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Final Report: Assessing the impact of developments in research policy for research on higher education: An exploratory study

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Contents

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Acknowledgements

Summary

This study was designed to explore the implications of current Government research policy for academic research on higher education in the UK. It has been undertaken in the context of a significant re-shaping of the higher education sector and as preparations for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) have intensified in universities across the UK.

The study involved research policy analysis and email interviews with academics who specialise in research on higher education. Seventy-one academics at different stages of their careers and from universities across Britain participated in the study.

There was widespread awareness of key research policy trends amongst the academics in this study, and significant levels of disquiet about all or most aspects of current research policy developments. In particular, there were concerns about increased selectivity and concentration of funding, and although there was a good deal of support for the idea that research should have impact, serious concerns were raised about how 'impact' is conceptualised and measured.

Repeated concerns were raised about the likely impact of these developments on the kinds of research conducted and the potential threat to qualitative, innovative and/or critical research in education and across the social sciences and humanities. In particular, questions were raised about research capacity building and where new and innovative ideas would come from.

Findings also related to the impact of these developments on academics and academic work. Lack of time for research and an intensified workload were key issues raised by many participants in both Pre and Post-1992 institutions, with intense pressures to perform for the REF evident particularly in Pre-1992 universities. Some gender differences in responses were found and issues of inequality were also raised in relation to early career researchers and between types of university.

The study raises serious issues about the future of research on higher education and about academic work. It will be of interest to policy-makers, research managers, academics and others with an interest in higher education and knowledge production.

Introduction

This study was designed to explore the implications of current Government research policy for academic research on higher education in the UK. It builds on a number of previous studies that have investigated the impact of research policy, and in particular, research audit technologies such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), for academic research and academic work. A study commissioned in the mid 1990s by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (McNay 1997; McNay 1998) examined the effects of RAE 1992 on institutions and staff and noted the impact on management strategies, with an increased focus on research, appraisals and targets. Subsequent research (Lucas 2006) following RAE 1996 and prior to the 2001 exercise noted an increasing emphasis on research and research performance in institutions and departments, with new managerial strategies employed to steer and drive research activity. Similarly, Henkel (2007) drawing on the English component of an international study that included Sweden and Norway, reported that universities were responding to the pressures of audit and assessment by adopting new managerialist approaches with an increased emphasis on competition, performance and efficiency. Increased competition for research funding has been noted in all of these studies, with Thornton (2009) arguing that the dominance of the market and a highly competitive bidding culture compromises both the conduct and outcomes of research, with a threat to critical enquiry. Concerns have similarly been expressed about the kinds of research that are valued and supported in this context, with Knights and Richards (2003, p. 168) noting 'the homogenising of research areas towards the mainstream, short-termism and lack of innovation'. The consequences of research selectivity for the increasing differentiation of the sector have also been highlighted, and Alldred and Miller (2007) drew attention to the inequities of assessing and ranking universities and academics for their research when the material conditions of research production differ considerably.

The consequences for academics have also been a focus of much of this work. Henkel (1997) notes that changes to academic work have been evident from the 1960s, but the RAE significantly impacted upon academics, becoming, she argued, 'a vehicle of professional and personal humiliation' (Henkel 1999, p. 106). She highlighted the division of academics into the 'research active' and the rest, although Lucas (2006) argued that these classifications are not necessarily fixed. Several studies have highlighted gender issues in relation to these developments (e.g. Morley and Walsh 1995; Morley 2003), with Harley (2001) reporting few gender differences in academic responses to the RAE, but arguing that the emphasis on competitive individualism, self-assertion and the measurement of publications tends to disadvantage women. Finally, several studies have focused specifically on the impact of these developments for education research. Deem and Lucas (2007) document the relatively low status of educational research in the UK and then report on a study of research and teaching cultures in education departments in five universities in Scotland and England. They use a Bourdieuian framework to explore academic identities and cultures, noting the high value placed upon scientific capital in the context of the RAE and the

differences between departments. A subsequent review of the impacts of RAE 2008 on education research (BERA/UCET 2010) highlighted the importance of the RAE for institutional and disciplinary positioning, and concern about its impact on the field of education research.

