Reduced to a Number: Exploring the relationship between research culture and metrics

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Abstract

In a recent study carried out by library professionals at the University of Waikato, a small university situated in Aotearoa New Zealand, researchers across a range of disciplines were interviewed to better understand their views on researcher assessment, metrics, and research impact. Beyond discussions about the limitations of bibliometrics, many of the participants also drew attention to structural factors that affect their decision making, attitudes, and the way they work. These included satisfying research assessment, ensuring job security and career progression, cultural labour and tensions for Indigenous scholars, and dealings with reviewers and publishers.

Keywords: research culture; research assessment; cultural labour; PBRF; bibliometrics

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In a recent study carried out by library professionals at the University of Waikato, a small university situated in Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand), researchers across a range of disciplines were interviewed to better understand their views on researcher assessment, metrics, and research impact. The research project employed a case study approach, interviewing a small number of participants from a spectrum of disciplines. One researcher cannot represent an entire field, and as such it is important to acknowledge that the research is exploratory only and the results of this research cannot be generalised. While the interviews were focused on discussions of the limitations of bibliometrics, many of the participants also drew attention to issues of research culture. Participants spoke about some of the structural factors that affect their decision making, attitudes, and the way they work. These included satisfying research assessment regimes, ensuring job security and career progression, cultural labour and tensions for Indigenous scholars, and dealings with reviewers and publishers.

The national research assessment in New Zealand is called the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) and requires all research staff employed at tertiary institutions to submit an individual research portfolio once per 6-year cycle (COVID-19 exceptions) in order to allocate public research funding for the tertiary sector for 'research excellence'. While the individual scores are confidential, it is common for academics to publicise their own results if they are good – after all, doing well on this exercise is evidence of successful engagement with the neoliberal agenda. In a comparison of reflections on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom and PBRF, Chatterjee et al. (**2020**) found since the launch of PBRF all participants in New Zealand reported an increase of 'self-interestedness in academia' (**Ibid: 1241**). Chatterjee et al. (**2020**) contend that assessing research excellence at an individual level in the PBRF rather than the group or institution level assessment of the REF (and many other national research assessment activities worldwide) may be encouraging individualism, at the expense of research culture both within and between universities. Of course, the existence of research assessment activities can have both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand research assessment can be a motivating factor for academic staff, giving validation of membership in the academy (**Chatterjee et al., 2020; Universities New Zealand, 2019**); one of our participants commented:

> *I told myself I was only going to be successful on my level as a researcher with career prospects if I got a B. […] I'm so damn proud of that B. And one of the things that drives me is holding on to that B.* (**Study Participant**)

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However, we cannot ignore the harm that evaluation and research excellence assessment activities can also cause, both for individuals and for our research culture (**Buckle & Creedy, 2022; Manasseh, 2020**). For academics who performed poorly in PBRF, a low score can be career limiting. One participant mentioned 'older colleagues who end up putting themselves in the hospital because they don't want to lose their job because they didn't get a high enough PBRF grade.' Simpson et al. (**2023**) outline the history of Audit Culture in New Zealand and argue that the PBRF has entrenched Audit Culture and encourages the casualisation of the academic workforce.

A number of our participants made comments regarding the harmful impacts of a research culture that encourages academic staff to overwork to the detriment of staff wellbeing: 'some of our colleagues actually work themselves into the ground' and others seemed to be pushing back against this expectation with comments like 'I don't work myself to the point of exhaustion.' Another participant stated 'let's put it bluntly, I can't be bothered. I've got too many things to do in my life and this is not going to be the one that I try to push out there.' Overwork is not only made up of visible work but includes other things such as cultural labour and load, a particular issue for Indigenous researchers.

