

Education: How many UK lecturers really are 'research active'?

By Rob Virtue on December 31, 2014 10:23 AM | Tagged with: University of Greenwich

COMMENT by Dr Solomon Habtemariam

The news page of every UK Higher Education Institution website appears to show that they are all winners of the Research Excellence Framework 2014, which assesses quality of research at universities.



Even institutions that have seen massive drops in their ranking at this round of the assessment appear to have lots to celebrate.

Every HEI played the game to their best advantage, most importantly by making sure selected staff members perceived to bring higher scores were submitted.

But shouldn't research ranking in HEI ultimately be based on overall impact made by ALL the academic/research community in the institution, instead of just a few selected for a higher score?

What we really needed to know was the number of eligible staff not returned and the recent updated ranking by Times Higher Education was just a timely blessing.

One would wonder how many academics are demoralised by not being included in REF2014 submission and how many will subsequently lose out in research funding allocations on the basis of the ranking game played out by HEIs.

As expected, the number of unreturned staff for the very top research institutions was low:

Cambridge (4.9%); Imperial College London (8.1%), University College London (8.7%), Oxford (13.2%), LSE (15.3%) and Warwick (16.5%).

As we go down through the ranking, however, the number of unreturned staff is staggeringly high, and for post-92 universities, the vast majority of eligible staff appears to be not returned.

For some post-1992 universities in and around London, for example, the percentage of unreturned staff was as follows: London South Bank (59.2%); Middlesex (64.7%), Westminster (71.1%), Greenwich (75.1%), East London (77.1%); Hertfordshire (78.8%), Kingston (83.5%) and London Met (85.5%).

While trying to improve their ranking through selective submission, UK HEIs have now revealed the real figure of their staff that they consider 'truly research active'. There is no doubt that HEIs, especially at the lower end of the ranking, also tried to optimise their resources for higher REF score, such as by recruiting more professorial staff in Unit of Assessment of interest or preferential allocation of research funding to those presumed to be REF returnable.

The reality is that the existing status quo will remain and the majority of research funding in the UK, whether it is from government or charity funding organisations, goes to the minority HEIs at the top of the ranking.

If such funding polarisation continues, both at the national and institutional levels, it only means that a significant number of UK graduates will be taught by academics that are not considered 'research active'. This

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is really a shame!

According to some reports, academics at post-1992 universities spend significantly longer time in lectures and seminars than those at traditional institutions.

This is not surprising, given most able students go to HEIs at the top of the league table and the likes of post-1992 universities have to spend a considerable amount of time in caring for their students and shape them up to the required standard.

Furthermore, the student: staff ratio (SSR) is disproportionately high for the likes of post-1992 universities. The SSR for the above mentioned universities is summarised in the table shown.

University	SSR
Cambridge	11.6
Imperial College London	11.7
University College London	10.2
Oxford	11.0
LSE	11.8
Warwick	13.9
London South Bank	21.9
Middlesex	20.5
Westminster	20.3
Greenwich	21.5
East London	26.3
Hertfordshire	18.3
Kingston	19.4
London Met	21.5

Source: [Complete University Guide](#)

These realities highlight the disproportionate nature of research environments for academics at the top and lower-end (e.g. many post-1992 universities) HEIs in the league table.

It now appears that the vast majority of academics at the likes of post-1992 universities are not even recognised as 'researcher active' as the REF process encouraged HEIs to play the game of enhancing their score through selective submission. In my view, this shouldn't have been allowed.

When all UK HEIs proudly say their teaching is underpinned by up-to-date research in the subject field, a research ranking/funding should have been based on the performance of all eligible staff.

Such an approach wouldn't even affect the overall winners at the top end of the research pecking order but have an impact at the middle and bottom-end of the ranking.

Irrespective of who will win or lose in the upcoming research funding allocations, a lesson both at national and institutional levels must be learnt to design a sustainable formula of enhancing research excellence at all HEIs.

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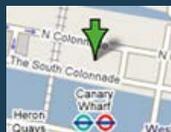
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