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A perspective on official research performance evaluation in tourism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the characteristics of performance based research funding systems (PBRFS) and what they mean for academic researchers in tourism. PBRFS are ways of allocating public research funds based on the performance of an individual or group during a stipulated period. The core characteristics of national systems are described - they involve an assessment of the quality of research outputs and related matters – but not the detail of each system (the emphasis of each often changes). Particular attention is paid to Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. By revealing the operation of PBRFS, readers will be able to develop bespoke approaches to career planning that reflect their personal circumstances and outlook.

KEYWORDS

Research quality	Research evaluation	Research funding
Research performance	Research policy	Career planning

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Rhodri Thomas is Professor of Tourism at Leeds Beckett University, UK. He is a member of the Economic and Social Research Council's Peer Evaluation College and served as a member of the Business and Economics Panel of New Zealand's 2018 Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF).

Introduction

The UK government first introduced performance evaluation of university research in 1986 as a means of allocating research monies. It did so via what was then termed the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which subsequently became the Research Excellence Framework (REF). At the time, the linking of research funding to demonstrable research performance represented a radical departure from existing practice. The expectation was that this new approach would lead to an increase in the volume of research and an improvement in quality as higher education institutions engaged in a competition for funding by improving performance. Several countries subsequently adopted performance-based research funding systems (PBRFS), perhaps most notably Australia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand and a growing number of European countries (Hermanu, et al., 2021; Ta et al., 2021; Zacharewicz, 2019). Many higher education evaluation and national ranking systems that do not 'qualify' as PBRFS also display some of their characteristics (Pardo-Guerra, 2022).

This chapter considers the characteristics PBRFS and what they mean for academic researchers. The nuances of national systems are not examined (the emphasis of each often changes) and few concrete suggestions about academic practice are offered. Instead, by revealing the operation of PBRFS, readers will be able to develop bespoke approaches to career planning that also reflect personal circumstances and outlook. Clearly, values and personal dispositions will influence the decision-making of individuals; some will seek out ways of maximising the metrics associated with their work while others might resist what they might see as distorting and damaging pressures. Perhaps most will navigate a middle way.

It is appropriate to acknowledge the context within which national research policy development takes place and the diversity of the higher education sector, both within and between countries. National research policies as they relate to PBRFS are inflected with broader neoliberal discourses that conceptualise universities as being engaged in marketoriented competition for students, staff and income (including research income) or, at least, that market-type (competitive) mechanisms are an effective way of distributing resources (Smyth, 2017; Jones, 2022). This, of course, contrasts with systems where the state intervenes by, perhaps, linking student numbers with the perceived needs of the economy and society.

Against this backdrop, public policy narratives tend to emphasise notions of transparency and fairness, whereby funding decisions reflect performance or merit. As the source of funding is from general taxation, it is often held that research monies should increasingly also generate non-academic impacts so that economic and social welfare are enhanced. The adoption of corporate managerial practices is a logical corollary if institutions are to 'do well' in such systems (Davis and Farrell, 2016).

The debates about the consequences of neoliberal approaches to higher education are rehearsed elsewhere (see for example Smythe, 2017; Jones, 2022). It is germane to note, in passing, that the growth in volume of universities over recent decades, and their contrasting missions, influence how organisations relate to research policy (for an account of the variety, see Watts, 2017). This implies that caution must be exercised when making generalisations about universities and performance-based research funding regimes.

The spread of performance-based university research funding, nevertheless, has consequences for the work of many academics. As others have pointed out, promotion prospects are often tied to what institutions regard as important, and 'importance' often relates to how research and related activities will be evaluated. Thus, an individual's ability to publish, their capacity to attract research grants and - increasingly – their capability to generate non-academic impact have become prominent yardsticks (Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler, 2014; Pardo-Guerra, 2022; Whitfield, 2023). These, in turn, suggest that to be successful, academic researchers need to develop a range of skills that extend beyond research.

The characteristics of Performance-based research funding systems (PBRFS)

Prior to exploring the (potential) response of academics to the policies spawned by national PBRFS, it is important to appreciate their parameters. This avoids conflating various other forms of research evaluation that may also influence the practices of academics. These include the international ranking of research by non-official or commercial organisations such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (the so-called Shanghai ranking) https://www.shanghairanking.com/rankings/gras/2022/RS0513) or the those constructed

by the *The Higher* (<u>https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings</u>), both of which are influenced substantially by research performance.