The context for the current study is one of considerable uncertainty in the higher education sector. The impact of the financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies is widespread, whilst in England, the forthcoming removal of most of the block grant for teaching and the dramatic but variable increase in tuition fees is already impacting upon universities and academics. Research policy analysis reveals a continuing emphasis on research selectivity, with a dominant discourse of 'excellence' legitimising the increasing concentration of research funding. These are not new developments. However, competition for research funding has intensified at a time of resourcing constraint, and preparation for the new Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014 is well under way. In relation to the latter, a consideration of the 'impact' of research is now a specific element of the overall assessment, making up 20% of the total grade.   In addition, selectivity and concentration are increasing still further with the removal of all funding for 2* (nationally excellent) research from 2012-13 (HEFCE 2012) and the trend towards fewer, larger research council grants (see, e.g. ESRC 2011). At a time of significant levels of financial and job insecurity in the sector, the stakes for the forthcoming REF are likely to be even higher than for previous RAEs.

This is the context in which this study has been conducted. The overall aim was to explore the implications of current Government research policy for academic research on higher education in the UK. Specifically, we aimed to:

1. Identify dominant discourses and constructions of research in current UK research policy
2. Explore academics' perceptions and experiences of the impact of current research policies on their research activities
3. Identify the extent to which perceptions and experiences of policy impact reflect differing locations, identities and positionalities within the field of HE.
4. Consider the implications of the findings for the future of research on higher education.

This report provides an outline of the key findings of the study.

Methodology

The methodology for the study was twofold: monitoring and analysis of policy developments in relation to research, and email interviews with academics who specialise in research on higher education.

We have continued to monitor developments in research policy throughout the study to identify key trends and dominant policy discourses to illuminate the wider context for this study.

For the email interviews, a purposive sample of participants was recruited to reflect the diversity of the field, including those in Pre-1992 and Post-1992 HEIs, at different stages in their academic career, gender, age and ethnicity. The purpose of this was to enable us to explore the ways in which policy developments are perceived differently in relation to individual and institutional identities and to consider the potential impact of these developments on research in the field.

Academics were invited to participate through relevant academic networks (e.g. SRHE, BERA HE SIG). Our original intention was to achieve a diverse sample of 25 academics, but of the first 21 responses, 15 were from women, professors were significantly over-represented and all identified as White. We therefore broadened our recruitment procedure by targeting academics from our own web-searches as well as circulating the emails to specific contacts and networks to target early career researchers, men and Black and minority ethnic academics. As a result we achieved a rather more diverse sample, but also significantly increased number of participants to 71. Our final sample consisted of

- 39 women, 32 men
- 53 who identified as White or White British, 6 as 'Other' White ethnicity, 3 as Black, 1 as Asian, and 1 of mixed ethnicity
- 40 of the 71 are over the age of 50. Of these, 18 are aged 61+. (16 are aged 41-50, 13 aged 31-40 and 2 unassigned)
- 20 described their background as working class, 36 as middle class, 7 as lower middle class, with the rest unassigned.
- The job titles included 2 Principal Lecturers, 18 Senior Lecturers, 7 Lecturers; 17 Professors, 7 Readers, 4 Senior Research Fellows, 3 Research Fellows, 3 Deans, 8 'Others' (such as 'academic developer'), and 2 Unassigned
- There was a spread of higher education institutions, both geographically across Britain and in terms of type of university or mission group, including 17 Research intensive HEIs (including Russell Group), 5 1994 Group, 14 1960s universities, 32 post-1992/modern, and 3 unassigned.

In the analysis, particular attention has been paid to gender and type of HEI as these appeared to be most salient. We have paid attention to job title, though few clear patterns

emerged in relation to this. Due to the small numbers, issues of ethnicity and differences in policy environment between Scotland, Wales and England have not been explored, though in relation to the latter, the dominance of the REF across the UK has been evident in the data. When discussing the findings and providing contextual data for individuals quoted, we have only used pseudonym, job title and Pre- or Post-1992 HEI in order to preserve anonymity. We have also replaced very specific job titles with generic ones where necessary.

We have marginally more participants from Pre-1992 universities (36) than from Post-1992/'modern' institutions (32) which we would expect given our focus on research, and proportionately more women than men in research intensive universities and in professorial roles. The findings therefore need to be interpreted with this caveat in mind.

Although only recently emergent as a research tool, email interviews have been successfully utilised in a number of educational research studies (see James 2007), including a study on academics' perceptions of speaking and writing in HE conducted by one of the researchers in this study (see Leathwood and Read 2009). Email interviews can produce richer and more nuanced data than a survey, especially with the greater interactivity between researcher and participant. We sent a total of two emails with interview questions (see Appendices). The first one was sent out as participants volunteered to take part in the study between June and November 2011. On the basis of an initial analysis of responses to these initial emails, a second set of questions was sent to all participants in February 2012 to further expand and explore both emerging themes and issues we felt were not initially covered in sufficient detail in the first 'round'. Unfortunately, constraints relating to time and scope meant that we were unable to follow up queries with individuals on a 'bespoke' basis – something we would hope to be able to do in a larger/follow-up study.

