



Australian Academics' Perceptions on Research Evaluation Exercises

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore academics' perceptions in response to a research evaluation exercise and its impact on their working life. Adopting a case study, the research examines the period 2006-2010, in which the case study university was preparing for Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise. It relies on academics' responses to an open-ended question in a survey, contextualised with academic policy and organisational literature interpreted from an institutional perspective. The responses to the survey are analysed qualitatively. The case study university performed well in the first ERA exercise in 2010. However, academics reported immense pressure to increase research outputs, fear and anxiety, gaming and strategic initiatives, focus on quantity and not quality of research, and increased workload. Academics also felt that appointments, promotions, and tenure decisions were determined by measures aligned with ERA. In investigating in detail the responses of individual academics to Australia's research evaluation initiative, the paper reveals a disconnect between the institutional demands placed on the higher education sector, university changes made to accommodate these demands and the ability of the academics to meet these pressures in a sustainable way. The study provides insights to regulators and higher education leaders into the impact of ERA on the working lives of academics. It also highlights the need to take account of academics' views in the design and implementation of research assessment exercises.

Keywords – Academics, Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), New public management, Performance measures, Research evaluation exercise, Workload

JEL Classification: I23

Paper Classification – Research paper

Introduction

With the widespread adoption of new public management (NPM) reforms during the 1980s by the Higher Education Sector (HES), policy development and management were geared towards efficiency and effectiveness. The implementation of accounting technologies in the form of performance measurements consisting of explicit targets, outputs and outcomes (L. D. Parker & Gould, 1999), placed universities on a more business-like footing (L. Parker, 2002),

shifting the culture to one of managing for results (Jackson & Lapsley, 2003; L. D. Parker, 2013; L. D. Parker & Guthrie, 1993; Skalen, 2004). Performance measures were intended to encourage public institutions to become more productive and efficient by making their performance more transparent, comparable and measurable (Hood, 1995; L. Parker, 2002). In addition to accounting, technological developments also enabled the concept of measurement. This development may also have been fuelled by the idea that measurement affects behaviour thus promising a controllable organisation (Catasus, Ersson, J, & Wallentin, 2006).

Within the Australian Higher Education Sector (AHES), the impact of globalisation ignited the introduction of various reforms regarded at the time as being appropriate responses within higher education and the economy, that is, moving away from the 'social agenda toward individualist market-oriented modes of responding to broad international economic forces' (Smyth, 1994, p. 66). With the Dawkins Reforms in 1987 (Dawkins, 1987, 1987b, 1988, 1989) and a move toward non-public funding and market orientation (Duckett, 2004; MacGregor, Rix, Aylward, & Glynn, 2006; S. Ryan, Guthrie, & Neumann, 2008), funding cuts were initiated by various governments, which changed the management practices of universities (Fredman & Doughney, 2012). These cuts compelled universities to turn towards different sources of financing leading to a huge reliance on student fees and the intake of international students (Anderson, Johnson, & Saha, 2002; Neumann & Guthrie, 2002). While these changes covered the government funding cuts to a certain extent, they added to a growing disparity in student/staff ratios and greater teaching requirements and pressures (Maslen, 2014; L. Parker, 2002). There is considerable evidence in the literature that highlights the impact of these changes on academic workload and work pressures (Anderson et al., 2002; Houston, Meyer, & Paewai, 2006; McInnis, Powles, & Anwyl, 1995; 2011; Taylor, Gough, Bundrock, & Winter, 1998; Vidovich & Currie, 1998; R. Winter & Sarros, 2002; Richard Winter, Taylor, & Sarros, 2000).

A myriad of new corporate governance technologies (Neumann & Guthrie, 2002, 2004; S. Ryan & Guthrie, 2009; S. Ryan et al., 2008) were introduced alongside the above changes. This added to the explosion of audit culture (Guthrie & Parker, 1999; Power, 1997) and manifested in the proliferation of performance measures in the form of league tables, performance indicators, quality and ranking and assessment measurements of university research (Smyth, 2013). Within universities, these control systems have filtered down to the academic level, which has eroded the trust and respect of academic work, regarded as the cornerstones of universities (Adorno, 1974 cited in Smyth, 2013). Following in the footsteps of global Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs), the Australian Research Council (the government's regulatory body) for the first time implemented the Excellence of Research in Australia (ERA) in 2010. A study on its impact on universities and academic work life is therefore very timely and appropriate.