Hicks (2012) provides a useful starting point for defining PRBFS by listing five essential criteria:

- Research quality is the focus of evaluation and not that of degree programmes, for example;
- Research evaluation is *ex post* rather than considering research proposals or funding applications (such as those required by research councils);
- Research outputs are central to the evaluation, rather than research student (PhD) numbers and external grant funding;
- Government funding is informed by the research evaluation exercise;
- It is a national system of evaluation.

The agencies responsible for the evaluation of research performance vary from ministries of state to dedicated arms-length agencies who then inform those responsible for budget allocations. Timelines for evaluation also differ in terms of frequency of evaluation and are not stable (i.e they change as national PBRFS evolve). Some, such as those in Australia and Norway, used to require annual data to inform budget allocations, whereas in New Zealand and Hong Kong, assessments were held every three years. Intervals in the UK are usually longer (up to seven years) (Hicks, 2012).

The rationale used for the introduction and maintenance of PBRFS has common elements. Drawing on the work of others, Hicks (2012) identifies six aspects to the most prevalent rationales: (a) improving the productivity of researchers (increased volume of outputs without additional investment), (b) encouraging strategic research planning in universities by offering them the discretion to determine how funding should be used (unlike 'responsive mode funding' which prescribes the projects to be funded), (c) promoting stronger links between researchers and the wider population, (d) strengthening the ability of universities to be 'agile' and responsive to emerging agenda, (e) gaining efficiencies by limiting the role of government to research policy formulation rather than policy formulation and delivery, and finally, (f) strengthening accountability by focusing on outputs and outcomes rather than structures, processes and narratives.

Within these broad ideas, most systems also emphasise selectivity and the funding of excellence. This means rewarding those that perform well with additional resources so that they can continue to engage in research that deliver the benefits anticipated by officials. For many, the egalitarian language is little more than a veneer that fails to acknowledge the historic advantage of some institutions (i.e. those who have traditionally attracted government funding), that evaluation in inevitably superficial and confirms existing hierarchies (Bishop, 2021). Moreover, it is suggested that those operating in fields or disciplines that are seen as marginal (or are perhaps marginalised) also fail to attract significant impact (Thomas, 2018).

Some forms of PBRFS are bureaucratically intense and expensive to operate. By one estimate, the UK's 2014 exercise cost almost £250m or some \$310m (USD) and accounted for approximately 2.4% of the total expected budget of the research funding agencies (Else, 2015). Cost estimates of the most recent exercise have yet to be published. Clearly, the cost of PBRFS depend upon their methods of evaluation.

National systems of research performance evaluation fall broadly into three categories: ones where the unit of evaluation is the university (e.g. several countries in Europe), the department, though the term is used loosely to encompass clusters of expertise organised accordingly (e.g. Australia, the UK and Hong Kong), and – perhaps most dauntingly on face value – those systems that operate at the level of the individual (e.g. Spain and New Zealand). Timeframes range from annually to six or seven years.

Predictably, the design of evaluations varies. Some use the number of papers published and/or citations, as key dimensions of performance. These and other bibliometric approaches have tended to be used mainly for university level evaluations (Hicks, 2012). For many, bibliometric-led evaluation of research outputs fails to replicate the 'richness' of peer-review model (e.g. Grove, 2022) but adds a layer (perhaps a veneer) of objectivity.

Performance based research evaluation in tourism

Several commentators have pointed to the growing maturity of research in tourism. The number of journals in the field – now estimated to be more than 200 (<u>www.ciret-tourism.com/index/listes_revues.html</u>) - is often used as confirmatory evidence. Perhaps of greater significance is its inclusion as a district and separate field in official evaluations. As the three PBRFS described below show, there is yet no consensus on where tourism should be aligned withing broader cognate areas. In the UK, for example, it is positioned as part of a unit of assessment that includes sport, whereas in New Zealand it is grouped with marketing which is situated within a broader category of business and economics.

This official recognition has not prevented some influential commentators from suggesting that tourism research is at the periphery of the research policy landscape (e.g. Airey et al, 2015). It is noteworthy that the 2014 assessment of research performance in the UK included tourism within the title of a unit for the first time and that this was repeated for the 2021 exercise. The unit is entitled Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism (Unit 24).

