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Reflecting upon the Research Assessment Exercise in Hong Kong: A Cultural Economy’s Perspective
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Introduction
This paper aims to critically review the regulations, values and practices of research assessment exercise (RAE) introduced and then conducted by the University Grants Committee (UGC) by deploying the cultural circuit advocated by Paul de Gay (1997), and argues that RAE is not a de facto professional and an academic practices, aiming at promoting the culture of academic pluralism and autonomy, but at legitimatizing the hegemony and manipulation of research practices in the light of an institutional and economic perspective. This paper is divided into three parts: Part one introduces the contexts leading up to the emergence and adoption of RAE to assess the academic performance of universities. Part two examines in what ways an economic perspective penetrates research by reviewing the key regulations and practices, then regulation and representation are extracted from the circuit of culture to interpret how culture of economy comes into being. And finally, implication of RAE on distorting and manipulating the research in a local context is delineated.

Contextual understanding of RAE
From the official perspective, the RAE is not really on the academic pursuit in the light of knowledge searching, but on the resource allocation to promote and then produce the academic excellence, a curiosity that arouses my questioning in relation to how and how far research and resources are related. One common understanding is that excellent research = abundant resources, and vice versa, or poor research (performance) = cutting resources, and vice versa, a common perception shared by most of the academics. However, it is interesting to question further whether research can be and should be qualified as being ranged from excellent to poor, and then allocating the resources accordingly.
The RAE is an evaluation system aiming at using research performance to shape the finding allocation. Basically, the Hong Kong’s practice is borrowed from the United Kingdom, in which the assessment system aims to control the money spending over universities in the ground of having an explicit and formalized assessment process of the quality of research\(^1\). As recapped from a newspaper reporting relating to a recent RAE in the UK:

The fate of thousands of academic careers and the finances of a fair few universities will be sealed this week after a seven-year hiatus. On Thursday, the results of the sixth, and last, research assessment exercise (RAE) will be announced.

It is, as one vice-chancellor billed it, "as big as election night results for the higher education sector, where careers are made and lost overnight". It is also blamed for making academics' lives a misery and distorting research and university life.

Not only will Thursday's results reveal the quality of British research but they will also be used to allocate over £1.5bn in no-strings public funding for universities each year from 2009.

......Despite all attempts to stop them, universities have played games to win the research race. Some have excluded staff they thought would not score highly. Others have bought in the hottest researchers they could get, in transactions similar to the football transfer market.

This week they will find out whether the gamble paid off - though they will have to wait until March next year to see exactly what funding will flow from their performance.

The English funding council, Hefce, has run the RAE on behalf of all the funding councils. But funding decisions based on the results are made separately.

Panels of around 1,100 academics in 67 different subjects - overseen by 15 main panels to ensure parity - have spent the last year wrestling with reams of research papers to judge the quality of their peers' work. They have considered the quality of research, the environment in which it is produced and the esteem in which researchers are held. But exactly how these components made up their overall score will, again, not be made available until March.

In general, more departments are expected to slump in the rankings than soar because the new marking system will reveal poor research\(^2\) (The Guardian, December 16, 2008).

The above lengthy quotation is meaningful to contextualize the RAE not from a purely scholastic, but genuinely economic perspective in four ways: First, the RAE is a calculative practice using the measurement to perceive research, featured by deploying score as an indicator to show the ability. Second, RAE is an official game being operated in top-down approach, with the aim to monitor universities so that the public expenditure can be deployed efficiently and economically. Third, positioning and value of universities, academic units and even scholars are basically determined by the exercise in form of rating associated with resources available from the government. And finally, the calculation is also made based on the academic capacity, as reflected in which some “poor research” is detached throughout the exercise and those who are supposed to be scored poorly are excluded so as not to affect the results negatively. Situated in the historical context

of the UK in the mid-1980s, the persistence of the neoliberalism under the Thatcher’s administration, budget cutting was a common practice, being shown in the below remark made by Gombrich (2000):

What laboratories are to science, libraries are to the humanities – though the libraries cost less. While expenditure on books and periodicals for university libraries was cut to the bone and beyond, government policy initiated in the Thatcher years and continued since has been to minimize the public subsidy of culture. Museums and libraries have been hit very hard. Even the British Library had its funds so cut that it had to curtail its purchase of foreign books to the point at which buying in some languages has stopped altogether.\(^3\)

Referring to the Hong Kong context, the 1990s witnesses the changing mentality of university funding in an incremental manner despite the absence of the financial pressure, with an emphasis on performance as an indicator to allocate resources. Given the expansion of local universities in the first half of the 1990s and the subsequent upgrading and retitling of such polytechnics and post-secondary institutions as Baptist College (BC) and Lingnan College (LC), the government, considering the condition of the UK, decided to follow in line with the practice of making assessment in the UK by using research performance, a trend that is largely identical with which the polytechnics and certain colleges of higher education joined the university sector and for the first time became eligible for research funding (Elton, 2000, p. 275). Despite having a rumor that the above two colleges were regarded as a pure teaching institute in Hong Kong, not a research-based universities like HKU, CU or UST, which was denied thereafter.

