’? What implied theory of knowledge underpins the PBRF? Do the costs, including the human costs, of the PBRF outweigh the potential benefits it might bring? And, crucially, how are we changing as researchers, academics and human beings as a result of our participation in the PBRF process?

The last of these questions has been addressed by Ashcroft (2005) and Middleton (2005), among others. Ashcroft (2005) argues that the PBRF creates a culture of ‘winners and losers’, with potentially negative consequences for both research and teaching. Researchers, Ashcroft suggests, could become increasingly specialized and less flexible in their research, and less attention could be paid to excellence in teaching. Most worryingly of all, from Ashcroft’s perspective, the PBRF could become a key means for distinguishing between academics applying for jobs and seeking promotion. This, Ashcroft believes, will have dire implications, with ‘academic collegiality and quality

research' giving way to 'widespread career anxiety and apprehension, and more narrowly focused (or constrained) research activity' (p. 125).

Middleton (2005) has conducted empirical research on the impact of the PBRF on academics in the field of Education. Drawing on interviews with 36 researchers evaluated by the Education panel in the 2003 PBRF round, Middleton maintains that academics are being 'disciplined' as subjects in new ways under performance-based research funding. Some received a boost in confidence after receiving good grades, while others experienced considerable anxiety in waiting for the results. Many who were graded at a lower level than expected felt downgraded and discouraged. Those who received 'R' ratings often felt a diminished sense of self-worth. Some, especially older teacher-educators, noted that they were not undertaking research for PBRF grades but because they felt it was important and were less affected by the ratings they received.

Middleton found that the PBRF was already influencing the future goals, strategies and priorities for many Education researchers. Some were becoming 'more calculated, self-conscious, or less spontaneous in their decisions to take on tasks like supervision, reviewing, consultancy or public presentations' (p. 147). Others feared that the PBRF 'could lead to a devaluation of the local in favour of the international, and the academic over the professional' (p. 149). Some senior academics also believed the PBRF was having a negative impact on management and leadership in Education faculties and departments, with fewer people being willing to put their hands up for administrative responsibilities. Middleton concludes that there is already evidence of the PBRF reshaping Education as a field. By insisting on all staff having a researcher identity, 'the PBRF could encourage a downgrading of the grassroots engagements traditionally carried out by Education staff with teachers and classrooms and prioritise for all staff publication in remote, overseas, intellectual journals' (p. 153).

In a university research environment structured by PBRF requirements, a certain dissonance can become part of our institutional lives. On the one hand, we may develop significant misgivings about the PBRF and its consequences for research and researchers. On the other hand, if we are in senior positions, we may also feel a strong obligation to assist our colleagues, as best we can, to succeed in a PBRF environment. After all, jobs, promotions and working conditions are on the line as a result of the PBRF process. There

is no easy 'resolution' here, as is true of intellectual life more generally in knowledge economies (Blackmore, 2001; Ozga, 1998). It is possible, however, to see this dissonance as potentially productive. Highlighting the tension, rather than denying it or hiding it, allows some of the contradictions in the PBRF to become more apparent. These are *lived* contradictions, not simply theoretical games, and they are for that reason all the more vivid and instructive. At the same time, if Lyotard is correct in his description of the wider process of change at work here, we must recognize that our very ability to ask critical questions of the PBRF is shaped and limited by the PBRF process itself. Competition, commodification and instrumentalism leave their mark on all of us, even as we interrogate their role in tertiary education and research policy.

Conclusion: A Dystopian Future for the Academy?

Lyotard's work offers an important set of signposts for understanding a series of related changes. I want to argue that, collectively, these changes point to a dystopian future for the academy. Lyotard discusses changes in the nature and status of knowledge, the organizational logic under which institutions operate, and commercial relations within and between nations, all of which have come to pass. The forms of surveillance and control Lyotard signaled as possibilities in a computerized world are now no longer the subject of science fiction; as each year goes by, systems for monitoring citizens become more sophisticated, intrusive and widespread. Perhaps the deepest and most far reaching changes, however, are those we often cannot see: subtle but significant shifts in the way we think about ourselves as human beings.