Commenting on the growing maturity of the field, the review at the end of the 2014 assessment stated:

Tourism research had improved noticeably since RAE2008 the panel was pleased to see greater and more effective engagement with theory and outputs with considerable methodological rigour. There was an increase in original, significant and rigorous overview papers reviewing the field and testament to the maturing nature and contribution of the subject area. The sub-panel also assessed world-leading tourism research that employed innovative methods of analysis of large and new datasets. The sub-panel was pleased to see a larger number of submissions from event management researchers (even though) this field is still at an earlier stage of maturity (REF, 2015: 117).

The position of tourism research has a different history in Australia. Thus, the number of submissions made by universities in 2012 with tourism as formal units of evaluation was lower than previously. The suggestion is that university strategists limited the number

because ratings for tourism were lower than other areas in business and management with none achieving the top score (Airey, et al, 2015). As is shown below, the level of performance changed in 2018 as two units excelled.

PBRFS and Tourism as illustrated by ERA (Australia), PBRF 2018 (New Zealand) and REF 2021 (UK)

<u>Australia</u>

Australia's PBRFS is entitled Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). As its title implies, its aims are to promote and reward excellence in all types of research undertaken by Australian higher education institutions.

As the official documentation notes, the objectives of ERA are to:

- establish an evaluation framework that gives government, industry, business and the wider community assurance of the excellence of research conducted in Australia's higher education institutions
- provide a national stocktake of discipline-level areas of research strength and areas where there is opportunity for development in Australia's higher education institutions
- identify excellence across the full spectrum of research performance
- identify emerging research areas and opportunities for further development
- allow for comparisons of Australia's research nationally and internationally for all discipline areas (ARC, 2019).

The evaluation of research varies slightly by discipline or field of study (units of evaluation) but is underpinned by a concern with research quality, research volume and the nonacademic value of research. From these, a set of principles is used to inform the judgement of expert panels of reviewers. The principles encompass quantitative measures that are internationally recognised, thus allowing for comparability between countries which also extends to comparability between disciplines. In similar vein to other systems of evaluation, there is a concern to ensure that the ability of institutions to game the system are minimised or eradicated. The so-called ERA 2018 Discipline Matrix operationalised these principles for particular subject, though there is disquiet in some quarters over the transparency of their application (<u>https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/do-australias-era-discipline-assessments-really-measure-research-excellence</u>).

This section draws on the State of Australian University Research 2018-19 report https://dataportal.arc.gov.au/ERA/NationalReport/2018/pages/section3/15/1506/. It reports the outcome of the most recent national research performance evaluation (the next is scheduled for 2023). Tourism as a field was located within the broader subject category of 'Commerce, Management, Tourism and Services'. The grading system used for this evaluation was as follows: 5 equates with 'well above world standard'; 4 reflects research performance that is 'above world standard'; 3 indicates that average performance in the grouping evaluated is at world standard; 2 and 1 suggest research that is below or well below world standard. These scores relate only to research quality.

Thirteen institutions submitted a tourism grouping to the most recent evaluation exercise. Between them they amounted to 173 full-time equivalent staff (FTA) who had produced 2440 outputs and generated a research income of almost \$6m. There were no patents or commercial income reported. 63% of outputs were in the form of journal articles, followed by 23% as book chapters and 11% as conference papers.

Two of the submitted units were awarded a top rating (5), one was rated as 4, followed by eight in the 3 category. None received a score of 1. This represented a general improvement in performance in the field according to the growth in volume of institutions submitting to tourism and an increase in the number gaining the top score (for details of rankings, see https://www.universityrankings.com.au/tourism-rankings-2/). As there is usually a gaming of PBRFS, some institutions may have decided to allocate outputs to other fields for tactical advantage.

<u>New Zealand</u>

Research performance evaluation in New Zealand, entitled the Performance Based Research Evaluation (PBRF), focuses on the Evidence Portfolios (EPs) of individual researchers. Each EP contains details of outputs (70% weighting) and other aspects of research performance (Research Contribution) (30%), and is evaluated by a panel comprised of national and international peers. The panel evaluates EPs against agreed quality standards. To achieve an A rating, the EP would contain evidence of world-class outputs and high levels of peer esteem. A C rating, by contrast, would indicate quality assured outputs and some level of peer esteem, perhaps including contributions at institutional level. An R rating would reflect performance that falls short of the minimum expected standards of research quality and contribution (TEC, 2018).

