

The Performance Based Research Fund – an increasing barrier to innovation within universities.

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This contribution was prompted by the Productivity Commission issues paper and has been published through on-line newsletters of the Tertiary Education Union. I fully support the call by the president of the Union, Sandra Grey, that it is time to change a system which is increasingly undermining many of the wider goals of tertiary education as discussed in the issues paper. Gains are increasingly questionable, as academics have been ‘incentivized’ to ‘salami slice’ research, and to keep focused on narrow subject areas and the publishing interests of journals mostly based in the United States and Britain, at the expense of multidiscipline issues of importance for New Zealand.

University work has been a second career for me, including a PhD about New Zealand’s adoption of New Public Management ideas in the 1980s and 1990s, and their longer term impact. This was published as a book *Obedient Servants? Management freedoms and accountabilities in the New Zealand public sector* (Victoria University Press, 2003).

While much of the rest of the public sector has moved beyond the ‘outputs’ management of the 1980s and 1990s, universities are increasingly siloed and held back from innovation by the PBRF. Systems which focus excessively on measures end up with ‘goal displacement’ – where the measures become the goals. What matters is no longer the pursuit of new knowledge, individual enthusiasm or effort to make a difference to a community or subject area – just retrospective numbers about where research has been published. The PBRF probably had a useful impact in its first two rounds, of challenging traditional practices; as it has become ‘bureaucratized’ its effects are increasingly damaging.

An American based accreditation agency for business schools uses the terms ‘engagement, innovation and impact’ as a counter to ‘publish or perish’ systems of the United States. These outcomes seek balance between teaching, research and community engagement. Currently the supposed objectivity of numbers about research means this part of university work dominates.

School, Faculty and University managers are locked into a numbers driven performance system which has relatively few dollars at stake, but reputational issues which prompt ‘gaming’ of results. Such techniques have included offering ‘voluntary’ severance packages to academics whose publishing records might lower the overall university score, and through offering special incentives to academics from around the world who can boost a university’s score. These managerial strategies have reduced staff engagement, reduced commitment to teaching and significantly reduced staff involvement with issues of importance to New Zealand communities, but of little interest to journal editors mostly based in the US and Europe.

The PBRF has limited innovation by introducing short cycle performance reviews which push for ‘outputs’ rather than ‘outcomes’. Legislation was changed in 2013 to focus the wider public service on outcomes (also termed purpose or results). Universities are locked into a 1980s form of thinking about public sector management – university productivity and innovation will be well served by the Productivity Commission calling for an end to this outmoded practice.