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Performance Anxiety: Audit Culture and the Neoliberal New Zealand University

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Abstract

This essay considers the role of audit culture and research output measurement regimes in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It explores the nature of neoliberalism and how it has worked its way into research and publishing, as well as departmental and teaching, contexts. This forms an important part of what Alison Hearn has called the promotional university, complete with bibliometrics and the attendant disciplinary mechanisms that work to produce "productive" researchers.

Keywords: audit culture, neoliberalism, research output measurement, academic publishing, Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Performance Anxiety: Audit Culture and the Neoliberal New Zealand University

The neoliberal university, and the attendant rise of auditing mechanisms that is part and parcel of a deepening of managerial culture now a central force as so many tertiary institutions, has lately been the subject of a number of scholarly articles, academic think-pieces, and newspaper editorials. The symposium held at Linköping University in November 2014, dedicated to examining publishing and its relation to public knowledge, allowed scholars from a number of countries to consider, as well as challenge, this phenomena in more detail, with a number of those participating drawing on personal accounts of the pernicious ways in which audit culture and its imperatives have been utilised as disciplining tools. As a way of contributing to this discussion, focusing on a phenomenon that is strengthening its grip on more and more tertiary institutions around the world, I want to briefly consider the PBRF, the Performance Based Research Fund, which is New Zealand's own take on auditing techniques designed to enumerate and evaluate research quality, as it has had a series impact on publishing and thus academics', as well was universities', relationships to public knowledge. The PBRF is similar in many respects to managerial regimes introduced in other countries, such as the UK's REF and Australia's ERA, but it is worth outlining some of its imperatives in a local context, how some of these have been put into practice in certain institutions, and point to some of its consequences, as they are germane to larger debates and discussions being had about a changing research and publishing environment in the contemporary university. As a part of an ongoing reconfiguration of the tertiary sector along neoliberal lines, where notions of accountability, responsibility, entrepreneurialism proliferate, the PBRF, as with other audit regimes, has notable impact not only upon research and publishing but on scholarly culture more generally.

The model for audit regimes was started in the UK in the 1980s, with the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) instituted in 1992, later renamed the Research Excellence Framework (REF) beginning in 2008. In Hong Kong, the Quality Assurance Audit was begun in 2007. In Australia, following the RAE model, initiated the ERA in 2007. Across the Tasman, New Zealand's PBRF was introduced in 2002, by the then Labour government as a way of addressing concerns about accountability and quality in the tertiary sector, but of also tying funding to research outputs rather than student population numbers, relying on notions of accountability and the potential for developing funding partnerships (this emphasis tends to favour the hard sciences over the social sciences and the humanities, with both the latter further marginalized in funding). The model adopted was based on comparisons made between a number of quality-evaluation models found in other coun-

tries, with particular focus on Australia, the UK, and Hong Kong as countries with similar tertiary institutional structures. As with many other audit mechanisms, the PBRF is based on the principle of peer review, with expert panels, made up of regional and international scholars, with different disciplinary groupings assigned the task of grading evidence portfolios (EPs) submitted by individual researchers. In the most recent round, completed in 2012, EPs were made up of three main sections: a list of nominated research outputs (NROs, which includes quality-assured books, articles, chapters, and so on); peer esteem (PE, which includes prizes/awards, invitations to review, requests to give addresses, evaluate grant proposals, favourable citations); and contributions to the research environment (CRE, which includes external funding grants, supervisions, facilitating research networks, etc.). After the most recent round, numerous modifications were made in order to better streamline the various processes for the 2018 deadline.

The PBRF is tied to individual grades in the first instance, unlike many other quality-evaluation exercises elsewhere, which tend to be aggregate grades based on preferentially selected portfolios of a programme or department. In the PBRF, an academic's EP is given a letter grade (A, B, C, "research inactive," or "emerging researcher"), with differential funding tied to each letter grade. Programme members' grades are then clustered together and given a cumulative ranking, then placed in a league table model which pits these programmes against similar programmes at other universities in New Zealand (though these are often difficult to weigh as equivalent across institutions; for example, the Media Studies programme at Victoria University is the only stand alone media studies programme in the country, with other programmes in New Zealand bringing together in their programmes some combination of film, communications, journalism, English literature, and/or television studies).