	VEAD	٨	D	C	C(NE)
JUDJECT AREA	TEAN	~	D	Ľ	C(NE)
	2018	6.6%	38.1%	34.6%	20.8%
Accounting and Finance	2012	10.5%	30.1%	42.2%	17.3%
	Variance	-3.9	+8.0	-7.6	+3.5
	2018	8.5%	43.3%	37.3%	11.0%
Economics	2012	12.6%	41.8%	33.6%	12.0%
	Variance	-4.1	+1.5	+3.7	-1.0
Menogement Human Decourses Industrial Deletions	2018	8.8%	50.4%	30.0%	10.8%
Management, Human Resources, Industrial Relations,	2012	5.3%	40.3%	42.8%	11.7%
	Variance	+3.5	+10.1	-12.8	-0.9
	2018	8.4%	41.5%	28.9%	21.3%
Marketing and Tourism	2012	8.9%	37.7%	37.1%	16.3%
	Variance	-0.5	+3.8	-8.2	+5.0

Table 5: Percentage of EPs awarded funded Quality Categories by subject area, 2018 and 2012

Source: <u>https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Publications-and-others/PBRF-</u> 2018/268776b02d/Report-of-the-Moderation-and-Peer-Review-Panels-PBRF-2018-Quality-Evaluation-12-09-2019.pdf p26

The report produced by the Business and Economics Panel noted a narrowing in the performance gap between subjects since the 2012 evaluation. Some of this, they suggest, could be accounted for by the greater use of journal metrics in the earlier evaluation exercise. The emphasis on quality of individual outputs, rather than the status of the journal within which work is published, probably helped improve scores for fields where there are few top-quality journals. Interestingly, the report also noted that for Marketing and Tourism, there was an increase in the number EPs awarded the grade associated with early career researchers. This was taken as a healthy sign for the field. Further, more researchers than previously were awarded the top two grades (TEC, 2018). Unfortunately, it is not possible to separate those in marketing from those in tourism.

United Kingdom (UK)

The purpose of the most recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) was to attain:

- accountability for public funding of research and identify its value;
- data enabling comparison of institutional performance by different stakeholders;
- information to assist in decisions on research funding allocations (REF, 2022).

REF assessed three aspects of research quality: the quality of outputs (60% weighting); the quality of the non-academic impact of research (25% weighting); the quality of the research environment (15% weighting).

The criteria for assessing the quality of outputs were originality, significance, and rigour. Unit 24 attracted 185,594 outputs from universities in REF 2021. Without an intricate assessment of each submission, it is hard to estimate how many of these related to tourism (interested readers with sufficient time could gain access to the data if they so wished because all institutional submissions are available on the REF2021 web site).

Impact was defined as 'the effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'. It was evaluated via a number of case studies submitted by institutions. The number of case studies per institution depended upon the size of the institutional submission (i.e. number of FTEs). The criteria for evaluating impact were 'reach' and 'significance'.

The research environment was assessed to establish how effective universities were in supporting research and facilitating non-academic impact. The formal criteria were 'vitality' and 'sustainability'. In addition to a narrative statement, submissions included number of PhD students and grants secured.

Sub-panel 24 encompassed research that was undertaken by some 1452 FTEs. Of these, some 15% were early career researchers. Individual submissions ranged from 6.5 FTEs to 94.9 FTEs. The average was 24 FTEs.

The results of REF for Unit 24 are reproduced in the table below.

Sub-panel 24: Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism

Table 1: Quality Profiles (FTE weighted) for the UOA

	% 4*	% 3*	% 2*	% 1*	% Unclassified
Output	28.7	55.1	15.1	0.8	0.3
Impact	44.1	40.8	13.6	1.5	0.0
Environment	37.5	39.2	19.5	3.7	0.1
Overall	34	49	15	2	0

Source: REF, 2022: 170

Sixteen universities submitted tourism outputs to Unit 24 and a further eight submitted work to Unit 17 (Business and Management Studies).

In spite of the steady but sustained decline in the number of universities in the UK with dedicated tourism departments, the assessors noted an improvement in the quality of research since the last REF. In addition, the summary report states:

Tourism research is still largely underpinned by concepts from social sciences and applied management. The sub-panel noted the use of more sophisticated and innovative methodological rigour compared with REF 2014. There continued to be an increase in rigorous literature review papers which used sophisticated bibliometric methods. Research areas that were particularly strong included outputs related to policy, planning and development, the impact of tourism, sustainability, climate change, wellbeing, consumer behaviour, and the use of technology in tourism, particularly as related to phone tracking, Big Data, Artificial Intelligence, and wearable technology (REF, 2022: 175).

