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# *Let the Games begin!*

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## Chair's Report 2017

*Greg Woolf*

It is competition time again.

Of course in a sense it is always competition time – so much so that ‘competitive’ is always a positive recommendation and ‘co-operative’ almost a negative one in our professional vocabulary. But I don’t mean the constant background noise of us competing as individuals for posts, promotions, grants and the like, nor even the decades long multi-player game of peer review in which the best seek to make others like themselves and the worst to settle ancient scores.

No the competitions on all our minds right now are the penteric festivals of REF and TEF, hunger games in which entire departments enter the arena. Not only penteric but also isolympic, since excellence is the only game in town, and the financial rewards of a good performance in the REF are now about equivalent in the value of a crown of olive leaves.

Many of us have already been drawn into this. Planning (training?) for the next cycle has begun. Kindly research directors are being encouraged to behave like *lanistae*. NSS results are being scrutinized for the slightest indication of dissatisfaction. Pilot exercises are underway everywhere. A few will be enriched: if you have served on some of the right expert panels in the past you can easily earn a few thousand now from giving external advice of one kind or another. Many more are busy preparing documentation. These preparations distract us from doing the very things that are being measured. Heisenberg rules OK? But we cannot afford to be unprepared.

We have become so accustomed to all this that it seems the natural order of things. But a conversation with colleagues from overseas will rapidly confirm that the UK remains a world leader in this field. Others have imitated our REF of course, but the rigour of British regulatory regimes is exceptional. I once explained to a US colleague how coursework and examinations here are double-marked, subject to appeal, and moderated by externals before being passed through examination boards to be signed off by Deans. ‘Wouldn’t it be easier’ he asked “just to appoint teachers you trust?” How this culture of constant *epikrisis* will translate into subject level TEF is still unclear. Expect, if not the unexpected, at least very short notice indeed of what will be expected. The next REF, we now know, will be very much as it

has been. This is what we asked for. University responses to HEFCEs consultation overwhelmingly favoured status quo over change. Let us hope it was because our CEOs could not imagine a better order of things, and not just that they thought that was what the Minister wanted to hear, or even that academics hate change more than anything else.

There are good reasons to appreciate what RAEs and REFs have done for us. Research has moved up the agenda in many institutions. Good researchers – many of them – are rewarded. Promotion is easy, and so is mobility. Departments where some staff were effectively research dormant are a thing of the past. Universities have had to put in place leave schemes, mentoring and research offices which, in the years when their workload is not dominated by REF returns, mostly provide fantastic support to those of us applying for grants. All this is good.

But let us also remember the reasons why the REF is fundamentally broken. It drives the short term at the expense of the long term. It depresses the status and importance of teaching at the expense of research. (TEF is a very British solution to this problem, bolstering Charybdis to deal with the excesses of Scylla.) The REF promotes work with measureable short-term impact at the expense of fundamental research. Most of all there is the human cost. Excellent teachers pressured into early retirement, others side-lined temporarily or permanently transferred into teaching-and-admin. only posts. The shame and guilt of exclusion. The rage against anonymous assessors. The strains put on collegiality. Disaffection and in some sad cases despair and worse.

So let us be careful as we approach the festival season and remember that we can choose how to play the game. One peculiarity of the economics of REF is that the winners gain much less than the losers lose. Come near the top of one of the more prominent tables and a department will win kind words from this year's pro vice-chancellor, a good write up from marketing and perhaps one or two new posts. Those last prizes are not to be sniffed at. But after most recent REFs and RAEs those departments near the bottom did not survive to fight another day. The worst result of RAE 2021 for our discipline would be a ranking in which the distance between winners and losers had grown greater.

Students of ancient Sparta are familiar with the thesis that the *agoge*, an educational system designed to produce winners, had the unintended consequence of producing many more losers as well. We need to be careful who pays the price for our slight and temporary comparative advantages. This applies to other competitions too. The effective removal of the cap on student recruitment in most parts of the UK means that many classics departments are growing. Good for them, although often they have to do so at the same time as increasing contact hours, and without damaging NSS scores. This can be tricky. Meanwhile other departments will find it ever harder to recruit potential students with good grades. Our subject is fantastically popular compared to some of our neighbours in the humanities and social sciences, but even so the pool we fish in is not limitless. Even if the amount of resource for humanities remains stable – and no guarantees there – if we are not careful we might well find ourselves moving to a world of fewer, larger departments.

We are, of course, more fortunate than many. Classics will again – thank goodness – have its own panel in the REF. We are fortunate too that unlike some humanities disciplines, we do not have a long 'tail'. Since the mid-80s – the last period of multiple closures – most

departments have done well. Many have expanded, increased student access by professionalizing teaching *ab initio*, and added to the range of what we teach and study. Bronze Age archaeology, modern Greek, Akkadian, ancient science are often on display alongside 'core' philological and historical offerings. We admit many kinds of classics, and as a result many can enjoy it. Many departments have also developed strong connections with their intellectual neighbours, with philosophy and archaeology, history and theology, English and modern languages. Quite apart from fostering research synergies and extending student choice those relationships are politically important at every level, from lobbying government and funding agencies to resisting 'pruning' exercises within universities. We have mostly been good at sustaining those connections. We need to continue to be good at it. We have also been fortunate in the commitment and calibre of those who have been willing to serve on various panels. REF panellists will be chosen over the next few months. Subject level TEF is a little further off but no doubt will also depend on the energies of panellists. We wish them well, but hope they do not find too many losers in their hunt for the excellent.

We do not choose the games we compete in, nor do we set the rules, but we can still play more or less humanely. Sometimes this is a matter of keeping a sense of perspective. Assessment exercises and reviews are often focused on the short term, and have narrow goals. As individuals and as a discipline we should take a wider view and a longer one. Anyone who has ever been a head of department knows that its members contribute in different ways. What matters is how those contributions add up, not how they differ from one another at any given moment. We know from our own experience that we do different things at different points in our career. No five year time-slice or annual league table or survey really provides the measure of the person. Government and management often want quick answers and quick solutions. We know our most valuable enterprises and products – human and material – are measured in the long term. Our research ecologies and our teaching environments are precious. Managed well they are very sustainable as well as productive. But we have to exercise due care. As we engage in our individual acts of assessment and review during the next cycle, we should remember we are gardeners not miners. Let's not frak it up.

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