In relation to analysis we have combined a poststructuralist theoretical lens with a policy sociology approach, to 'describe and critically analyse changes in policy, policy technologies and policy regimes' (Ball 2007, p. 1) in relation to higher education research policy and its impacts on HE research and researchers. Foucauldian discourse analysis was used to explore the ways in which research policies are constructed and framed, and academics differently positioned within this policy field. The email transcripts were anonymised and entered into NVivo data analysis software to facilitate data management and coding. We inductively employed thematic analysis to explore resonant themes (Gibson and Brown 2009). To ensure a systematic and rigorous approach to the analysis, we undertook detailed and repeated readings of the data to identify patterns and variations across the dataset and ensure a consistent approach to coding. In particular, we paid specific attention to contradictory or divergent findings and examined emerging interpretations carefully to identify the extent to which they were evident across the dataset or in relation to specific contexts and/or groups of participants.   Our aim was to explore the impact of research policy developments on research on higher education, but as noted in the BERA/UCET (2010) review, 'impact' needs to be problematised. There are a range of pressures and influences

impacting on academics and academic work and, of course, on the accounts academics chose to present to us in this context.

The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of London Metropolitan University.

Academics' views of policy trends

There was widespread awareness of the key research policy trends amongst the academics in this study. It was evident that the forthcoming REF, along with increased selectivity, the further concentration of research funding and the importance of gaining external research grants were influencing internal strategies and developments in most of the universities in which participants were working. Whilst some felt positive about changes in their own university or department, for example in relation to what they felt was a greater degree of support for research, the majority felt that the changes were having a negative impact on their own research and experience in the profession.

There was widespread disquiet about the broad direction of research policy with most participants from all types of university reporting disagreement with, and /or opposition to, all or most aspects of current policy developments. Comments centred around two key inter-related themes that we discuss below:

1.   The perceived implications for research

There was widespread concern that current developments were likely to have a negative impact on the kinds of research that would be conducted, reflecting earlier studies on the impact of the RAE (e.g. Alldred and Miller 2007; BERA/UCET 2010). However, recent trends towards the *further* concentration of research funding and the consequent prioritisation of 3* and 4* publications were discussed by a number of participants, most of whom were critical of these aspects of the current policy landscape. John, for example, said:

> Yes, I am aware of these developments. I think the super-concentration of research funding is regrettable, counter-productive and lacking in an evidence base. I broadly support the skewing of research funding to higher quality research, but not the extent to which this has been applied. There is a role for supporting nationally excellent research from public funds, both for its own qualities and as a nurturing ground for future internationally excellent researchers. (John, Lecturer, Pre-1992)

Others expressed support for the emphasis on high quality, 'excellent' research, but like John, raised concerns about how such 'excellence' was assessed:

> Any move to fund only 'internationally excellent' work needs to be accompanied
> by a re-definition of the all-purpose/empty signifier 'excellent'. Without a

complete re-assessment of what constitutes 'excellence', that involves input from academics of all kinds, we may as well abandon any original/naturally evolving thinking whatsoever. (Alistair, Lecturer, Pre-1992)

Although the discourse of 'excellence' has long been problematised (e.g. Bourdieu and Saint-Martin 1974), its dominance in research policy developments is evident not just in the UK (e.g. Deem 2009; ESRC 2011) but elsewhere too (e.g. Lamont 2009; Sandström et al. 2010). Moreover, there are potentially gendered, classed and racialised consequences (see, e.g. Morley 2003; Keskinen and Silius 2006), as Irene notes:

On the one hand, I support the principles of doing excellent research, publishing in excellent journals, and ensuring that our research has an impact beyond the ivory tower. On the other hand, I see problems in how these things come to be defined: what is excellent research, a high ranking journal, or research impact; and who gets to decide. One example I am familiar with in my own area is that feminist journals, and qualitative research journals, are rarely ranked above a 2. Many quantitative journals, on the other hand, are consistently highly ranked. So yes, we all want to do excellent work that has impact but there is not a level playing field in terms of who has the power to define these and set the criteria by which they will be defined. The problem then is that we end up with a one-size-fits-all that has a tendency to exclude diversity. (Irene, Reader, Pre-1992)

The perceived exclusion of some kinds of research was a recurring theme in the data. Commenting on the increasing concentration on research graded as 'internationally excellent', Helena (Reader, Post-1992) was concerned about the impact on 'more pragmatic and applied research' that 'has genuine impact on research participants and service users', but which risked not been valued in this context.

