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**Abstract:**

**The UK Research Excellence Framework- a transparent enabler or an inequality catalyst?**

Is the Research Excellence Framework as an academic research evaluation tool deepening the plight of female academics reaching the professoriate or does it hold opportunity for increased transparency and merit?

This research will critically examine equality and diversity issues that surround the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and how these issues manifest themselves in the contribution and development of academics, particularly female academics. ‘*While there may be resistance on the part of many academics, to the practices of managerialism, the increased transparency demanded by audit and benchmarking may benefit some women’* Fletcher (2007:279) is considered, though it is argued in this paper that the increase in new managerialism and academic control is potentially detrimental to the development of female academics in the UK.

It is important to contextualise the current gendered environment, in that: ‘*currently in the UK, only one Russell Group university has a permanent female head: Dame Nancy Rothwell, at the University of Manchester’* Grove (2012)*.* Whilst this is a very visible gender equality issue, the main theoretical argument is that new managerialism and the proletarianisation of academic labour are preventing female academics from contributing effectively and being fully recognised. This research builds on existing knowledge and provides greater insight into how a fairer and more inclusive system can be developed, as it is clear that the under-representation of women in senior level academic positions throughout the [UK] academy is endemic.

Key Literature

Whilst there is much available literature surrounding various past runs of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the precursor to the REF in the UK, in general, the availability of formally published and particularly, empirical works regarding the concepts of the proletarianisation of academic labour and new managerialism is limited through a gendered lens is limited. There is a clear and substantial gap in existing research and literature surrounding the previous RAE equality and diversity issues, in part due to the Research Excellence Framework (following on from the RAE) not happening until 2014. Hence, that there is an underlying need for research into the associated equality and diversity issues in order to contribute to the current prevalent discourse.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach will allow for the comparison of qualitative data to what the findings of the quantitative data demonstrate, providing greater insight into what the key issues are and how they are being addressed quantifiably by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The inclusive nature of a mixed methods approach is in line with true research-inclusivity in academia, as well as being an innovative methodological approach to this specific research. It is argued that *‘methods should be mixed in a way that has complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses’* Johnson and Turner (2003:297) and that an inter-method mixing approach is most appropriate: ‘*it may be more beneficial to see the two as interwoven, that one element stimulates new ideas for the data collection for the other’* Bowling (2005:236)

Mixed methods are not to be considered a panacea in this research, but through using an inter-method approach will further build academic credence and gain synergy from triangulation of the findings. The proposed triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings will allow for the more effective building of rhetoric, as well as drilling more deeply in to specific departments cases, in order to expose the cases of individual academics for example, rather than that of a mere statistic, thus taking a more humanistic approach, which is in line with the egalitarian principles that underpin this research.

Preliminary findings

Findings currently point towards a need for clearer HEFCE guidelines surrounding long term illness, early career researchers and a lack of females in upper echelons of academia and the professoriate.

Expected original contribution

This research will make an empirical, timely contribution to the creation of a more level playing field in the UK academy, and show evidence of inequality in how UK research is assessed for funding. REF-specific equality and diversity issues surrounding female research-active academics will also form strategic recommendations for HEFCE and Government policy makers.

**Key words: REF, Women, Academia, Managerialism, Mixed Methods, Intersectionality**

**Key literature and Discussion**

The literature which is discussed illuminates the openings for this research investigating equality and diversity issues, with specific reference to the gender divide surrounding the Research Excellence Framework (REF), within an academy which some argue is becoming increasingly proletarianised and bureaucratic (Wilson, 2001; Willmott, 1995) as well as being subjugated by white masculine hegemony (Özbilgin, 2009).

The rise of new managerialism in the academy underpins this discussion, and this paper will further delve into the literature surrounding the proletarianisation of academic labour and a possible wider loss of autonomy, and ultimately what this means for women. The idea that the REF, auditing and benchmarking may create opportunity for some women (Fletcher, 2007) is critically examined, and it is argued that the increase in new managerialism and academic control is detrimental to the progress of female academics in the UK into the upper echelons of the academy, particularly as ore masculine management practices are implied.

