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Abstract

"When 'Excellence' is not good enough: Reflections on Research Evaluation and Assessment"

Over recent decades, since 1986 in the UK, there has been an increase in the assessment and evaluation of the quality and, more recently, the impact of research undertaken in European Universities. This can be set in the wider context of the rise of the audit culture in the second half of the last century. In this lecture I will take the UK Research Assessment Exercise, now the Research Excellence Framework, as a baseline case, because it developed early and is so highly developed, in order to explore the changes which such practices and, processes have wrought across the HE sector. I will examine the ways in which the UK model has been 'copied and this assessment culture has spread across Europe, and more widely, like some latter-day process of colonisation. In some cases, benchmarks have been introduced which are even more problematic for the development of both international and more locally focused research, than those used in the UK. The expectations set by these exercises can create insurmountable hurdles, especially for early career researchers, those with 'non-standard' career trajectories, and for researchers undertaking work in developing fields. One such example is the widespread introduction of journal hierarchies as an indicator of the excellence of publications.

As a sociologist I will be most interested in discussing the effects which these practices have had on the social sciences, especially in the context of using a framework which is designed for STEM disciplines, and also in how utilizing sociological conceptualizations of, for example: The Public University, civil society, the market, consumption, trust and unintended consequences, can help us as to understand what has occurred, and, hopefully, to offer more positive alternatives.