Similar concerns were expressed about the risks that may ensue to some kinds of research from the emphasis on larger grants, in particular in the social sciences and education: 'where the kind of research undertaken in general tends to be smaller-scale and qualitative in nature' (Karen, Senior Lecturer, Post-1992) and where 'excellent work is often done by lone scholars' (Nigel, Professor, Post-1992). These trends were also seen to privilege research undertaken in elite institutions, with Carlson (Senior Lecturer, Post-1992) arguing:

I think this will ultimately emphasize the gap between post & pre 92 HEIs and entrench the divide. This will be a real shame, as it's likely to limit the kind of fine-grained, qualitative research most often carried out by post 92 colleagues.

Similarly, Clarissa, who expressed support for the funding of longer term projects, stated:

The "only funding excellent research" is misguided. It is going to create an even more elitist culture and a stupid catch 22 - the only way to get funding is to be already funded. Where do young researchers get a break? Is it going to be the research equivalent of the old boys club? How are new projects going to get

funding? How are fresh and innovative ideas get support? I'm afraid that we will we just be researching the safe and already explored topics because they have precedent and employ the same pool of researchers because they have already done it all. (Clarissa, Senior Research Fellow, Post-1992)

A continuing theme running through the data, from both senior academics and researchers at an earlier stage of their career, was a concern about where innovative ideas would come from in a context in which less established staff risk exclusion through the emphasis on international excellence. Paula, who had been unable to secure any grant funding explained:

It is very difficult to get a foot on the ladder in the first place. This could lead to HE research becoming quite conservative as the money remains with a small group of people who use familiar methodologies. (Paula, Lecturer, Pre-1992)

Similarly, Emily (Principal Lecturer, Post-1992) was concerned that although 'with less money available it makes sense to try to focus it on the 'good' stuff', new researchers may have innovative ideas that 'could have the potential to produce some world-leading research for the future if they were allowed to see the light of day'. Although there were accounts of additional support for early career researchers, more participants commented on the danger that increased selectivity and concentration held for future research capacity.

Others were concerned that the REF and the increasing pressure to obtain external funding 'have made it increasingly difficult to take risks in research, e.g. branching out into something fairly left-field, or building imaginative but risky interdisciplinary collaborations' (Lucy, Senior Lecturer, Pre-1992). Ed (Senior Lecturer, Post-1992) argued that the REF 'is distorting research' through the focus on publishing in particular journals, whilst Roger noted that internal constraints on the research themes identified for a REF submission excluded important research areas (Roger, Professor, Post-1992). These issues were raised repeatedly by participants. Nevertheless, there were a few participants who reported benefits for their area of research because that was an area being prioritised, including reports of internal support to further develop research on higher education, although in another case, research in educational development was assumed to be 'being unofficially "wound down"' (Agatha, Academic developer, Pre-1992).

The impact agenda was also seen as distorting what counts as research by many. Doreen, for example, stated:

I have been 'told off' for doing work which I found highly engaging but which is not valid in terms of 'Impact' and find it amusing that my highest selling publication is not viewed as important yet it is selling out in countries around the world . But, as I've been told "It's just a study skills book". (Doreen, Senior Lecturer, Post-1992)

There was a good deal of support for the idea that research should have impact. As Irene (Reader, Pre-1992) noted, 'we all want to do excellent work that has impact', but most

participants, including Irene, raised serious concerns about how impact is conceptualised, how possible it is to 'measure' it and the likely effect on research in the social sciences. There was also concern about the implications for research that could not, at this point in time, easily demonstrate impact. Danny (Lecturer, Pre-1992) stressed that 'The outcomes of research as breaking fundamentally new ground, research as discovery, cannot be stipulated in advance', Nigel (Professor, Post-1992) argued that 'research that can be predicted, by definition, is not ground-breaking', whilst Jim (Senior Lecturer, Post-1992) stressed the value of research that adds to debate or broadens understanding even if it cannot demonstrate impact.