The higher echelons of management in Australian universities have more or less enthusiastically embraced the principle of ERA as a means of securing institutional status and funding in the face of increasing resource constraints (Martin-Sardesai et al., 2017). However, the pressure to improve research performance eventually falls on academics. Since ERA was implemented for the first time in 2010, there is little evidence of its impact on academic working life. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the responses of academics to ERA and the research performance demands of UniA.¹ Initially the paper will analyse how research has been accounted for within the university, and the changes related to performance measures with the operationalisation of ERA. It will then investigate the responses of academics to these research performance demands.

¹ UniA is a pseudonym, to preserve the anonymity of the university.

Accordingly, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief history of the introduction of performance measures within the AHES. It provides the context in which ERA was instituted and briefly outlines the various performance measures implemented within the AHES by the respective governments. Section 3 outlines the case study organisation and identifies the changes implemented within the university in preparation for ERA. Section 4 then explains the research methodology while section 5 presents the findings of the study identifying academic responses to the impact of ERA on their working life. Section 6 highlights the study's conclusions, limitations and avenues for further research, and contributions and reflections on the significance of the study.

The Australian Higher Education Sector

The AHES is a major export industry and an important driver of societal and economic progress. Education exports were valued at AUD \$15b in 2012-2013, making it one of the major industries in a country of 22 million people (ABS2013). Universities are major drivers of national and local economies. For nearly 30 years, governments around the world have been trying to reduce financial outlays, more recently attempting to balance budgets after the global financial crisis (Guthrie & Parker, 2014). Commercialisation, privatisation and corporatisation of the public sector have been central to government policy in many countries regardless of their political agenda have led to outsourcing of public services previously delivered directly by government, particularly in education, health and welfare (Broadbent & Guthrie, 2008).

Globally, in the HES, national research performance reporting systems have been introduced over the past three decades and have grown in importance (Hicks, 2010), with the intent to measure the results of research brought about by universities (Broadbent, 2010). Several governments have developed national research performance reporting systems for research activities, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK, the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) in New Zealand and Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) (Hicks, 2012; Otley, 2010). Several countries are embarking on stringent austerity programs, which will prevent increase in funding or lead to decreased funding and these national research performance reporting systems are used to allocate funds (Hicks, 2009, 2010). In early 2010, 14 countries were found to be using performance reporting systems (Hicks, 2012) and we now believe this is nearing 20 nations.

Within the AHES, the establishment of a Unified National System (UNS) in the late 1980s, a Relative Funding Model (RFM) was introduced in 1990, which aimed at equitable funding arrangements for research (Miller & Pincus, 1997). A research component of this model, referred to as the Research Quantum (RQ), aimed to support research activities other than those linked to postgraduate/higher degree research training (Ramsden, 1999). Universities' ability to meet research targets with a focus on priority areas as identified by the Government's regulatory body, the ARC took precedence in the distribution of the RQ (Miller & Pincus, 1997). Performance indicators were developed to measure research performance of universities quantitatively through the use of a Composite Index (CI) (Anderson, Johnson, & Milligan, 1996; Vidovich & Currie, 1998), and were used by the ARC to allocate funding for university research through the use of a funding formula via RQ (Ramsden, 1999). In 2002, the RQ was replaced by the DEST block funding schemes which included: (1) Research Training Scheme (RTS); (2) the Research Infrastructure Block Grants (RIBG); and (3) the Institutional Grants Scheme (IGS) (DEST (Department of Education Science and Training), 2005). Their use contributed to universities' ability to compete for a share of funding.

In 2004 (see, Table 1), the Federal Government established an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) to support the development of a new research assessment exercise called the Research Quality Framework (RQF), which focused on measuring the quality and impact of research. Assessing the quality of research required the judgment of expert reviewers who included discipline experts (DEST, Department of Education Science and Training 2005). Regardless of the level of aggregation for the assessment, data was to be collected on individuals' research outputs and achievements (DEST, Department of Education Science and Training 2005, p. 27). The proposed RQF model involved universities selectively submitting groups of researchers for assessment by external panels, resulting in a system of ratings based on portfolios provided. This would then form the basis for allocation of formula based research block funding to the participating institutions. In 2005 (see, Table 1), the government introduced a RQF, designed to assess the quality and impact of Australian research both within Australia and globally. Several Australian universities participated in a trial run of RQF to review their processes and ensure that they had the correct procedures in place to meet the reporting requirements of the RQF. The RQF model drew considerably on the UK RAE and consolidated the importance of expert peer review by panels, and added an impact factor (Hicks, 2010). It was intended to be a streamlined, internationally recognised and transparent research quality assurance system (Carr, 2008), and was scheduled to be implemented in 2007. However, with a change in government this did not happen. In 2008, the new Labor Government made the ARC responsible for the implementation of ERA in place of RQF.