New managerialism as a prevalent concept within both the literature and the academy, is considered, with the key concepts focussing on the proletarianisation of academic labour (Wilson, 2001), the rise of the ‘*Manager Academic*’ (Fletcher, 2007) and new managerialism (Henke, 1997; Shattock, 1999), as well as the impact of external and political changes in the academy (Dearlove,1998; Parker and Jary, 1995).

Contextually, the proposed research will draw upon academic literature and funding body research, as well as the external political and policy changes which have contributed to the current socio-political, economic landscape in which this research is being conducted; these are considered at micro, meso and macro levels. Gender is continual theme in this paper, and is the main lens through which this research will focus, with considerable influence coming from the works of Crompton (1990), Bradley (1996), Cockburn(1991) and the various works of Acker, particularly the concept of intersectionality (Acker, 2012) will be considered, examining how a multiplier effect may negatively impact female academics.

To further contextualise the REF, one must draw reference to the point that the academy appears to be currently embroiled in a culture where the ‘*publish or perish*’ phenomenon is increasingly common and a highly significant emphasis on research prevails (Tourish, 2011). Hence, it will be argued that career construction is increasingly dominated by activity and socially-constructed behaviours which maximise individuals’ chances to develop a successful career. It is essential also to draw reference to and combine this with the epistemology of social-constructivism and collegiality, which are connected because of individuals learning from interactions with a group, and that this as a result may contribute to the feeling amongst some [female] academics to strategically career plan and, as a result, construct their careers in a more output driven fashion. This is supported by the work of Deem (2009) which contends that UK universities and the UK Government ‘*still perceive excellence as more important than diversity’* (2009:22). This may prove to be controversial when tokenism versus merit and actual achievement are critically considered through a gendered lens.

The management of academics, the governance of universities, gender roles and female academics, as well as the teaching and research nexus as interlinked activities are what underpins this research and there is much evidence to suggest that inequality in the academy is increasing. Combined with Ackers’ concept of intersectionality it will be probed whether the intersectionality of the aforementioned factors will further exacerbate the gender divide in the UK academy. The professions debate and the sociology of the professions, combined with the concept of the proletarianisation of academic labour (Wilson, 2001) is at the heart of this research and is essentially framed by the academic landscape and existing literature. The management and construction of academic careers is an area in which various strong opinions often collide, both formally and informally, and politics and philosophy all play an important role in shaping academics’ world views in relation to academic careers. It is argued that academic careers are not only significantly influenced by white masculine hegemony (Özbilgin, 2009), but critically, it will be investigated whether this is further impacted by social constructions of gender, excellence and merit. This is particularly evident when management in its broadest sense is considered and how careers are shaped within the ever-changing University environment, especially with regard to the REF and academic control mechanisms, thus potentially affecting what research is carried out where as a result. Teaching is often presented as a separate activity to research, with some even coining teaching ‘*a punishment*’ for poor performance (Deem, 1998), this is not only evident in empirical papers such as those of (Deem, 1998), but is also a common theme in online and informal articles, all of which contribute to the current thinking and prevalent discourse. As a result, the construction of values and norms within the academy surrounding managerial control and research evaluation, as well as an increasing affiliation between Government and research objectives.

There is of course much historical linkage between teaching and research, and this is something that aspects of the literature (Willmott, 1995; Shattock, 1999; Wilson, 2001) argue is being dramatically eroded, both by the massification of higher education and to an extent, by the way in which control mechanisms such as the RAE are physically structured (Tourish, 2011; Willmott, 2011, and it is the potential consequences of the ever increasing teaching and research nexus that forms the motivation for this research.

Some of the more recent literature such as that of Deem (2008), argue that it is the new, post-1992 universities that are focussing on teaching [undergraduate] students, and that it is the traditional or old universities who are harvesting the capital from research due to having more ‘*research active academics*’ (Woodward 2007; Shelley, 2010) This in turn allows for more research to be conducted at the traditional research orientated institutes, furthering the gap between traditional research led universities and the post-1992 new universities and denigrating the academy as a whole.