In New Zealand, the PBRF has become the preferred instrument of the new managerialism that has encroached upon many contemporary universities. It is operationalized around research 'outputs' and 'outcomes', further entrenching rhetorically and materially the cultures of quantification and instrumentalization benchmarks that have become hallmarks of the neoliberal university. The PBRF now provides one of the primary means for supporting research in tertiary education institutions (amounting to approximately 20% of research funds). Its centrality to research funding has also become even more salient due to a situation wherein the ruling conservative National government has frozen university funding for the past five years (and having recently been re-elected, there is no indication this will change). As part, and some might suggest the preferred goal, of this calculus, the PBRF engenders different scales of competition and productivity, as well as instituting a means for more directly monitoring and disciplining those who are not performing up to pre-determined standards.

With that background context and a rough sketch of what has previously been at stake in the New Zealand university system, let me illustrate with an anecdote

some of the consequences of the PBRF as a disciplining mechanism. In 2009, Victoria University of Wellington, where I lecture in Media Studies, ran a mid-cycle 'mock PBRF' internal round. As the PBRF is on six-year cycle, this mid-point exercise was in anticipation of the round ending in 2012. At this particular juncture, Victoria, which had ranked fourth in the previous PBRF round (out of eight institutions), introduced an interim intervention, in which academic staff we asked to submit for internal consideration their portfolios in progress. Many staff were initially suspicious and skeptical, in no small part because the PBRF process is meant to be confidential (and not tied to promotion, a point I'll get to later), and felt this was an effort on behalf of the university to circumvent this, and in part because staff were asked to do this at a time when they were at the tail end of a year of teaching and thus in the midst of grading or trying to finish up various research/writing projects. As a result, many staff did the bare minimum required. The internal review panels were made up of senior staff, Deans and heads of various university research committees. Shortly thereafter, once these portfolios, such as they were, had been vetted, it was estimated by the union that more than half of the university's academic staff received a form letter advising them that their grades were not at the level Vic would like them to be (the preferred grade being a 'B'). This lot of staff were advised that they had three months to improve their grade or face probation and increased surveillance of their progress, with meetings with Heads of School on a regular basis. The union dutifully took notice of this, highlighting the bad faith in which the process unfolded, and eventually forced the University to withdraw the letters.

In the long run, however, this mid-cycle review and this disciplinary threat appeared to have had the desired effect. At the end this last round, completed in 2012, Victoria University climbed the ranks to "number one" research institute in New Zealand. That 'victory', however, was one which was forged out of academics working furiously to produce portfolios which could be anywhere from 40,000 to 60,000 words in length, in which they were required to dip into a litany of synonyms and superlatives to describe research as 'innovative', 'groundbreaking', 'creative', 'influential', etc. This was complemented by a phalanx of people, postgraduate students and editing and PR professionals, conscripted to search out further and expand up research-relevant material (citations, various other bibliometrics, etc). Various schools around the university dipped into their research funds, or were given access to newly released monies, to hire a cadre of postgraduate students to serve as editors who met with staff to discuss how best to recast their portfolios to play to their "strengths." The university then hired a number of external editors, to give the final portfolios a rhetorical spit and polish. In the mad rush to the finish line, there was money made available to staff for tutorial buy-outs, publishing subventions, and the hiring of research assistants to aid and abet the process. The situation at other universities was much the same. There were, as one might expect, departmental restructurings and job losses, as well as strategic

hirings, around the country. There were also number of attempts to 'game the system', which were noted in the national newspaper as well, engendering a tiny scandal, which universities quietly failed to address. In the end, results were engineered in some fashion or other at all universities, and each institution chose to spin the results in whatever way was most favourable to particular strengths.

In a slightly more insidious way, this sense of inter-institutional competition can work intra-institutionally against the camaraderie of a School, a programme or department, particularly in a context where individuals rather than entire programmes are being graded. As Julie Cupples (2012) has argued about the PBRF, this means that workplace collegiality and responsibility are threatened by the way in which 'the top-down surveillance of the PBRF is matched by lateral surveillance', disciplined subjects working to also discipline others (Cupples 2012: 18). Such lateral surveillance is for Cupples, citing Mark Andrejevic, an outcome of 'the increasingly elaborate and productive specification of the monitored body… a "redoubling of the panoptic gaze"' (ibid). Indeed, 'the self-inciting spiral of productivity' in which we get caught up makes lateral surveillance a defining aspect of this form of governmentality. This is the ideological dimension of the PBRF as institutional incarnation of neo-liberalism:

> We internalise a set of expectations, pressuring ourselves and those around us. Arguably, the PBRF apparatus relies on these forms of sideward monitoring, simply because it can only be concerned with outputs, not input behaviours. The danger in such processes is that we make our actions legible and calculable in order to gain the recognition that the PBRF requires of us but also lose sight of alternative ways of being in the academy. (ibid)