This highlights concerns expressed by a number of participants that current developments are constructing research in purely instrumental terms, reflecting concerns noted by Henkel (1999). Val expressed a sentiment articulated repeatedly when she said:

> The general climate is that research is purely an income stream to the university. Getting published/ impact etc, are what count. I don't feel there is much interest in the actual research anymore. (Val, Senior Lecturer, Pre-1992)

In summary, there was a great deal of concern about the implications for research and the kinds of knowledge that would be produced, as a result of the current direction of research policy. A few participants, however, expressed more or less wholehearted support for these developments. Tony, who described himself as 'broadly left-wing', argued in support of increased competition and the REF and reported that he did not:

> ..subscribe to the fears often expressed about the negatives attached to commercialisation and change. There is a public need to look at the way in which research is conducted and financed simply on the basis that for a long time individual academic's private interests have been publicly funded. This has done little more than to alienate the public from research of all kinds and to re-enforce universities as elite condescending institutions detached from the problems that many experience. (Tony, Lecturer, Pre-1992)

Jennifer (Reader, Pre-1992), who explained she was in a position to pursue her own research interests and valued the emphasis on research, identified most of the changes, and specifically the move from research as an individual endeavour to a departmental or institutional one (see also Henkel 1999), as having taken place after the 1992 RAE. She supported these developments and said:

> I love it. In 1973 if you did research or published you were seen as 'selfish', and 'ambitious' especially negative things to be said about a woman, as we were supposed to love pastoral care etc. Since 1992, anyone who can publish is seen as a 'good egg' and a contributor to the overall effort.

However, these were minority voices in a field of far wider disquiet. In the next section, we go on to consider the implications of these policy developments for academics and academic work.

2. Impacts on academics and academic work

A strong theme throughout the participants' responses related to the encouragement and/or pressures placed on academics to 'perform' for the REF, with evidence, in John's words, of 'a more directive and "performance management" approach to research being taken by the university's managers as the REF approaches' (John, Lecturer, Pre-1992), reflecting earlier research on the RAE (e.g. Lucas 2006).

For some, positive encouragement to publish was accompanied by a variety of support mechanisms, including 'good levels of funding for conference attendance / new writing retreat / funding for courses' (Daniel, Principal Lecturer, Post-1992) and 'support and interest from the professoriate' (Emily, Principal Lecturer, Post-1992). However, support was often was seen to tip over into pressure, surveillance and/or threats (e.g. to be put onto a teaching-only contract). Jackie (Professor, Pre-1992), for example, explained that a consequence of a mentoring programme to support more junior colleagues was that, 'staff's outputs are being monitored more regularly which probably increases pressures to publish'. Carlson also reported:

> All staff are now required to demonstrate that they are working towards 'tangible research outputs', i.e. publications. [...] Staff with 3 'REF-able' publications have recently been given time off teaching to work on a fourth article [...] There have been attempts to organise collaborative research clusters. But in practice, these feel more like monitoring mechanisms where pressure is applied on the least research active. (Carlson, Senior Lecturer, Post-1992).

Of course the pressure was not simply externally imposed, although there were a number of examples of perceived risks of non-compliance including the above-mentioned 'teaching-only' contract threat, risks to future promotion and redundancy. Margaret (Professor, Pre-1992) also, however, spoke of 'the governance of the soul', referencing Rose's (1999) account of the ways in which new forms of governance construct subjectivity, and there was evidence in the data of academics' own commitment to their research which clearly added to the pressures. For many, however, the pressure to perform was intense:

> Definite, huge increase in pressure to publish. The REF is mentioned nearly every day I come into work. (Paula, Lecturer, Pre-1992)

> In the last year the expectation has risen (with the REF cited a lot in meetings with my mentor) that I should publish two journal articles a year... I don't think this is feasible, particularly given that I have a very heavy teaching load and a management position in my team. (Doreen, Senior Lecturer, Post-1992)

> Huge pressures for doctoral student completion, publications and funding for the REF. (Indira, Senior Lecturer, Pre-1992)

> We are under severe pressure to bid for external funding. [...] We are expected to bring in 70-80% of our salary that way. (Felicity, Lecturer, Post-1992)

If anyone else shows me a list of the top 4* journals in the belief that I will go away and miraculously get a 4* paper for the REF - I will scream. (Sarah, Reader, Pre-1992)

Whilst intense pressures were articulated by staff at different levels and across Pre- and Post-1992 institutions, this pressure specifically related to the REF appeared to be most pervasive in the Pre-1992 universities. Although some reported no change in the level of pressure over previous years, more felt that the pressure had increased, with Judith (Professor, Pre-1992), who had been involved in RAE 1992 and 1996, arguing that now it was 'much more selective and individually constraining'.