New Zealand's PBRF is part of a wider process of policy reform, where principles at the heart of university life are being undermined. The neoliberal reconstruction of New Zealand has continued, with some variations in emphasis and political style, for more than a quarter of a century (Roberts & Codd, 2010). Neoliberal ideas have held similar sway in many other parts of the world (see, for example, Giroux, 2002). The ontological heart of neoliberalism is the idea of a self-interested, utility maximizing individual who is expected to make continuous consumer-style choices in a competitive world. Over the last two decades, academics have increasingly been encouraged, directly or indirectly, to

see themselves in this light, and the PBRF has reinforced this trend. Under the PBRF scheme, competition between institutions is intense, but when finances are tight individuals also become pitted against their colleagues in the race to hold on to their jobs. In recent years, redundancies in the Arts and in Education have been widespread in New Zealand universities. Under such circumstances, research becomes not an integral part of one's being as an academic – the manifestation of a desire to know – but a matter of survival. This can prompt a certain creativity but it can also lead to conformity. Academics can, in Nietzsche's terms, develop a herd-like mentality, and ultimately lose all independence of intellectual spirit (cf. Nietzsche, 1968, 1990, 1997). In constantly producing for others, we simultaneously reconstitute ourselves. *We* become the 'output': just another cog in the vast machine that is designed to make one country more efficient, more economically competitive than another.

One indication of this can be seen in the new ways we conceive of collective research activity. The notion of a community of scholars has been replaced by the idea of 'research teams', and these are often indistinguishable in many respects from groupings that might be found in the business world. Large university based research teams have highly organized systems for gaining and retaining funding, complex reporting and appointment procedures, and hierarchical management structures. They market themselves, aggressively at times, in a myriad of different ways. These might include, for some or all team members: appearing at the right conferences, contacting the media, meeting officials and Ministers and others with deep pockets, publishing strategically, and repackaging findings to make them more easily understood and palatable. If individual researchers might be said to be becoming more machine-like under the PBRF, research teams can be seen as the embodiment of a factory of well-oiled machines, all working harmoniously in a process of relentless production.

The dystopian character of this unfolding reality is revealed not just in the tendency toward conformity that is built into the PBRF regime but in the propensity among academics to *not* see themselves in this way. Defenders of the PBRF and of the neoliberal turn in tertiary education policy might point to jostling over the meaning of results from earlier assessment rounds, or to questions that are asked about the weightings given to different parts of a portfolio, or to concerns expressed that the scheme favors

some tertiary institutions over others, as evidence against this claim. How, it might be asked, can the system be seen as conformist when there is such healthy debate? Yet, such contestation remains within a tightly circumscribed circle of possible positions and utterances. Academics are *not* encouraged to step back and see the PBRF from a broader philosophical and political perspective. Disputes emerge over the way the competition operates, not over whether competition should be the basis for tertiary education life in the first place.

Universities in New Zealand have a statutory obligation to serve as the ‘critic and conscience of society’. Yet, of all the goals Vice-Chancellors and others in positions of power set for themselves, this would undoubtedly rank among the lowest. At best, it becomes just another bullet point buried somewhere beneath a list of ‘strategic objectives’. For the most part, neither individual academics nor their leaders are held to account for failing to uphold this legal responsibility. To be sure, it is not the PBRF alone that prevents the ‘critic and conscience’ role being taken seriously. It can be said, however, that there is nothing in the PBRF that provides a strong incentive for committing intellectual energy to this role. To the contrary: time spent in social activism or critique will, unless this leads to measurable ‘outputs’ (and these must be ‘quality assured’), be wasted in PBRF terms.

The PBRF, in keeping with earlier neoliberal developments in tertiary education, discourages academics from seeing the world otherwise. Alternatives can be considered but only if they are consistent with the logic Lyotard described more than three decades ago: the ongoing commodification of knowledge, an emphasis on performativity, and a commitment to competition. Building a counter discourse to such dominant trends will be extraordinarily difficult and will require a longer term perspective. With the PBRF now such an entrenched part of tertiary education culture in New Zealand, it is difficult to imagine research life beyond it. But policy changes over the last quarter century need to be viewed as one moment in a history of a thousand years. The university as an institution dates back to at least the Middle Ages, and arguably has its roots in even earlier times with the formation of the ancient Greek academy. Neoliberalism may be leaving a deep imprint on contemporary policy thinking, but the ideas and practices consistent with it will not remain dominant for ever.