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In 1993, the UGC began to move away from a historical-based model for the assessment of the public recurrent funding requirements of the UGC-funded institutions to a more performance-based funding model. Following detailed study aided by an expert consultant, the UGC adopted a zero-based model which relates the level of funding allocations both to the tasks that each institution is expected to accomplish during the funding period, and to the quality of its recent performance (UGC, 1999). The RAE was introduced in early 1994, with the purpose of assessing the research output performance of the UGC-funded institutions by cost center and the results were used as the basis for allocating some of the research portion of the institutional recurrent grant for the triennium 1995-98. Referring to the Guidance Notes for RAE 1996:

> The purpose of the exercise is to assess the research output performance of the UGC-funded institutions by cost centre, to be used as the basis for allocating some of the research portion of the institutional recurrent grant for the triennium (UGC, April 29, 1996).

As mentioned above, the government’s funding criteria is not based on the scale of the establishment, like HKU or CU getting more resources neutrally and such medium-/small-scale ones like BU or LN getting smaller portion. However, this assertion is dubious in two ways: First, the scale of the university, such as the presence of such faculties as engineering, medical science, biochemistry, has become a determining factor in asking for and then seeking a larger portion of resources, comparing with those faculties only needing a small portion of resources such as humanities or social sciences. Second, the educational bureaucracy in Hong Kong still holds a relatively significant discretionary power to allocate resources in the light of the political and institutional setting. Therefore, UGC does only serve as a channel allocating the resources to a certain extent without the real power to

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check how and how far the institution allocates resources based on the actual performance. Therefore, it seems to be illusionary that performance can be fully prominent in the setting, given the structural and political/institutional considerations.

“Economizing” research: A Cultural Circuit’s Perspective

Briefly recapping with the model of the cultural circuit, it aims to explain the cultural processes associated with a cultural artifact and medium of modern culture, regardless of a product or a policy (Gay, 1990, p. 2). Five major cultural processes are identified, namely representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. By using and then adapting Gay’s analysis on culture, this paper is intended to study the RAE culturally with a specific focus of representation and regulation: exploring how RAE is represented, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use.

Hence, the above three questions can be further developed in connection with the following ways so as to structure the paper accordingly:

- Regulation: how is the research regulated based on the official perspective? How do such a mechanism (re-)define and then relate research and funding allocation?

- Representation: How is the excellent research defined under the rule of game? What are the possible implications associated with such a representation?

In addressing the above questions, the relevant documents, notably RAE 2014 Guidance Notes⁷, will be consulted and reviewed critically in relation to how language and discourse direct the way of understanding and then approaching research and performance.

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Regulation

RAE adopts the top-down and then outcome-based approach to assess the overall performance of the academic unit, use the label of cost center. As UGC mentions:

The RAE is thus part of the UGC’s performance-based assessment process. It aims to assess the quality of research at each of the UGC-funded institutions by cost centres (rather than by individual staff members) as one of the key factors for allocating part of research portion of the institutional recurrent grant in a publicly accountable way (UGC, 2014).

In other words, research for assessment is of the core value of the entire mechanism. It is assumed that if research is assessed to be excellent, then resources can be allocated significantly. However, the below statement shows that such a relationship may not be so obvious, by using the reason of respecting the administrative autonomy of each institution.

While the RAE will inform the distribution of the institutional recurrent Block Grant amongst institutions, each institution has full discretion to allocate such funding within the institution (UGC, 2014).

As mentioned, the RAE deploys the top-down approach to assess the performance in the form of forming panels:

Each panel will consist of mainly non-local academics and some local academics in the relevant disciplines and, where appropriate, also professionally qualified people from business, government, industry and the arts. Members will be appointed on an ad personam basis and will be specifically required to refrain from representing the interests of their own institutions. The standards
will thus ultimately be set and the judgments made by academic peers and not by the UGC (UGC, 2014).

In other words, such experts appointed by RGC are being used to assess the research output. However, assessment can be political in the sense that it is subjective, judgmental and hegemonic in connection with different methodological, ontological, epistemological and political orientations and the decision of the panels cannot be challenged and reversed under this top-down mechanism. Another controversy is that whether such non-local experts are fully familiar with, and appreciated, the local context in terms of research culture in making assessment; thereby making the mechanism unpredictable.