Insufficient time for research in the context of intensified workloads was a strong theme in the data across both Pre and Post-1992 institutions. Most described research time being squeezed even when it had not been formally reduced; others reported a formal reduction in their research allocation:

I think that research time is getting squeezed, while pretending that it isn't, i.e. teaching and admin requirements are being ratcheted up, study leave is becoming harder to get, but they still claim that we have 40% of our time for research. Of course, they're not interested in how long we work to make that 40%! (Rachel, Professor, Pre-1992)

Specific research time allocations have reduced and been limited to fewer colleagues. (Steven, Centre Director, Post-1992)

We no longer have allocated research time - all time spent on writing bids, journal articles etc are done in 'our own time'. This has changed dramatically over the past couple of years. (Hannah, Lecturer, Pre-1992)

We are all being strained to do more things in less time. So I do feel much more stressed than I did 2 years ago. (Felicity, Lecturer, Post-1992)

A minority of participants, and proportionately more men than women, reported a small increase in their allocated time for research, with a number of explanations ranging from rewards for productivity to sympathetic line managers. There were no apparent gender differences in those reporting a reduction in research time, but it was noticeable that only women, with a mix of grade and Pre- and Post-1992 institutions, talked about research being done outside working hours:

Research is done in unsociable hours, at weekends and so on (Elise, Senior Lecturer, Post-1992)

Research has become private, in my own time, paid for by me. Very tiring, stressful and depressing. (Denise , Senior Research Fellow, Pre-1992)

I'm working ridiculously hard and have had stress issues because of this. I remember thinking when I started as a research assistant this was my dream job

and now sometimes it seems more like a nightmare (if only I could sleep!) (Janet, Research Fellow, Post-1992)

The research culture – although they say we are a research driven institution – well we are provided we all do it in the evening and weekends after the rest of our work. (Kathleen, Professor, Pre-1992)

Harley (2001) also found that women participants were significantly more likely to highlight issues of overwork and stress, with other research from the UK (Morley 2003; Deem and Lucas 2007), Canada (Acker and Armenti 2004) and Australia (Blackmore and Sachs 2001) highlighting the gendered impact of cultures of performativity. In this study, it was mainly women who conveyed a strong sense of endless hours of work and desperation, whilst more of the men appeared able to distance themselves, despite sometimes expressing concern for others:

I'm old enough not to give a toss. (Howard, Professor, Post-1992)

Like everyone else, I am finding it harder to win funding, despite good ratings for my proposals. I guess that is for the obvious reasons, so I don't spend too long worrying about it. But I know some younger colleagues find this demoralising, and try to work with them to develop stronger proposals. (Gary, Professor, Pre-1992)

Despite these pressures however, nearly half the sample reported that the research culture in which they worked was predominantly collaborative, three times as many as those describing it as mainly competitive. This was found across institution type and occupational grade of the participants. There was more or less an even split between those who believed that a collaborative ethos had been well-established and not a recent phenomenon, and those who believed that it had increased recently. Of those reporting a recent change, this was mostly, though not always, in response to the REF, echoing McNay's (1997) findings in relation to the RAE, particularly in terms of departments now being judged more as collectivities than before:

This isn't to say that there is no competitiveness – I am certain there is, but equally I don't know when there wasn't competition between Dr A and Dr B over their publications, income and reputation. I think there is now more of a tendency to think that if Dr A doesn't get grants and papers, then it will ultimately harm us both. This is very impressionistic of course. (Gary, Professor, Pre-1992)

As mentioned above, fewer academics reported a primarily competitive culture at departmental level, and most of these reported that this was a more recent development, in some cases linking it specifically to the REF. Competitive cultures were equally reported by men and women academics, and roughly evenly split between those in Post- and Pre-1992 institutions.

Henkel (1999, p. 120-121) found that the impact of the RAE had been 'paradoxical, creating solidarity and divisiveness', but also that non research active staff who used to be tolerated were now seen as 'a liability'. In this study, many participants discussed increased tensions or divisions between staff. In particular divisions were reported between research 'stars' and the 'rank and file'; between those who publish regularly and those who primarily teach; and between older, more established academics and early career researchers. In all these cases the first category were often believed by participants to have been favoured in terms of departmental/university resources, to the detriment of the latter. For example, Lucy states:

> To those that have, more shall be given. There is huge competition for study leave and it is now only being granted to the researchers with the best track record and more or less guaranteed outcomes. In terms of unallocated time, the pressure to produce has meant more and more teaching being offloaded on to graduate teaching assistants and 'poor' researchers [...]There is a (so far informal) threat that poor performers will be put on teaching only contracts. (Lucy, Senior Lecturer, Pre-1992)

Whilst many expressed concerns about early career researchers in this regard, senior academics were often subject to many of the same pressures:

> You know what it is like – you feel a complete failure without money in my place –but its soooo hard to get! Pressure is there and the rewards are great if you get it – so we get racehorses and carthorses – if you don't get money, you get to do more marking/teaching etc. (Kathleen, Professor, Pre-1992)

This division between the research 'stars' and the rest was raised repeatedly by participants, and it was evident that the potential costs of the pressures of performativity in an academic 'game' in which there are 'winners and losers' are considerable:

> Only the workaholics or downright ruthless seem to preserve their time or steal time from themselves to stay in the game or redistribute the 'other' work to less powerful colleagues. (Margaret, Professor, Pre-1992)

Lucy goes on to say:

> Our research review process (unlike appraisal) is not confidential – so everyone knows how everyone else is doing, and who may be 'letting the side down'. Some departments are now very difficult places to work for some colleagues. (Lucy, Senior Lecturer, Pre-1992)

Similar personal costs were noted by Henkel (1999) and found in the BERA/UCET (2010) Review of the impacts of RAE 2008 on education research. As Harley and Lowe (1998, p. 20) noted back in the late 1990s, 'through the periodic research assessment exercise, academics have been made individually responsible not only for their own fate but also that of their

colleagues and their performance has been monitored in a brutal public way'. Again it was predominantly women who expressed strong feelings about this, although there were a few men who spoke in similar terms. Danny (Lecturer, Pre-1992), for example, described a

> .. summary judgement out of the blue [...] that it would be unlikely that I would be entered, [...into the REF]. If the ethos was one of saying 'oh well, so be it, no problem' then that would be one thing but I am made to feel as though I have let the side down.

For some, the costs were now outweighing any benefits with several talking about 'opting out' by leaving academia, moving to another university, voluntarily moving to a teaching-only contract or not playing the bidding game when the chances of success appear negligible. Jessie (Professor, Pre-1992), who articulated sentiments expressed by others about the pressures on early career researchers, said ' I am glad I am approaching the end of an academic career rather than starting at the beginning of one'.

There were also a few examples where participants were able to temper the pressure by their pleasure in their work:

> I have felt a constant pressure to publish and to apply for research funding. However, as I really enjoy doing research and writing, this hasn't felt like a burden at all (Sharon, Professor, Pre-1992).

In addition, a number of participants spoke with pleasure about their supportive colleagues and/or the collaborative ethos within their department or research group, with Janet (Research Fellow, Post-1992) describing 'Pockets of generosity and altruism [...] make it still a good job to be in'.

Conclusions and Implications

This study has provided a snapshot of higher education researchers' perceptions and experiences of the impacts of current research policy developments on their research. It has been undertaken in the context of a significant re-shaping of the higher education sector and as preparations for the REF have intensified in universities across the UK.

We found widespread awareness of key trends in research policy amongst participants in this study, along with significant levels of disquiet about these developments. Repeated concerns were raised about the likely impact on the kinds of research conducted and the potential threat to qualitative, innovative and/or critical research in education and across the social sciences and humanities. In particular, questions were raised about research capacity building and where new and innovative ideas would come from. Whilst the impact agenda received more support than any of the other main developments, this support was heavily qualified with reservations about definitions, criteria and whether meaningful impact can be predicted and/or measured.

Lack of time for research and an intensified workload were key issues raised by many participants in both Pre- and Post-1992 institutions, with intense pressures to perform for the REF evident particularly in Pre-1992 universities. This obviously raises concerns about stress levels for academics, but also about the sustainability of academic research in this context.

Issues of equality were also evident. As has been seen, gender issues were apparent in the reporting of workload and time constraints, whilst the issues affecting early career staff are also likely to have gender implications in a context in which the majority of senior academics are men. There were also fears that the binary divide is being re-instigated with an even greater concentration of research funding in research intensive institutions, with implications for academics and the kinds of research that are conducted. This of course also raises issues about the education that students receive with those attending research-intensive or research-led institutions more likely to benefit from research-informed teaching. Given the different demographics of students in different parts of the HE sector, this also has equality implications.