It is imperative to illustrate the extent to which this is true in that: ‘*Just 15% of the higher education sector, two-thirds of the UK’s very best (‘world leading’) research takes place in the Russell Group's 24 universities.’* Russell Group (2012), thus indicating that there is a strong polarisation of research funding and critically, its subsequent allocation. As institutions battle ferociously against one another to gain research funding through the publication of high-quality research papers, as well as having as many ‘*ref-able*’ research academics as possible, it must be considered how this will impact an already vastly gendered academy at the top level. Particularly when the following is considered: ‘*currently in the UK, only one Russell Group university has a permanent female head: Dame Nancy Rothwell, at the University of Manchester’* (Grove, 2012)*.* It is this issue which is a key aspect of this research, and whether the REF will have a detrimental impact upon women in the academy and their career development or as Fletcher (2007) argues, create opportunity. This idea becomes particularly pertinent when peer review is considered and the use of gender neutral, ‘double-blind’ review, for example is deliberated.

**Proposed Main paradigms, conceptual frames, issues and theoretical argument**

New managerialism as a prevalent concept within both the literature and the academy will be considered in the thesis, from the 1960’s onwards with the key concepts focussing on the proletarianisation of academic labour (Wilson, 2001), the rise of the ‘Manager Academic’ (Fletcher, 2007) and new managerialism (Henke, 1997; Shattock, 1999), as well as the impact of external and political changes in the academy. The core theoretical argument of this research surrounds the notion that academic labour is becoming increasingly proletarianised (Wilson, 2001), and that the rise of new managerialism in the academy is leading to further gender segregation in the professoriate within an already vastly gendered academy, and that the REF may, in its current form. This is essentially further framed by the current political, economic, and social context and as well as existing literature.

**Methodology**

The research methodology for this research project possesses robust ethical foundations. This is due not only to the timing of the research, in terms of the research being carried out in the same time frame during which the submissions to the REF are being made, but also in order to acknowledge and respect any associated academic anxiety associated with the process, of which the researcher already senses much within the field. Due to the nature of this research and the time frame in which it is occurring, a purely qualitative approach would not suffice. Utilising an approach which allows for the comparison of qualitative data to what the findings of the quantitative data demonstrate will provide greater insight into what the issues are and critically how [or not] they are being addressed [quantifiably] by the funding bodies. Such an approach will allow for a clearer demonstration of the equality and diversity issues surrounding the REF, both in terms of setting the context qualitatively and exploring and analysing the experiences of interviewees, as well portraying what the official quantitative data is highlighting. Utilising an entirely quantitative approach would also not be entirely appropriate, as the researcher believes that, for example, aspects of intersectionality cannot be adequately explored using a quantitative approach alone. The utilisation of qualitative data will allow for the more effective building of rhetoric, as well as drilling more deeply in to specific departments cases, for example to expose the plight of individual academics rather than that of a mere statistic, thus taking a more humanistic, egalitarian approach. It is such an approach that will allow academics and Government policy makers alike to engage with this research and so create truly meaningful impact, as well as highlighting key issues which may be present contrary to the statistics which the Government publish with reference to research-active academics.

Mixed Methods Research

*‘A key feature of mixed methods research is its methodological pluralism or eclecticism, which frequently results in superior research (compared to mono-method research). Mixed methods research will be successful as more investigators study and help advance its concepts and as they regularly practice it’* Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:14) Whilst the researcher is very much aware, not only of the different schools of thought surrounding a mixed methods research approach, but also of the very strong opinions of quantitative purists such as Nagel (1986) for example, ‘*both sets of purists view their paradigms as the ideal for research, and, implicitly or explicitly, they advocate the incompatibility thesis [Howe, 1988], which posits that qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, including their associated methods cannot and should not be mixed’* Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:14) Whilst there are suggestions that such an attitude towards mixed methods research is changing, the researcher has experienced the so called ‘paradigm wars’ in the past, but holds a fervent belief that synergies can be gained from the proposed mixed methods approach. Quantitative data can be used effectively to further underpin and support empirical qualitative findings, though acknowledges that it is not a panacea. Further to this it will be possible to capitalise on the strengths of each research element, whilst minimising the associated weaknesses of each research method. It is however essential to illustrate that the researcher does not propose that a mixed methods approach is superior to a purely quantitative or purely qualitative approach, but that it is the approach which is deemed most appropriate for this particular research.