Indigenous scholars often contend with the tension of producing work that is relevant to both their scholarly and home communities, and satisfying institutional expectations (**Chivers et al., 2023**). Indigenous participants in our study recognised this tension in publication and peer-review processes, where they felt pressured to submit to high-ranking, global journals in order to appease New Zealand researcher-assessment criteria. This meant, for example, they often dealt with journal reviewers who did not understand the nuance of Māori/Indigenous-focused research and lacked the expertise to appropriately respond to their work. At times, this led to them feeling that they had to dilute their work in such a way that made it more digestible to a wider audience. The choice of which types of journals to submit to and publish in can have a direct impact on career progression and by extension, job security. When these publishers have the power to shape scholarly conversations in such a way that detracts from Indigenous scholars' contribution to their own disciplines and communities, institutional publishing expectations and standards need to be reevaluated. In discussing the ways in which colonialism and patriarchy function in the academy and how they can influence scholarly discussions, Te Punga Somerville (**2021**) also identifies 'funding bodies, appointment committees, reviewers' comments, editorial processes, conference programs, and publishing houses and Royal Societies' (**Ibid: 280**), and points out that the impact of these social forces is 'evident in the whiteness (and other forms of narrowness) in the academy' (**Ibid**). While

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the scope of our own research project did not extend to a full study of the embeddedness of colonialism and patriarchy in our institutions, we must acknowledge that metrics culture and researcher assessment frameworks often exist in these kinds of systems of power that favour particular kinds of voices, bodies, and perspectives—typically those of white men (**Ahmed, 2013, 2017; Brower & James, 2023; Te Punga Somerville, 2021**). If citational practices privilege whiteness, so will citation metrics (**Chivers et al., 2023**).

Ultimately, this misalignment of priorities was reflected in comments from our Indigenous participants who also spoke of the unrecognised cultural labour that goes into their jobs, often in the form of mentoring and providing opportunities for younger Indigenous scholars, in addition to many other tasks. The tension is perhaps best summed up in the following comment from one of our Indigenous participants:

> *We're not writing for scope and scale, we're writing for quality of a knowledge system, we're writing because we want to bring that [Indigenous] voice forward. Now, if I was going to be really tactical, I would abandon all of that and just write for scale and write to have the broadest citation marketplace appeal—so as many consumers of my work would be interested in citing it. So, to me, that's a fundamental tension in the way that citations are used to grade a scholar's quality of work.*

These issues identified by the Indigenous participants in our study all connect to a broader research culture that is obsessed with citationality and bibliometrics. Scholars recognised this in the tension between publishing expectations and scholarly and community responsibilities. The focus that researcher assessment systems have on journal rankings and citations often put Indigenous scholars (and other scholars of colour) at a disadvantage, given the inequities in academia and the tendency of disciplines to reproduce themselves as white, male structures through the practice of citation (**Ahmed, 2013, 2017; Burgess, Cormack, & Reid, 2021**).

Kidman (**2020**) identifies neoliberalism as a driving force in our universities that shapes how intellectual labour is configured through a "regime of audit, rankings and measurement" (**Ibid: 248**). The twin demands for periodic, quantifiable outputs and for the pursuit of external research funding (regardless of the expenses related to their research) often results in academics spending their time on these peripheral efforts rather than the core components of their jobs. As is so often the case, the burdens of these expectations fall more heavily on Indigenous academics and early career researchers (**Kidman, 2020**). Success on these metrics is closely linked to job security, advancement and promotion. It should be noted that at time of writing, no New Zealand universities have committed to

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initiatives such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment or the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment.

In this essay we have reflected on the centrality of citations and other metrics in our research culture (mostly as a result of our researcher assessment systems) and the impact on scholars across a range of disciplines. We have also reflected on educational institutions' need to reckon with their deeply rooted colonial pasts and presents to understand how the biased structures in which researchers work continuously reproduce themselves through the practices of citation and the measures and frameworks used to assess research (**Ahmed, 2013; Burgess, Cormack, & Reid, 2021**). Addressing issues of neoliberalism, racism, and sexism is essential if there is to be a shift in research culture, on both a local and global level. It is the authors' hope that we can help to develop and nurture the research culture at our institution and across our small country. As library staff we have the ability to influence research culture both through leadership at an institutional level, and by supporting and guiding researchers at an individual level. Our research concluded that our academics care deeply about the impact that they wish to make on the world, but the research culture that they exist within needs to nurture and support researchers so that they can focus on what really matters.

The Open Research Team at the University of Waikato Library started working on this research project soon after our formation in 2022. With diverse backgrounds and skill sets, we found that the project helped form us into a cohesive team. This enabled us to develop our expertise in open research and gain a better understanding of the existing research culture at the university.

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