Indeed, there are already some promising signs that neoliberalism is lessening its hold over the hearts and minds of many younger people who will become tomorrow's leaders. While the dystopian features of the academic present are clearly evident, the promise of a revival of an older spirit of utopian social reform, in a manner appropriate to the times, has by no means disappeared. The Occupy Movements that started in places such as Wall Street in the United States and have subsequently swept around the world – in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, among other places – provide grounds for legitimate hope that the forms of subtle control so essential to neoliberalism will not be guaranteed safe passage. The deep social divisions created by global neoliberal capitalism have spawned a new sense of shared responsibility in many quarters, including pockets of the academy. University students are among those who, as Henry Giroux (2011a) so eloquently puts it, 'tell us that the social visions embedded in casino capitalism and deeply authoritarian regimes have lost their ability to normalize their values as well as their power to intimidate and silence through threats, coercion, and state violence' (p. 12). Many of these students recognise that they have come to be seen as disposable servants of late capitalist economies. They have built up huge debts seeking the gains promised to them by higher education and they have been let down. They see the hypocrisy in politicians making cuts to public spending, while providing tax breaks for the wealthy few (Giroux, 2011b, pp. 1-2). These young people, protesting now, are in some cases the professors of the future.

Universities have an important ongoing role to play in examining these movements, setting them in their broader historical and political contexts, and showing how they are connected to other struggles against greed and the commodification of everyday life. Researchers cannot remain neutral in the face of this push for change. 'Why', Giroux (2011b) asks, 'do so many academics cling to a notion of disinterested and objective scholarship and publish and make a claim to pedagogy that allegedly decries any relationship to politics, power or interest in larger social issues?' (p. 3). The answer, he says, is that 'for all intents and purposes, too many academics who make a claim to objectivity, and, in some cases, reject the presence of the military-industrial-academic complex on campus, have become irrelevant to offering any viable defense of the university as a democratic public sphere, or, for that matter, even defending to a broader

public the very conditions that make their work possible' (p. 3). This is not to say that academics set out to deliberately undermine the democratic and critical ideals the university is meant to uphold; it is more a matter of such questions not being raised. Or, to be more precise, it might be said that, over time, deep immersion in a culture of commodification and performativity inhibits one's ability to truly *hear* what is being said by others. The first step, then, is to begin listening to students (p. 4). Getting involved may mean joining an occupation, but a contribution can also be made through critical teaching, 'risky' research, and a willingness to enter into dialogue with those positioned as 'Others' in neoliberal times.

A path forward lies not in attempting to return to a romanticized version of the university of the past but in acknowledging the importance of the tension between ideals and realities. I support a more collegial, cooperative, democratic approach to tertiary education. That these features of university life have been so heavily compromised by recent policy changes does not mean they were always honored exemplary fashion in the past. The universities of old were, of course, elitist not just in an academic sense but in class terms, and only children from the most privileged families could attend. There has never been a single, 'pure' source of motivation for pursuing knowledge and undertaking research, and the 'publish or perish' phenomenon was well established before the arrival of neoliberalism and the PBRF. The PBRF has, however, systematized what was hitherto enacted in a more ad hoc way. It has made research more individualistic, more competitive, more 'outputs' driven than ever before. In so doing, it has reduced 'knowledge' to a shallow imitation of its former self and narrowed conceptions of what counts as worthwhile research. The PBRF, by elevating the idea of performance above all else, has dehumanized academic activity and contributed to the incremental process of turning universities into corporations.

What is needed, I believe, is a gradual but substantial shift in thinking: from the exaggerated certainties of neoliberalism and policy developments such as the PBRF to the uncertainty and questioning that has always characterized creative intellectual life; from the artificial tidiness of a well-ordered system for ranking academics as 'A', 'B', 'C', or 'R' to a more nuanced and well rounded assessment of achievements (and then only when strictly necessary); from the logic of performance and the language of outputs

to the notion of rich, complex research cultures; from the narrowness of a one-size-fits-all approach to economic and social life to a careful, open-minded consideration of alternatives; from a focus on the idea of the self-interested individual researcher to a view of academics as dialogical beings, committed to inquiry with others and to the pursuit of better worlds.

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