The lingering effect of the mid-cycle 'mock PBRF' and the final outcome is one founded increasingly on the university's attempts to mobilize academics' research labour in a way that took advantage of the PBRF-as-neoliberal-tool's destabilising effects. This particular mid-cycle moment referred to earlier was revealing, and the union's swift response took them by surprise, notably with regard to the uneasy situation of academic labour in New Zealand, where there is no tenure and unions have been gradually weakened through over thirty years of successive neoliberal governments. This also in relation to an evaluative mechanism marked by an unevenness in terms of the disciplines it tends to prefer (science, maths, medicine tend to perform better in terms of outputs than humanities subjects), gender (where male academics have been seen to "outperform" female academics), and the seniority of staff (statistically senior staff do better than junior staff). With regard to this last point, in these academic auditing exercises and the larger institutional contexts in which they are deployed, recently hired academics, as emerging researchers, can also find themselves in an unpredictable academic climate, just finding their footing at the same time being made aware of the increasingly precarious nature of academic labour in New Zealand. In this context, they are placed in a position of tallying up academic outputs as part of the PBRF exercise

in a situation that can be unsettling. Emerging researchers find themselves in the uneasy position of simply 'perpetuating the individualistic and competitive goals of the system' (Tynan and Garbett 2007: 412), in which the university is increasingly framed as an individually competitive one.

Along these lines, as Lisa Lucas has argued, the REF in the UK allowed universities to differentiate themselves from one another based on 'research esteem' and that these feelings have trickled down to departments and individual academics. The emphasis placed on the "academic currencies" of publications in international refereed journals and research grants disadvantage those who are unable or unwilling to play the 'research game' (Lucas 2007). The kind of intellectual capital being accrued through quality publications is one form these currencies take. Another form emerges out of a system that in New Zealand works to further divide and conquer, where the ongoing commodification of research and publishing has led, as some have commented in reference to the fetish for bibliometrics in these exercises, to a sort of citational bloat or padding, a consequence of a system that seeks to evaluate quality on the basis of peer esteem.

As a counterpoint, and site of resistance to these regimes, Hine Jane Waitere, et al, conclude a discussion of how best to work in New Zealand universities to preserve the integrity of an academic identity with a powerful suggestion, and with particular reference to Maori and gender politics as critical vantage points:

> Our identities as academics from our particular backgrounds are realised, revitalised and affirmed in community. Collective support is a part of indigenous values, expressed in the Maori language as *whanaungatanga*. Feminism espouses non-hierarchical, non-individualised ways of working and the working class ethic affirms solidarity. Early career academics require mentoring and support to understand the research process. And academics arriving in this country from overseas should be able to count on hospitality (in Maori, *manakitanga* – the caring that should be shown by the hosts to the visitors) to enable them to feel at home in a new environment. Our stories exemplify the core value of community within academia, which should be preserved at all costs from the abrasive and destructive impact of PBRF. (Waitere et al 2011: 215)

Or as Tynan and Garbett assert (in making a claim for more collaborative work, but one which should resonate also for those who work solo, but not necessarily alone):

> We may not be as powerless as we thought. We have, in using our voices here, challenged the order of the way things are done. On one level we have entered the system, recognised the game for what it has to offer, but have refused to lose ourselves within it. We have realised that we want more than a step up the ladder and, certainly, more than a list of research outputs. The total sum of what we represent and give in the higher education system will not be measured by research alone. (Tynan and Garbet 2007: 423)

Taking on board some of these suggestions is strategically useful as working to develop a bulwark against the always expanding regimes of accountability and managerialism that are colonising all aspects of university life. However, it is

worth noting, that in terms of incentivising research and publications, the PBRF as a disciplining mechanism is not entirely without merit. It certainly encourages staff to complete articles, book chapters and even books (although, those are not strictly encouraged, as peer-reviewed work is deemed to have more academic capital), and universities did find ways to facilitate this. At the same time, as much as the process was driven by top-down managerialism and its imperatives for more and more quality-assured outputs, there was across universities throughout New Zealand many attempts to approach the process from the bottom up, where colleagues would work together on portfolios, and where senior staff could take leadership roles to mentor junior staff in how best to maximise the number and reach of their publications.