Particularly in a field which is dominated by qualitative research, it is important to support the qualitative research findings with an element of quantitative data in order to build further gravitas and academic credence as well as in the case of this research, effectively link the findings to the data which Higher Education Institutions use to drive their equality and diversity policy making, and adopt an innovate approach. Ultimately, the researcher will combine different types of collected data in order to provide the deepest insight into the equality and diversity issues surrounding the REF, and in a way that provides the best insight into the current issues and how to provide *‘the best opportunities for answering important research questions’* Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:16) It is the inclusive nature of a mixed methods approach which is in line with true research-inclusivity in academia, as well as being an innovative methodological approach to this specific research. This will further enhance the ability to effectively and efficiently answer the research question in a way in which is both the preferred approach within the field of Equality and Diversity research, as well as being quantitatively underpinned. Including elements of quantitative research will allow the research to drill more deeply into, for example secondary quantitative data from HEFCE to provide concrete numerical evidence, in order to support or indeed contrast findings and claims from interviewees for example. Further to this, it may provide an effective platform from which to build evidential statistics and investigate important cause and effect relationships within gender dynamics in the academy. Such an approach can be further justified by several authors, including most notably Johnson and Turner (2003) who argue that *‘methods should be mixed in a way that has complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses’* (2003:297)

The researcher is keen to pursue an approach has strong qualitative foundations which are quantitatively underpinned, due to the nature of the investigation, as well as personal experience of mixed methods research and experience of the gravitas that the triangulation of findings can add to building of high-impact rhetoric, particularly in a study which aims to be more widely applicable in both a Business School environment, Government funding bodies (HEFCE), and for policy makers. Nevertheless, to be *‘considered a mixed method design, the findings must be mixed or integrated at some point’* Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:20) This approach can be further justified in that the researcher acknowledges that a mixed methods approach is not superior to either quantitative or qualitative research because it utilises both, but that it is the superlative methodological approach for this research. It is deemed to be an approach which will allow the findings to be analysed in a holistic manner, in order to produce rigorous and high impact research which also does not *‘confuse the logic of justification with research methods’* Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:15); this is further supported by the works of Bryman (1984) and Howe (1992), as well as through the use of an inter-method mixed methods approach.

It is also crucial to draw distinction between inter-method and intra-method mixing and the stage at which the research will be mixed, on order to clearly define what route this research will most likely take. At this stage the researcher proposes that an inter-method mixing approach is most appropriate as each aspect of data collection adheres to sound principles of either qualitative or quantitative data collection and whilst the main limitation may be time, effective time management tools are in use in order to effectively mitigate this risk for this study. This idea can also be supported by Bryman (1992) as cited in Bowling (2005): ‘*it may be more beneficial to see the two as interwoven, that one element stimulates new ideas for the data collection for the other’* Bowling (2005:236) It is through such an approach that the researcher will gain synergies from available secondary data in the form of statistics from the RAE 2008, HEFCE and empirical data from the semi-structured interviews that will be conducted, in order to create a timely, innovative and insightful thesis.

**Preliminary findings**

Findings currently point towards a need for clearer HEFCE guidelines surrounding long term illness, early career researchers and a lack of females in upper echelons of academia and the professoriate, though the formal research has yet to be conducted.

**Expected original contribution**

This research will make an empirical, timely contribution to the creation of a more level playing field in the UK academy, and show evidence of gender inequality in how UK research is assessed for funding. REF specific equality and diversity issues will also form strategic recommendations for HEFCE and relevant Government policy makers in order to highlight any issues as drive legislative change.

**Summary and conclusions**

This paper has highlighted the main theoretical frameworks and concepts which have contributed both to the discussion around academic career construction, new managerialism and the proletarianisation of academic labour from a feminist perspective. However, throughout this paper it has been demonstrated that there is a strong movement within the academy who are against increased academic control, and it is important to reiterate that a significant body of the literature that is currently available on research assessment takes a critical management standpoint, hence that this research contributes to the current discourse empirically through the consideration of female academics, new managerialism and the proletarianisation of academic labour as intersected aspects which are interdependent. This research will empirically contribute to the current discourse and build upon the work of Acker (2012) to create insight into the gendered aspects of the professoriate and the wider academy, in a Business School context.