Table 1: Timeline showing key dates for Australian Government Research Schemes 1990 - 2010

Research Quantum	1990
Block Funding Schemes (RTS, RIBG, IGS)	2002
Coalition Government establishes an EAG to support development of RQF	2004
RQF Trial run by some universities	2005
New Labor Government ends Coalition Government's RQF process	2007
ARC made responsible for development and implementation of ERA	2008
ERA Trial involving only two clusters (PCE and HCA) conducted	2009
ERA 2010 implemented and conducted – University submissions for ERA 2010	2010
ERA 2010 National Report Released	2011
ERA 2012 (modified from ERA 2010)	2011
ERA 2012 National Report Released	2012
ERA 2015 (modified from ERA 2012)	2014
ERA 2015 submission deadlines announced	2014

Excellence in Research for Australia

Administrative efficiency, simplicity and a balance between performance indicators and peer review were among the reasons offered by the Government for replacing RQF with ERA. The Government also made the ARC responsible for the design and implementation of ERA (The Australian "The Experts will be Balanced," 2008). Under ERA, the ARC required collection of indicators (see, Table 2) of research productivity from all eligible public sector universities.² The

² Commonwealth Provider Category Standards enforced by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) in Australia regulate which institutions can operate as universities [for details of Standards refer to Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DISSRTE) (2012)]. Institutions regulated as 'Universities' are eligible to receive funding from the Government and are in the domain of public policy. In 2014, there are 41 eligible universities in operation in Australia (39 public and 2 private).

data was evaluated by Research Evaluation Committees (RECs) under eight multidisciplinary clusters using the two-and four-digit Fields of Research (FoR) codes aggregated to create four-and two-digit Units of Evaluations (UoEs). In the evaluation process, RECs rate each UoE in the range of 1 to 5, 1 meaning that performance in the discipline is well below world standard, to 5, meaning that performance in the discipline is well above world standard. The outcomes were reported publicly, by institution, and by discipline (ARC2009; 2010). In 2011, changes to the ERA methodology were made, based on feedback received from the ERA 2010 evaluations. The ERA 2012 now included the withdrawal of ranked outlets indicators and the introduction of a refined journal indicator that did not use prescriptive A*/A/B/C ranks (ARC2011). The ERA 2015 submission dates will begin in January 2015. The only high level change indicated so far is the addition of a new category of 'non-traditional research outputs', which could include a written research report commissioned or solicited by an external body, such as a government department or private company (Cahill, 2014). At the time of writing this paper the ERA 2018 consultation rounds are in progress with the university, the peak bodies & the ARC.

The evaluations of research performance made against four categories of indicators are of quality, research volume and activity, indicators of research application and indicators of recognition (ARC, 2010). The reference period for these indicators and the main variations between 2010, 2012 and 2015 are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: ERA indicators in 2010, 2012 and 2015

Indicators	2010	Period	2012	Period	2015	Period
Quality	Ranked outlets, citation analysis, ERA peer review, peer-reviewed Australian and international research income	Jan 03-Dec 08	Publishing behaviour, citation analysis, ERA peer review, peer-reviewed Australian and international research income	Jan 05 – Dec 10	Same as 2012	Jan 07 – Dec 13
Volume and activity	Total research outputs, research income and other research items within the context of the profile of eligible researchers	Jan 06-Dec 08	Same as 2010	Jan 08 – Dec 10	New category of non-traditional research outputs. This is entitled research report for an external body and consists of four subcategories of reports, public sector, industry, not for profit and other.	Jan 10 – Dec 13
Application	Research commercialisation income and other applied measures	Jan 06-Dec 08	Research commercialisation income, plant breeder's rights, registered designs, and NHMRC guidelines. Some other measures such as publishing behaviour and some other categories of research income can also provide information about research application	Jan 08 – Dec 10	Same as 2012	Jan 10 – Dec 13
Recognition	A range of esteem measures	Jan 06-Dec 08	Same as 2010	Jan 08 – Dec 10	Same as 2012	Jan 10 – Dec 13

