

***MEDITATIONS BY A
DISAFFECTED AUDITOCRAT***

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When invited to serve on the History sub-panel for the Research Assessment Exercise 2008, I felt a mixture of responses: some pride (or vanity); quite a lot of civic duty; a distinct ambivalence about the whole assessment process; and lots of curiosity. I therefore accepted, despite some reservations. The immediate response of most of my academic peers was commiseration at the amount of work that would be involved. And a few denounced me as a traitor, whether from an elitist ‘we are above assessment’ perspective or from a liberal opposition to intrusive centralised bossing from the state - at half-an-arm’s length via the Higher Education Funding Council and, at less than half-an-arm’s length, via the Universities’ central managements.

Now, after much labour, my curiosity is amply sated. There was a lot of work, about which all panellists are pledged to secrecy. But the load was not unmanageable and the task was undeniably interesting. Moreover, everything was conducted with great decorum. As might be expected, colleagues generally did not attempt to find out which panellist was reading their personal outputs; nor did anyone outside the panel

attempt to lobby for one outcome or another. It was all cricket as she ought to be played.

Nonetheless, I don't now feel any pride in having served as an outfielder in the 2008 process. On the contrary, I have become a disaffected auditocrat. I cannot say that the collective time, cost, and effort was worth the outcome. The publicly declared RAE methodology left the various Units of Assessment with too much scope for games-playing, in terms of which colleagues to enter for assessment and which to exclude. As a result, the subject panels were not enabled to compare like with like. We were given bits and pieces, and the results are composites of such bits and pieces. As a result, I don't believe that my professional judgement was used to best effect. Incidentally, it may be noted with some irony that Economics was the subject that awarded itself the highest marks across-the-board in RAE 2008, at the very moment when applied economic policies are in global disarray.

Furthermore, the highly disaggregated results have left the University sector with a mass of ambiguous data, which is open to interpretation in a myriad of different ways. Universities are now busy massaging the statistics; and different groups are lobbying the government to advance their sectoral interests in funding terms. That is all to be expected. But again, I feel that the work of the panels has merely been used for the great game of educational politics between Universities and the government. Our labours will make, at best, a marginal impact upon the funding settlement to follow; and, at worst, merely provide a fig-leaf for the *Realpolitik* of government/higher education jousting.

In that light, there is a justifiable concern over the cost of the whole exercise. Viewed close at hand, the assessment process was not profligate in terms of the venues and style of panel meetings. We were not treated lavishly; the retainer fee to us individually was minimal; and we paid for

any social extras, like a glass of wine with dinner. Yet the collective expenditure of everybody's time and effort within the entire University sector was staggeringly great. HEFCE pays for only a small amount of the process. In 2005, it forecast its own costs to be £10 million; and no doubt the actual sums in 2008 were much greater. Meanwhile, the Universities pay huge, uncosted sums. The thousands of academics and administrators who run the panels and sub-panels are all seconded, with more or less generous leave entitlements, from their employing Universities, who get absolutely no grant from HEFCE to defray the costs entailed by this prolonged absence of expert labour. Indeed, if the Universities refused to provide the staff, the system would be inoperable.

Moreover, there are many more concealed costs, long before the assessment process starts. Unquantified hours of management and academic time are devoted to preparation exercises for the RAE, for years before the real thing. There are plans, revised plans, dummy-runs, consultancies, chivvyings, would-be 'star' recruitments, staff transfers, retirements, and invariably some 'non-star' staff rebranding into non-research-active roles. The opportunity costs of such preoccupations are huge and detrimental. Time that might be spent on more research and public communication is driven into introversion. Published research, that has already been assessed expertly in order to get into books, articles, conference presentations, museum displays, scholarly websites, and a myriad form of public communications, is then solemnly graded by a further panel of experts, who find, not surprisingly, that the general quality is good. This duplication is a massive waste of time, which encourages a mechanistic top-down chivvying within institutions and distracts from the Universities' core values and especially from its public communication of research.

Having now been an auditocrat, I have been a temporary member of the new sector of state monitors who intrude between service providers and the public. The insertion of such assessors denotes a major lack of trust and promotes further distrust. Endless auditing hobbles creativity. There are also non-stop changes to the assessment system, in order to keep everyone guessing. All disciplines are supposed to be assessed in identical ways, although in practice there are also anomalies. That creates grievances. Often, the assessment framework fails to match the realities that are known to the people being assessed. Why, for example, does every academic in every subject have to produce four items of work for assessment? That number makes sense for some disciplines in the hard sciences; but does not for others. Such enforced uniformity makes academics seem like naughty school-children who have to present their homework to teacher. People end up paying lip-service to an assessment system with which they don't agree – with all the corrosive effects that happen when systems lose the consent of those who run them.

Audits come and, in due course, also go, as times and political exigencies change. Teaching Audits have come and gone. The RAE too is reaching the end of its lifespan, by collective agreement. It has done its work and now should lie fallow for a due period. A reason for audit can always be invented, just as new administrative processes can always be invented. University systems that have never been surveyed critically need the shock of such external interventions. Yet there must be a countervailing process of auditing the auditors; and stopping the cycles, as well as starting them. Otherwise what begins as productive shock ends up as mechanistic and deadening slog.

Periods of distrust and necessary reforms need to be balanced by periods of trust and consolidation. The language of competitive rankings itself should be allowed to simmer down and should be counter-balanced

by the language of cooperation among Britain's interlocking research communities. And, as for public assessment of the Universities, we should be looking at much more public ways of communicating research – rather than continuing with these introverted systems. The flawed proposals for a successor Research Excellent Framework should be halted. They will further deprofessionalise and mechanise the whole process; and the proposed metrics will require much effort to obtain while their fallible data will miss the reality of what many subjects are actually doing. Introverted and mechanistic research assessment should be transmuted into new and creative measures for interactive research Communication/ Dissemination to the wider public, including especially but not exclusively the schools.

Needless to say, these opinions are personal ones. They are hard to admit, because they may appear to endorse the view that Universities should be above public inspection. I don't believe that. Yet there are many better and more creative ways of accounting for the value of our work to the wider world. So I believe that the Universities should collectively reject the costly, distracting, and unproductive intrusion of the unelected auditocrats. I was one and I don't regret enjoying it. But I was a cog in the wrong machine and I do regret that.