The findings of this study present a rather more negative picture than the BERA/UCET (2010) review that appeared to highlight stronger positive impacts of RAE 2008 (although also similar negative ones). There may be a number of reasons for these differences. The BERA/UCET review focused specifically on the impact of RAE 2008 rather than on broader trends in research policy, and examined the impact on education and education researchers in general in contrast to our specific focus on higher education research. Another key difference relates to the context, with this study set in the lead-in period for the REF, rather than the post-hoc analysis of the RAE reported in the BERA/UCET review. Finally, differences in methodology are likely to have impacted on responses. In the BERA/UCET survey respondents were specifically asked to identify the three main areas where the RAE had a positive impact. In contrast our questions did not specifically seek to elicit positive or negative responses. Whilst, however, these differences may in part explain the different findings of the two studies, it may also be that developments in research policy such as increased selectivity and concentration and the high stakes nature of the REF in the current economic climate have resulted in rather more negative perceptions and experiences.

There are a number of areas that we have not been able to fully explore in the time frame of this study. These include the contribution of managers and management strategies in creating cultures that support or inhibit research, and an examination of the ways in which national research policy is interpreted, reformulated, enacted and/or resisted in particular departmental and institutional contexts.

This key message of this study, however, of the widespread concerns about the current direction of research policy amongst a specific academic community of researchers should, we suggest, give policy makers and others in the higher education sector pause for thought.

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Appendix 1: Initial email questions

Dear....

Thank you for agreeing to take part in our study - it is really appreciated.

The questions follow. Please be as detailed as you would like and add any other information you think may be relevant.

Please be reassured that we will extract your responses and store them in a separate file without any identifying personal or institutional information. All information will be kept in a password-protected folder. If any questions are unclear please do get in touch.

1. In your experience, has the research culture in the department/institution in which you work changed noticeably over the last year or so? If so, how?

Please comment on any changes in relation to:

a) allocated research time:

b) Opportunities, encouragement and or pressure to bid for external funding:

c) Opportunities, encouragement and or pressure to publish:

d) Changes in departmental or institutional research strategies/procedures:

e) Research students and developing research capacity amongst young researchers:

2. How competitive/collaborative is the research culture in your department/institution? In your view, has this changed in any noticeable way? Have there been any other noticeable changes in terms of the relationships amongst academics? Please give any examples.

3. If you have identified any changes above, how do you feel this has impacted on your own research?

4. Finally, it would be helpful if you could please provide the following demographic information:

Please indicate how you identify your:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Social class background:

Did your family of origin have any history of HE participation?

Age group: Under 30; 31-40; 41-50; 51-60; 61+

Current job title:

Current institution type: (e.g. research intensive, elite/'old' university, 'new'/post 1992/ex-polytechnic, redbrick/1960s, specialist HE college, etc.)

Faculty/Department/School:

Length of time working as an academic in HE (if UK, please specify Pre or Post-1992 institutions):

Primary discipline:

Were you entered into the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)?

Do you anticipate being entered into the Research Excellence Framework (REF)?

Please add any comments about your experience and perceptions of selection for the RAE/REF

Thank you for taking the time to give us your views. Please feel free to add any other comments. We look forward to reading your responses and will get back to you with any follow up/clarification questions as necessary.

Thanks again and best wishes

Carole and Barbara

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Appendix 2: Follow-up email questions

Dear ....

Thank you very much for the time and thought you have given to responding to the initial questions from our study. We really appreciate it.

We have identified two further questions which we would welcome your response to.

As previously, please be reassured that we treat your responses as confidential and we will take care to fully anonymise all data. We will extract your responses and store them in a separate file without any identifying personal or institutional information. All information will be kept in a password-protected folder.

1. With reference to the research you are currently doing, or most recently completed:

a) Is it externally funded, and if so, from what type of funder (research council, EU, charitable body, government, etc)?

b) To what degree does this research stem from your own personal research interests and/or from other factors such as the interests of colleagues, priorities of your department, available funding, university strategy, etc?

2. We are interested in your views about recent developments and trends in research policy, including:

- the increasing concentration of research funding to fund only research graded as 'internationally excellent' or above (3 and 4*)

- the trend by research councils to focus research resources on funding larger and longer grants

- the impact agenda

To what extent are you aware of these developments? Are they having any impact upon your research? Do you support these trends? We would welcome any other comments you would like to make about current developments in research policy and their potential or actual impact on research into higher education.

Thanks again for your help with this study. Please feel free to add anything else you think might be relevant - all comments are very gratefully received.

Warm wishes

Carole and Barbara