To reiterate, the PBRF, a very blunt instrument, may not be entirely negative in its ability to affect research outcomes. As Cupples and others have noted, it does appear to produce productive subjects. It appears as a not-so-ironic catalyst for academic publishing, with countless articles appearing in a range of disciplines, from nursing to geography, political science, accounting, to education focusing on the PBRF. As Cupples also argues,

> surveillance and audit breed counter-surveillance and counter-audit, and managerial strategies become hybridised by tactics. By such means, university faculty and students in New Zealand and elsewhere have increasingly turned their gaze on managers, scrutinising their activities as far as is possible, questioning their motives and their authority. (Cupples 2012: 21)

This is perhaps too hopeful a turning of the tables, in my estimation, but it points to moments and potential modes of resistance, however temporary they may prove. In part, this is because the PBRF has changed the institutional habitus at universities throughout New Zealand, in ways both Foucault and Bourdieu would have no doubt recoiled. I make reference to that earlier anecdote, because in the wake of this particular process, a disingenuous one I should add as staff had no idea that the results would be mobilized in such a threatening and coercive way, Victoria has used the very content of that letter as a warning to staff no enriched as of as we embark on the next internal mid-cycle, where senior lecturers and above are expected to attain a 'B' grade or expect disciplinary action. And while the PBRF, we have been told, was never meant to be explicitly tied to promotions, we are now instructed to fill out our promotion applications using the PBRF template listing our preferred publications.

While we may find these metrics of quality problematic and paradoxical in the ways they interpellate us as researchers and academics, let me finish on a slightly more positive note. I occasionally teach a course on advertising and consumer culture, the last week of which I dedicate to the neoliberal self and the neoliberal university, drawing upon two articles by Alison Hearn, highlighting in particular her updating of Andrew Wernick's notion of promotional culture. The articles are two sides of the institutional coin, and can be usefully articulated to one another,

one which talks about the branded self, 'Brand You', the other which considers in more detail 'Brand U' as in the promotional university. I like to also share with them some of the promotional ads, both video and still images, that the university has produced over the years. They are full of the kind of motivational and aspirational rhetoric you would expect from a university, slogans such as "Know Your Mind," and in this respect are not much different from other universities around the world. As you might also imagine, however, the 'success' of Victoria as a research institution was embraced by the university (and, I should note, some staff) and wholeheartedly foregrounded in recruitment campaigns nationally and internationally. As Hearn reminds us, citing Carrocci, in these promotional campaigns students are 'rhetorically positioned as the subjects of transformation' (Hearn 2010: 213) and are sold the idea that university experiences and credentials will add to their potential as highly individuated, promotional selves. The university experience is presented as a 'lifestyle choice, where brochures brag of… great social and sports events, and plentiful student services, so students will not have to compromise their already well-established consumer lifestyles' (ibid). In these contexts, where students (and staff as we are all too aware) are expected to entrepreneurialize themselves, they are encouraged, as Hearn notes, drawing from Coté and Allahar, to be 'architects of their own destiny' (ibid: 213). 'Know Your Mind' indeed.

I think it is incumbent upon us to enlighten students about the changing terms of the contracts, between them and the university, between the university and academics, and between us and them, contracts increasingly shaped by discourses of individualism, and, more so, entrepreneurialism, with contract being a word I use noting its many connotations, formal and informal, legal and social, etc., noting how their terms and conditions can always be subject to adjustment and sometimes contestation. Usually, for example, at this point in the course, I like to remind students that academic staff, too, are being evaluated, 'graded,' for their research, and that there's a reason some people 'disappear;' not for being poor teachers, but for not abiding by the rules of the research 'game,' of 'failing to fulfil their contract' with the university. The idea here is to make students aware of the changes that have been unfolding at the university for some time, but to alert them also to the particular modes of interpellation increasingly defining the academic apparatus, as well as indicate that we, staff and students alike, are all being hailed as subjects in/to/of the neoliberal university. Here, their situation can be effectively if unevenly articulated to that of academics as well, and there might be found here moments of solidarity, glimpses of another way of collectively being good university citizens. This has the potential to be a political position that confounds the dominant logic which does its utmost to coerce us into becoming rational agents working under a managerial aegis gaining capital, cultural and intellectual, only to better position themselves and their labour aspirationally, thereby becoming better saleable commodities in the marketplace, all of us. The project

now seems to be one in which we better understand the ways and means of becoming simultaneously productive and ethical subjects, as students and academics finding creative and constructive ways to better resist and push back against the managerial imperatives of the neoliberal university, becoming more responsible and less accountable, in ways which preserve and call attention to the democratic and empathetic modes of engaging with peers, reaching across the many different constituencies at the institution, as well as tending to the learning and researching environment in which we do what we do.

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