

The academics vs the bureaucracy

21 SEPTEMBER 2016

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The Research Excellence Framework (REF), the UK-wide review of higher-education research, is the bane of British academia. When the historians of the future look back on the REF – and its predecessor, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – it will no doubt be remembered as one of the most damaging bureaucratic exercises to ever afflict the academy.

Under the REF, universities are required to demonstrate the social, cultural and economic ‘impact’ of their research, as well as their overall research output. And, as the REF in part determines the allocation of funding, university administrations are desperate to play ball, distorting academic life for the sake of raking in more research money. No longer do individual academics pursue knowledge for its own sake. Willingly, or unwillingly, they try to be ‘REFable’, and show that their work has ‘impact’. It’s a brutal bureaucratic game. If an academic doesn’t jump through the hoops, their career is over. Universities are no longer willing to give academics the space and the time they need to produce great work.

Sadly, things are due to get much worse. In August, a review of the REF, commissioned by universities minister Jo Johnson and led by Lord Stern, was published. If the recommendations of the report – titled, *Building on Success and Learning From Experience* – are implemented, there’s a very good chance the university, as it has been constituted for centuries, will be no more.

The review set out to tackle several concerns raised about the REF. One central concern was that universities were ‘buying in’ leading academics just before the REF census so they could claim the outputs and the impact the academics brought with them. To resolve the problem, Stern proposes giving ownership of outputs to the university in which they are produced. So, when an academic

moves jobs, they can't take their outputs with them, and thus bump up their new employer's score.

Some are concerned about the burden this new system will place on academics individually, who might be discouraged from taking new jobs for fear of having to produce reams of new work once they arrive. But what has been overlooked is the impact this will have on the academy as a whole. The university is made up of individual academics pursuing their research. If you sever academics from their work, then that is the end of the university as we know it. Unfortunately, university administrations will no doubt welcome the move – seeing as it will increase the power of the bureaucracy over academics.

But that's not all. Stern also says universities should submit 'institutional level impact case studies', showcasing interdisciplinary and collaborative efforts. This is an attack on academic subjects that will further empower the bureaucracy. What's more, where previously universities were free to select and submit their best researchers to the REF, Stern suggests that all staff with 'any significant responsibility to undertake research' should be submitted. While, on the surface, this might seem fair enough, it will lead to sharp distinctions being drawn between teaching and research staff. In professional subjects such as education, this will mean teaching-only contracts for many.

University bureaucracies love league tables. They will embrace the Stern report because it will mean more power for faceless committees and less power for individual academics. But if they accept Stern's recommendations, they will bring about the end of the university. Academics are often complacent about responding to consultations, but, this time around, they should pull their fingers out. What Stern is proposing amounts to intellectual theft. All academics should respond, and do their bit to defend the university.

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