Another feature is the deployment of cost center, a term that directly uses an economic term to position the research. Viewing the meaning and nature of cost center, it is interesting to note that it carries the negative meaning in the light of the economic setting.

A cost center is part of an organization that does not produce direct profit and adds to the cost of running a company. Examples of cost centers include research and development departments, marketing departments, help desks and customer service/contact centers.

Although not always demonstrably profitable, a cost center typically adds to revenue indirectly or fulfills some other corporate mandate. Money spent on research and development, for example, may yield innovations that will be profitable in the future. Investments in public relations and customer service may result in more customers and increased customer loyalty.

Because the cost center has a negative impact on profit (at least on the surface) it is a likely target for rollbacks and layoffs when budgets are cut. Operational decisions in a contact center, for
example, are typically driven by cost considerations. Financial investments in new equipment, technology and staff are often difficult to justify to management because indirect profitability is hard to translate to bottom-line figures\(^8\).

In this regard, cost center is regarded economically as a nonproductive unit as it cannot directly make profit arising from the commercial and business activities, and is basically money spending’s unit. So, it is curious to see why RGC directly copies the UK’s experience on labeling the academic unit in such a way without reflecting upon the genuine nature of the naming. Returning to the intellectual context, research is not aimed at making profit and earning money arising from the research outputs, especially in social sciences and humanities, but at knowledge searching that cannot be and should not be associated with profit in the stricter sense.

Strategies of how to calculate the score of the assessment center are also introduced, as shown in the following case:

The above figure illustrates how a cost center constructs its quality profile so as to make it impressive and competitive under the evaluation. At first, three components, namely research outputs (80%), peer-reviewed research grants (10%) and esteem measures (10%) are included. Second, 5 levels of ranking is set to evaluate each component by the panel members. Third, an overall quality profile arising from these three components is established. In the connection, research can be measureable, calculative, and is regarded as outcome-based.

To sum up, regulation is featured in economic dimension, focusing on performance being related to resource allocation. Academic/intellectual activities are bounded in the form of cost center so as to make calculation at ease and legitimately in undergoing the measurement of academic output.

(Source: RAE 2014 – Guideline Notes, p. 38)
It is interesting to find that there is a disarticulation between the local and the international in defining and understanding the excellent research. By critically reading the following content, confusing and perhaps misleading remarks can be found in language usage.

(B) Objectives of research
6.6 The UGC perceives two objectives for research in the UGC-funded institutions:
(a) to participate in the global endeavour to extend human understanding thus keeping the knowledge base in the institutions current; and
(b) to encourage research tied to the interests and needs of the community.

6.7 The UGC will continue to encourage research outputs with social relevance. These outputs will be captured and assessed in terms of academic strength and quality of benchmarking against international standards.

6.8 The UGC will strive to ensure broad comparability across disciplines, but it will be up to each panel, with its subject expertise and knowledge of local circumstances, to translate the general definitions into more precise benchmarks appropriate to each discipline or group of disciplines. The panels will also be expected to interpret the guidelines with due regard to the nature of those subjects that may, by their nature, necessarily have a strong regional focus.

(C) Evaluation of the quality of research outputs
6.9 Research outputs will be assessed in terms of their originality, significance and rigour with reference to international standards and be graded into five categories:
(a) 4 star: world leading;
(b) 3 star: internationally excellent;
(c) 2 star: international standing;
(d) 1 star: regional standing; and
(e) unclassified (UGC, 2013).

While research should not and cannot be easily drawn a boundary between so-called local and international ones in terms of empirical sense and of the nature of journals to be published, the above items can be confusing in four ways: First, a disarticulation between the international and the local is detached, as reflected in which while the research can be related to social context and local circumstances, the RAE’s assessment is ranked at five levels, in which 4 star denotes world leading, and 3 star represents international excellent. In other words, the ranking shows that globalizing and internationalizing the study is of salience. One hypothetical but controversial case is that if a scholar studies how the protest against the project of High Speed Rail arouses the controversies about urban renewal, the topic can be local by focusing on such social relevant topics as the official hegemony of development and urban renewal, the cultural framing of urban protests. However, it can also be done in an international dimension being linked with the similar experiences of urban renewal in developed and developing countries around the world. Therefore, it is controversial to see whether the labeling of being local and international is mainly based on the deployment of the empirical case. Also, despite the listing of the indicators differentiating such five categorizations, such descriptions and indicators are so subjective and judgmental, especially for evaluating the level of major/profound, significant, useful or valuable, or minor influence, which is shaped by the personal perception toward the empirical and methodological underpinning, the level of acceptance toward the unfamiliar knowledge, and the abilities of appreciating the divergent perspectives, as well as tolerating the opposing and contesting perspectives.