The paper advocates the more contemporary concept that the wider economic context is to be considered, in order to better understand professionalisation and audit and control mechanisms in the academy in the UK. Furthermore, theories from Crompton (1990) and Fournier (1999) have contributed to the discourse, the importance of the economic environment and the concepts of professions as a mode of control and regulation, with the current prevalent school of thought questions the future of the professions. It was illustrated that there are still significant differences between how women and men plan and manage their academic careers, as well as the leadership styles that they may adopt (Doherty and Manfredi, 2010). The sociology of the professions is to an extent underpinned by Braverman (1974) whom argued that professions are not neutral or indeed scientific concepts, but folk concepts, which are also further complimented by the approach of using first-hand experience to develop empirical theory, similar in a sense to the works of Acker which combine personal, lived experiences and theory. An inter-play of gender and new managerialism was also found (Deem, 2003), and the research will build upon whether indeed this relationship is a key contributor to the deeper gender segregation that is evident in the UK academy.

This paper has considered academia and the rise of the manager academic (Deem 2003, 2004, Baldwin and Blackburn 1981) and although they contribute to how academic careers are constructed, they fail to illuminate the impact of new managerialism and academic control or evaluation mechanisms. New managerialism and the academy were illustrated (Deem, 1997), which highlighted the importance of the relationship between Government control and the marketisation of the academy (Shattock, 1999). Conversely, elements of new managerialism are hypothetically argued to potentially provide increased transparency and systems for those who may have been previously excluded (Deem, 2009; Fletcher, 2007). However, ideas and theories surrounding academic control and the proletarianisation of academic labour (Wilson, 2001), orient the current discourse in the wider literature, particularly where the negative impacts of performance management tools are considered. It has been argued that there have been significant changes in the management of research and that exercises such as the RAE and the REF have changed the culture of universities and the inter-relationship between academics and institutions (Henkel, 1997; Shattock, 1999; Wilson, 2001), and that ultimately this is vastly gendered. Women are still considerably underrepresented in the upper echelons of academia and ultimately, it is this inequality which drives the need for this research. The discussion that has been presented also demonstrates that there has been an increase in control over universities and the associated allocation of research funding. The importance of historical context, as well as emphasising the impact of patriarchal structures must be considered in order to further contextualise this research. This paper values the idea that there has been a proletarianisation of academic labour (Wilson, 2001) and that there is an increasing teaching and research nexus (Elton, 2000; Deem, 2008).

This paper has drawn consideration of feminist perspectives (Crompton, 1990; Acker 2006,2012; Cockburn, 1991) and Acker’s (2006) inequality regimes, and aspects of intersectionality (Acker, 2012), surrounding the use of control and evaluation mechanisms such as the REF in the academy. It is argued that this will provide greater insight into how female academics maybe be multiply disadvantaged, particularly when BME women are considered (Acker, 2012), thus highlighting gender inequality at a meso level and that a binary relationship between men and women continues to obstruct the development of sexual equality (Knights and Kerfoot, 2008), as well as acknowledging the argument that white men continue to dominate the academy (Özbilgin, 2009) It will be investigated whether the Research Excellence framework as a national level academic research evaluation tool is deepening the plight of female academics reaching the professoriate or whether it holds opportunity for increased transparency and merit.

It is essential to once again make reference to that in the UK almost three quarters of the total income from Research councils goes to Russell Groups Universities (leading 24 UK research Universities), yet that for example there is only one female Dean in the Russell Group (Grove, 2012). Whilst this is a very visible gender equality issue, there are many more issues surrounding equality and diversity which are preventing academics from contributing and being fully recognised, and this research will provide greater insight in to not only what these issues are but how a fairer and more inclusive system can be created and as a result, how the allocation of research funding is affected.

It is the historical legacies in academia, which continue to breed inequality, and aspects of the REF may hold part of the solution to promoting further excellence in an environment which is more complimentary to female academics (Deem, 2009; Fletcher, 2007) and their success, in what is still a profoundly gendered academy today.

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