A literature review on AHES provides evidence to suggest that the various reforms introduced within the sector, with the advent of NPM, whether they were from direct coercive pressures, such as government policy, or indirect pressures, have not been widely accepted by staff (McInnis et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 1998; Vidovich & Currie, 1998). Constant restructuring into larger academic units with more administrative units has alienated academics and students (Green, 2006; L. D. Parker, 2007). The changes introduced within the sector can be seen as a marked policy success for governments in terms of sector growth (Ryan & Guthrie, 2009). However, these changes have

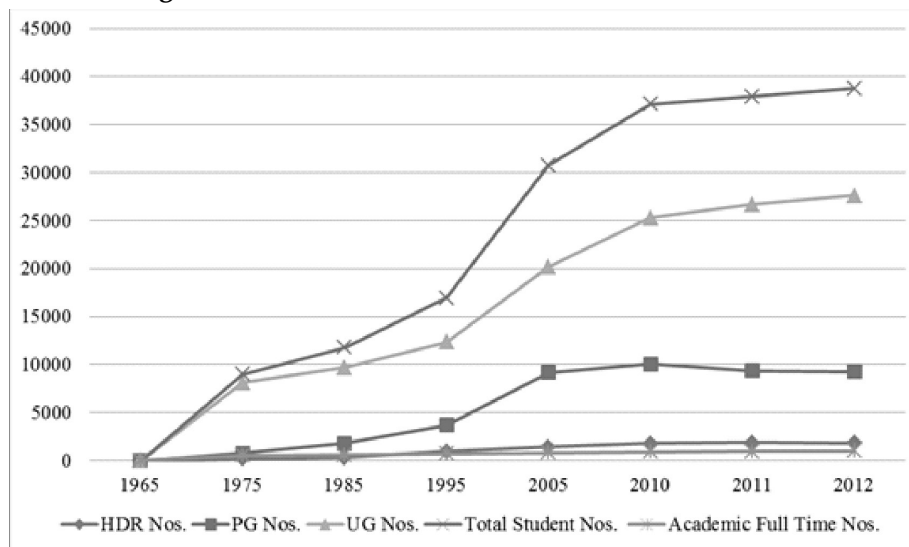
also been criticised in the literature (Brett, 2000; Coaldrake, 2000; Marginson, 1997; Williams, 2000). Several research studies disclose that academics were adversely affected by changes in the AHES (Anderson et al., 2002; NTEU2000; Winfield, Gillespie, Stough, & Hauarachchi, 2002; R. Winter & Sarros, 2002; Richard Winter et al., 2000). However, a study by Ryan and Guthrie (2009) revealed academics as highly motivated, hardworking and committed to academic values and priorities and loyal to their school. Subsequent studies show a negative impact of NPM related reforms on academics (see, for example Pop-Vasileva et al., 2011).

Studies on the impact of RAE's in the form of ERA indicate that ERA had directly impacted the confidence and capacity of university researchers to undertake broad and diverse types of research (NTEU2012). A study by de Lange et al. (2010) highlighted that in the AHES, ERA was already having a significant effect on accounting schools and their staff. Heads of School in the accounting discipline across various universities predicted that the operationalisation of ERA would be problematic because of the reporting requirements, and leading to 'gaming', a consequence of the significant focus on research. Institutional pressures from government accountability and assurance measures have pressured academics to publish more (Villiers & Dumay, 2013). This paper adds to this body of knowledge, by investigating the impact of ERA on the working lives of academics.

UniA – Changes Implemented in Preparation for ERA

In order to explore academics' perception about the impact of ERA on their working lives, as experienced through a university's internally developed performance measurement system, a case study research with one university within the AHES, namely UniA, was undertaken. UniA was established as an independent university, and has expanded enormously since its inception. It began with an enrolment of 956 students, and in 2012 comprised 38,747 full time and part time students, 1,334 academic and 1434 professional staff. It is the fourth largest university within its state, with four faculties and 35 departments. Figure 1 presents a statistical summary of student and staff growth from 1965 to 2012 indicating that UniA had a continuous growth of students since its inception.

