

**ARMA Protagonist: Untangling the red tape
(The Tickell Review of Research Bureaucracy)
October 2021**

Hopeful for change

We all welcomed the announcement by the Prime Minister in January 2020 of a review of research bureaucracy, followed by the details of the review in March 2021. Everyone involved in research can identify something (probably many things) that they feel are unnecessary or at least more onerous than they need to be. Is relief in sight?

At exactly the same time (January 2020) we had the first announcements about Covid-19, leading to constraints on the research system's operation. However, that same system responded tremendously, with revised processes and rapid reviews to enable relevant research to be evaluated, undertaken and outcomes to be achieved.

So, streamlining of processes is possible. But there have also been reports of a system and individuals under severe pressure, such that these new modes of operation are not sustainable.

Many moving parts

What might we reasonably expect from Adam Tickell's review of research bureaucracy? Noting that it does not include research assessment, for which there is the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP), and that there is a separate review of the Concordats taking place. Just mentioning these other reviews illustrates the challenge: that there are many moving parts to the research system. And similarly, many vested interests.

The creation of bureaucracy might be driven by several different elements. For example: processes; regulations; information gathering, analysis and reporting. Each individually may be justifiable, even essential. It's the combination that gets us, especially when there is repetition and overlaps with slight variations.

It's also a matter of 'my essential process, check or assurance' compared to 'your unnecessary bureaucracy'. So, when seeking change from others, it is always good to look at oneself and one's own requirements first. On more than one occasion, I changed a process for which I was responsible when I was subject to it or had to operate it myself.

What to address?

Bureaucracy affecting research includes both research-specific bureaucracy (e.g. funding processes and its terms and conditions, research governance, integrity and ethics, the Concordats, etc.) and more general business or public sector bureaucracy (e.g. employment law, right to work, public procurement, international sanctions or controls, health and safety, and so on).

It ought to be more feasible to address the first group, research-specific bureaucracy, because it is something that we do to ourselves, albeit sometimes encouraged or mandated by others. Alongside are also aspects of the wider higher education process in which much of our research sits, and which affects the research environment. These are the areas in which one hopes that Tickell and colleagues are able to make some progress.

The proper use of funding drives many elements of process and assurance, whether it's public funding or any other source. Over the years I have seen the level of attention to detail in this respect, but have also sometimes wondered about the proportionality of it all: is more

attention being paid to the invoices than to the research itself. What level of variation is material? UKRI, for example, might try to focus on system-level audit, but the National Audit Office (NAO) castigates it if it does not delve down to the level of individual transactions and so on, which in turn adds to the burden on institutions and individual researchers. And leaves less time for consideration of all the other issues at system level. A key conversation for the Tickell review, for me, would be with the NAO.

An area for substantive attention is reporting. This might relate to the general research environment, to project-related activities, or to outcomes or value-for-money exercises. There seems to have been an increase in reporting requirements, but more reporting does not necessarily mean more accountability and hence better assurance. Asking for reports is easy; like selecting obvious (but inappropriate) metrics.

For the second group, of more general burdens, it's unreasonable to expect the review to create direct change. But the review might observe the effects from these areas, to add to any separate review of those topics. Instead, the review might suggest ways in which the system should operate, given those burdens. This will particularly be about making connections across the system and improving understanding of the requirements.

Principles for the long haul

Tickell will not be able to resolve every problem or niggle. Delving too far into any set of weeds would be problematic for such a review. Solving one or two issues that transcend the research and innovation system, across stakeholder types would be a win.

I am pleased to see the principles dam sets out in his piece, and hope that those principles can have some longevity, to be used to assess systems, processes, requirements, etc. not just now but at relevant points in the future. So that we build regular systematic review into the research system itself, to enable it to adapt to the inevitable changes that will take place over the coming years as new strategies and policies are adopted and hence have to be accommodation by the system.

I also hope that research organisations are asking themselves how they might change. In this vein, I would like to see the ARMA contribution to the review suggest ways that research organisations could change, if other (controlling) stakeholders were to change: if you do this, we'll be able to do (or stop doing) this...

Good luck to Adam and his colleagues. It's a significant task on which thousands of people are pinning at least some hopes. No pressure then!

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