It is perhaps somewhat paradoxical that in addition to highlighting improvements in quality, the panel drew attention to what they saw as 'an over-reliance on outputs submitted to a small number of highly regarded tourism journals' (REF, 2002: 175-76).

Although impact case studies relating to tourism were submitted, most of the impact case studies focused on physical activity/exercise and health and sports injury/sports medicine. Indeed, some 60% of claimed impacts related to sport. This may be because developing strong impact case studies is challenging in tourism (Thomas, 2018).

Public policy debates about the next REF (2028) are now beginning to emerge. It sems that outputs will diminish in overall importance but that a measure of academic impact may be introduced (some have speculated that this may be measured via citations data), and that both non-academic impact and research environment will be elevated. This implies that individual academic researchers in tourism will need to continue to focus on high quality outputs but redouble their efforts to undertake work likely to inform decision-makers. In addition, they might expect a collegiate and supportive research environment if their institution is to do well in this assessment (UKRI, 2023).

Conclusion: the emergence of academic super-heroes?

Few would doubt that PBRFS have affected how academic researchers approach their work (for perspectives in contrasting systems see Li, 2021; Thomas, 2018). For some, PBRFS are best understood as manifestations of neoliberal systems of higher education which constrain their academic freedom. Bottrell & Manathunga (2019), for example, have assembled a collection of essays from academics who have negotiated their work in different types of university. Grant (2019), within that volume, discusses what she describes as system where 'careerism' has come to dominate discussions of academic careers. Her autoethnographic study provides rich insight into how she navigated the pressures to 'perform' and addressed the challenging ethical issues she identified. Similar employment related matters have been discussed in the context of tourism by Thomas (2022). His research undertaken in the UK found substantial evidence of an academic community primarily concerned with their own performativity. This he explained via the notion of affective subjectification whereby academic researchers become 'manageable subjects' (rather than independent critically minded researchers).

Alternative ways of considering PBRFS are perhaps more appropriate for the purposes of this book. Hay (2017), for example, utilises the notion of super-hero to offer guidance on how to operate within a modern higher education system. The advice on offer is broadly based to assist individuals in securing a post and then advancing their career. They advocate the acquisition of 'soft' skills that encompass networking, public relations, and mentoring, as well as teaching and research skills. In the context of this chapter, their assessment might be seen as partial. They acknowledge the need for high quality output but downplay the influence public policy – in this case research policy – has on how people are judged and, in turn, what they might prioritise. The importance attached to research impact as part of many PBRFS, for example, now has a direct impact on academic work for those operating in those systems (Thomas, 2018).

Another way of looking at the practical implications of operating within a PBRFS is provided by Pitt and Mewburn (2016: 88) who ask *What do academic employers really want from the PhD now*? The premise of their question is that studying for a PhD represents the best 'training' for an academic career yet, they suggest, PhD curricula are not informed by employment related research. Their paper reports an attempt to remedying this deficiency by offering insights gleaned from their exploratory scrutiny a set of job adverts in Australia. They note the following:

These job adverts provide a window into Australian university employers' expectations for the new academic worker–where 'new' has a dual meaning, reflecting both those 'new' to working within academia and signifying a shift towards a 'new 'academic who is simultaneously autonomous and a team player. This new academic we see figured in the data is a multi-talented, always ready and available worker that we have started to label the 'academic super-hero', capable of being everything to everyone and leaping over 24 KSC (key selection criteria) in a single job application..... At any moment our hero must be ready to deal with the multiple uncertainties that beset the higher education sector in Australia, all the while collecting business cards for that next round of student placements, soothing hurt feelings and smiling graciously at the crowds of prospective students at Open Day while publishing prodigiously and creating innovative learning opportunities for their students across multiple media (Pitt and Mewburn, 2016: 99).

The daunting scenario they paint will resonate with many because of the breadth of expectation. It led some commentators to suggest, for example, that expecting teaching-oriented academics to produce research work of world class quality is akin to inviting a bowler in a cricket team to focus on batting (Anonymous 2023). Nevertheless, as chapters of this book have explained, learning lessons, and developing individual strategies for key aspects of an academic's role may ease the potential stress of these demands and enable individuals to enjoy rewarding academic careers.

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