Figure 1: UniA – Student and Staff Numbers 1965-2012



Source: Based on data collected from Annual Reports of UniA by authors

UniA was chosen as the case study organisation due to its strong and concerted research aspirations and the ability of the researchers to gain access. To gain an understanding of the background and history of UniA, a documentary analysis was undertaken. This included the university's web page content at a specific point in time (from January to March 2012), and publicly available electronic documents and media articles, annual reports and books accessed from its library. This also enabled an understanding of UniA's size, student numbers, financial growth, its aims, objectives, and long-term goals and shed light on the strategic orientation and the research policies implemented by management to bring about changes in the organisation, in response to government policies.

Documentary analysis of UniA revealed that prior to 2006, the university concentrated more on teaching than research. In that year, research gained importance and began to be accounted for with the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor (VC), who came to UniA with exposure to, and experience of, research evaluations in the HES internationally. He presented a fresh vision for UniA, followed by a restructure of faculties and the development of research focused performance management system (PMS) (Martin-Sardesai, 2016; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2015). Prior to ERA, and in anticipation of a research assessment exercise in some form, UniA designed and implemented PMS to measure, monitor, and enhance its research performance (Martin-Sardesai, 2016; Martin-Sardesai, Irvine, Tooley, & Guthrie, 2016). After ERA 2010 was announced, and to prepare for its specific requirements, UniA modified its existing PMS, once again emphasising the quality and quantity of publications. These strategies proved to be successful as UniA was ranked among the top 10 universities in the first ERA evaluation in 2010, with 63% of its research evaluated at world standard or above (Martin-Sardesai, 2016). Within this institutional setting, academics were required to meet the expectations of ERA's requirements. It is their impressions of the impact of ERA on their working lives that form the objective of this paper.

Research Method

A web-based survey questionnaire was administered to all academics across UniA between February and March 2013. The instrument was designed based on insights drawn from literature and prior survey instruments used by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU2012),³ and other survey instruments used in higher education research (for example, Dunn & Wallace, 2006; Probert, 2005). The survey included questions about the university's PMS, changes to the PMS with the operationalisation of ERA, and so on. A list of 1252 senior and junior academics from the different faculties and departments of UniA was compiled from the university's website. The survey was administered between February and March 2013 to all academics across UniA's various faculties and departments. The total survey responses received were 202, a response rate of 16%. These responses were analysed using IBM SPSS and the results have been published in the *Australian Accounting Review* (Martin-Sardesai et al., 2016).

Of the 202 respondents, 90 academics responded to the open-ended question, which asked, respondents to provide comments, if any, on the impact of ERA on their working lives. This is the main source of data gathered to address the objective of this paper. The aim of the open-ended question was to access the feelings of as many academics as possible on the impact of PMS and ERA on their working lives. Also, the question was designed to prompt the telling of their individual stories. Of the 90 academics who responded to the open-ended question, 14 were not included in the analysis as they merely provided reasons for not commenting being recent

³The survey by NTEU was administered only to senior administrators and included four broad questions on communication of policies, journal ranking, use of performance metric and performance targets. It did not seek input from academics.

appointees, or contract appointees academics who responded to the open-ended question in the survey. Table 3 show snapshots of the profiles of academics.

Table 3: Snapshot of profile of Academics

Category	Open-ended question respondents	
	No.	%
Continuing full time*academics	63	70
Continuing part time	1	1
Fixed Term	26	29
Emeritus	-	-
Total	90	100%
Employment Level		
Level A	7	8
Level B	18	20
Level C	27	30
Level D	12	13
Level E	19	21
Postdoc	7	8
Emeritus	-	-
Total	90	100%
Age		
Age 25-34	11	12
35-44	25	28
45-54	27	30
>55	27	30
Total	90	100%
Length of time at UniA		
At UniA<5 years	28	31
5-10 years	26	29
10-20 years	22	24
>20 years	14	16
Total	90	100%
Faculty		
Faculty of Arts	33	37
Faculty of Business and Economics	9	10
Faculty of Science	48	53
Total	90	100%

A majority (70%) of the respondents who answered the open-ended question were continuing full time academics and 50% were from the academic position, Level B/C.