Also, such terms “international” and “world” are also dubious as well. In positioning international or world, whether it refers to the Western world, notably the North
America or Europe, a western-centered approach embedded in establishing the understanding. Another frustration is about another term “regional” indicating 1 star which is categorized as a lower ranking. The meaning of being regional remains vague as well, regardless of which it can be defined in empirical, methodological, or linguistic aspect.

Looking back the 2006 RAE, the division between local and international is clearly stated, as shown in the below statement:

International excellence: This should not be equated with output items published outside of Hong Kong or the region; rather it is intended that evaluation should be made with reference to the best international norms in the mainstream of that discipline or sub-discipline. It is possible that in some particular disciplines, such norms are set by output items published in Hong Kong or region.

International vs. local: A distinction should be made between (a) a publication that is local because it addresses local issues, and (b) a publication that is local because it does not meet the standards of rigour and scholarship expected internationally in the mainstream of that discipline. In the former case, the item will not be discounted; in the latter, it will be.

Being local and international is framed by the evaluation system and empirical issues which discriminated local in two ways: First, the evaluation system is supposed to be scientific, excellent and efficient under the international practice, but not in local practices; in other words, local is being understood as partial, inferior and poor. Second, the division between international and local is arbitrarily made with the purpose of making a perception of which some studies are local and some are international, which is unnecessary and misleading. When the statements use such terms as “international norms”, “standards of rigour and scholarship expected
internationally in the mainstream”, these imply that research related to “local” is undesirable and unfavorable under the assessment system.

As a matter of fact, some local research can be international, and two of them cannot be readily separated empirically. For example, the popular culture of Hong Kong in the 1980s like movies, pop music and television programs, especially the entertainment and soup dramas, that have been impactful in the neighboring countries such as China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Southeast Asia as well as overseas Chinese communities in the United States, UK, and Canada, turning out to which the local pop culture has been internationalized to a certain extent. Therefore, the assertion of dividing local and international is empirically and ontologically controversial and unsound. Another salient point is that whether China studies is regarded as local or international? In an ontological sense, China is not a part of local study at the beginning, so it is supposed to be international. However, Hong Kong is a part of China and is not an alien country, so it does not make sense of being labeled as international.

Turning to the economic perspective, international is also depicted as equivalent to excellent, outstanding and rewarding. By referring to the above quotation related to the ranking system, the top ranking are of international, further impressing on the importance of internationalization of research which can be associated with following the international trend, style and even language, i.e. English. Referring to the Hong Kong context, for example, China studies in such aspects as politics, economy and society under the field of humanities and social sciences seem to be competitive, fashionable and marketable in the international academic circle over the past two decades, given the reform and opening up since 1978, followed by economic takeoff since the 1990s and then becoming the great power in international relations since the 2000s. Therefore, research and publications related to China have become so prestigious. However, given the fact that China studies has been dominated by the Western scholars in North America and Britain in the pre-1980s and then the Mainland Chinese scholars since the 1990s due to having a favorable position in terms of personal, social and intellectual networking
conducting the empirical study. As a result, research on China become so popular and dominating in the field of social sciences, and the local study seems to be marginalized and neglected. Using the Division of Social Science at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology as an example, only 2 out of 28 academics actively engaging in studying Hong Kong politics and society\(^9\). In other words, local study is being understood as narrow, unmarketable and insignificant in the eyes of the mainstream practice.

Overall, the entire RAE seems to be fallen to the duality of appreciating international and rejecting local in the ground of following the international norms and practice. However, it is definitely a sweeping generalization toward knowledge. As a result, it creates a general impression on which international represents excellent, outstanding and competitive, local represents marginal, useless and unfavorable in the entire contest, thereby undermining the local/Hong Kong studies in the cultural sense.

**Conclusion**

This paper attempts at using the RAE to reflect upon how economic dimension penetrates research. Given the fact that the RAE can be directly affecting the survival of such academic departments which are regarded as marginal, uncompetitive and unproductive after undertaking the exercise. Hence, a fundamental question is addressed: is competition necessary in research? I quote a retired professor whose criticism has been made toward the culture of competition

The government does not provide a peach (i.e. resources) to the institutions, and places them in a colosseum where they cannot escape and then fight each other....The winning or losing of the contest is based on the money being got in bidding the research grants and the number of the research projects to be undertaken.

\(^9\) They are Agnes Ku and Sing Ming.
By using figures to qualify the results, the uniqueness of each academic subject in terms of nature, methods, orientation, and the local need of integrating teaching and research, is totally ignored. As a result, the local ecology of the higher education has been undermined severely (Ming Pao, May 27, 2013).

By standardizing the evaluation using the economical perspective in the excuse of scientific management and public accountability, this turns to distort, manipulate, undermine and even kill research ultimately.
References


4. The Guardian.

5. Ming Pao.