The data from the open-ended question of the survey questionnaire was stored and analysed using NVivo 11. Thematic analysis methods were used to identify the impact of ERA on the working lives of academics. Thematic analysis involved searching the reflective texts to find

repeated patterns of meaning of themes that were abstract constructs as identified by the investigators before, during, and after analysis (G. W. Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Following Braun and Clarke (2006), a six-phased process was used, entailing: 1) familiarising ourselves with our data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing the paper. Both the authors read all reflective texts and generated initial codes using open coding methods. Preliminary themes were identified and compared through a discussion between authors until consensus was reached on key themes. These were then defined and named, and used as sub-headings to write the findings of the paper. These phases were not applied linearly, but rather, there was a constant moving back and forth through the data set, coded extracts of data and the analysis.

Academic responses to the impact of ERA on their working life

As stated earlier in the paper, significant changes were made within UniA in anticipation of a research assessment exercise such as ERA. The findings analysed in this section reveal the perceptions of academics as to the impact of ERA on their working lives.

Fear and anxiety, violation of academic freedom

Academics perceived that ERA has led to an atmosphere of fear and intimidation with people feeling constantly under threat for not meeting research goals. They identify that ERA creates a general atmosphere of anxiety around the department and works against genuine engagement with ideas and with other's research.

"ERA goals strongly contribute to a sense that one is never 'good enough.'"

Academics indicate that they were expected to increase their research performance when their teaching loads make it impossible to do so, unless they sacrifice their personal time. As such, academics believe ERA is destructive to work life balance and ultimately to innovation.

"ERA [is] dehumanising and thoroughly demoralising, as its measures violate the freedom of enquiry and the right to research, with academics being told on what areas of research they needed to focus on within their departments and/or faculties."

Further, academics expressed that while their progress in achieving ARC grants has added to a higher ranking of their discipline, the amount of time spent in writing grant applications and administering grants has cost them a lot of their weekends and time away from their families.

Workload and decisions on appointments, promotions, and tenure

Academics expressed that the constant pressure to achieve excellence in all areas required by ERA under their current teaching and research workload was making them consider leaving academic work. They are afraid that they will not be in a position to achieve excellence in research under their present working conditions. They feel it is against their work ethic and integrity to continue to do what they love doing. The huge administrative burden placed on some of the senior academics in the ERA data collection process has also had a negative impact on their working life. Many felt inundated with excessive administration load, teaching and learning, research and community and professional engagement. As a result, most of the research is being done outside of working hours and is not sustainable in the long run. Some of the comments included:

"The burden of administration and the teaching load since 2008 have increased exponentially yet our administrative assistance has decreased."

"I was Associate Dean Research for the Faculty for the first ERA collection so it had a huge impact on what I could achieve as Associate Dean. A good half of my time was devoted to collecting and checking ERA data."

"Academics perceived that ERA has forced UniA to make decisions on appointments, promotions, and tenure based on the amount of research grants and quantity of publications."

"The selection process is completely distorted by ERA anxieties and has led to ill will in the Department."

"Teaching is completely devalued."

"Since their tenured appointment is teaching based, chances of promotion have become very bleak."

Emphasis on Quantity and not Quality

Academics perceived that ERA distorted the value of academic work by placing too great an emphasis on narrowly defined research outcomes and short-term achievements rather than actual research activity. They feel that ERA is a poorly conceived policy based on what are in many ways, trivial measures. Academics perceive that their university's obsession with metrics will lead to poor quality publications, as they try to poach researchers from other universities rather than actually investing in quality within UniA. Some academics perceived that ERA uses criteria that are invalid or inappropriate in certain fields. They alleged that their university did not seem to have any interest in quality, only in quantity, which is perceived as damaging to interdisciplinary research.

"The whole ERA exercise as a pointless bean counting one."

"Since ERA does not assess 4 digit disciplines with small number of research outputs, I feel that quality research and researchers are ignored in the process."

Gaming and Strategic Initiatives

Academics observed that UniA has started to game the ERA system. Their university has identified areas of research strengths and pool together publications and grants that will add to that specific research strength. This then boosts that specific area and enables the achievement of a good ERA rating. Thus, UniA is able to achieve a four-star rating and above, within these areas, which increases the chances of achieving grants and funding, and raises the research ranking of UniA. Thus, they perceive that ERA has perverse effects on universities, as universities are engaging in gaming the system rather than actually trying to enhance the quality of research.

"For my discipline ... the ERA exercise 'defined away' most of the research work that I do ... they were not counted as part of my discipline ... The fact that UniA obtained a 2 for my discipline then seems to be used by others (at university, faculty and department levels) as an indication that we were doing a bad job."

Some academics expressed they could not adapt to ERA as it is a changing measure, and fail to understand how their research today will be evaluated in the next round of the assessment exercise. They have thus developed their individual strategies to do the best they can within the given environment. Some of their strategies included:

"What matters to me is the quality and impact of my research and if it benefits the university in the process, that would be good, but I will not direct any activity towards university strategies."

"I will continue to do research and publish in areas of value and journals that have influence. In doing so I am confident that ERA scores would surely follow me."

On the other hand, some academics who have already established a good research record are not impacted by ERA at all, as they continue to do their research because they like research and its intellectual engagement.

Positive Comments

While all the comments discussed above are negative impacts of ERA, a few academics perceived that ERA had a positive impact on their working lives. Academics perceived that the ERA ratings made a difference to their departments within UniA. To some academics, ERA has instilled confidence in their research endeavours. Having achieved a good rating, they are proud of their respective disciplines and claim to have a supportive research team within their department in quality research work. However, they do agree with the rest of the academics that research alone should not be a measure of academic performance when the academics are required to teach and carry out various other administrative tasks. They also agree that quality research outputs and not quantity should be the emphasis.

Conclusion

The period in the Australian HES since the mid-1980s has seen many changes to the number of universities, how the system is funded, forms of public accountability of academics, management and governance. It is evident that new public management leading to the implementation of research assessment exercises in the form of ERA has involved a complex process of internal developments in universities in response to a more hostile external environment. Amongst these developments have been the expectations of how research should be led and managed, which led to the implementation of ERA. The aim of this paper was to explore the impact of ERA on the working lives of academics within an Australian university, UniA. As seen in the findings, a majority of the comments by the academics on the impact of ERA on their working life were negative, although there were a few positive comments.

UniA underwent a lot changes in anticipation of an assessment exercise such as ERA. It had positioned itself well for such an exercise and, with the implementation of ERA, underwent further changes to embed the specific requirements of ERA. The study revealed that while the efforts of management were rewarded in terms of a good ERA outcome for UniA in both the 2010 and 2012 evaluations, academics' perceptions were different. The results of this study conform to the views of prior studies where various changes in policies by the government have had a negative impact on academics (e.g. Anderson et al., 2002; Harman, 2006; R. Winter & Sarros, 2002). It also conforms to studies that indicate increased academic workload and stress levels due to the various public sector reforms that universities have been subject to in recent years (Fredman & Doughney, 2012; Winefield, Boyd, Saebel, & Pignata, 2008). This study makes a specific contribution by exploring one particular policy in the area of accounting and evaluating research in the form of ERA 2010, and its impact on the working lives of academics. It adds to the existing literature on international research assessment exercises (Broadbent, 2010; Edgar & Geare, 2010), but with an Australian focus. As ERA has been met with resistance, there will continue to be discussion about the extent to which this exercise is driving academic activity in particular ways.

As with all research, there are limitations, which set the boundaries of the research. The findings are based on perceptions. These perceptions may be inadequate due to inappropriate measures or inadequate interpretation of the survey instruments (Ittner, Larcker, & Randall, 2003; Ittner & Larker, 2001; Verbeeten, 2008). Further, the study is based on a survey administered to academics in a single university, and hence care should be taken in generalising the findings for the AHES.

Despite these limitations, the findings of the case study remain pertinent. The study provides empirical evidence that will inform universities and government regulators of the impact of ERA on the working life of academics. A potential risk seen in this study is the research focus by senior management, when academic work also includes teaching and administration. The continued focus of the Australian Government to direct its resources into areas of research excellence measures in the form of ERA have required universities to embed these strategies within their own individual PMS. Academics were hostile to ERA, because either they felt themselves personally disadvantaged by the privileging of research over other aspects of the academic role or because of the distortion it was felt to have introduced into academic life.

Further research is needed to strengthen our knowledge and understanding of the ongoing changes in the HES in the light of research assessment exercises, in order to assess more fully the impact of these exercises on the PMS of universities and their academic staff. As research expectation intensifies globally, future research could be reinforced by further longitudinal and comparative studies.

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