

A modest proposal, or . . . Fantasy Geography Department!

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‘Performance indicators are almost invariably published with “health warnings” regarding their potential use and mis-use. Nevertheless, they are widely used (and frequently misused, if not abused), especially in media reports which tend to simplify complex situations to simple “league tables”’ (Johnston 1995, 135)

In his recent article in *Area* on the use of indicators in the 1992 research assessment exercise, Johnston asserts that ‘Much work has been done recently on the development of such indicators’ and that ‘those now being made available allow for a much better evaluation of relative performance’ (Johnston 1995, 127). Here we want to propose an alternative (mis)use for those indicators—‘Fantasy Geography Department’!

The procedure which we propose is based on an analogy to the popular newspaper game, Fantasy Football. In this game, for a small fee members of the public are given a notional multi-million pound budget to construct a fictional football team whose members can be drawn from any of the league clubs. The newspaper publishes prices for these players which, in total, cannot exceed the budget. The performance of each fantasy team is monitored weekly in terms of the number of goals scored by members of the fantasy team and other ‘indicators’ of performance. At the end of the season the fantasy ‘manager’ with the most successful team is deemed to have won.

The rules of this game need to be modified somewhat for the model to be applied to the construction of academic departments. In the new game, ‘Fantasy Geography Department’¹ each player imagines that they are head of a fantasy department and has to select a set of, say, 20 academic staff, chosen from real academics currently working in university geography departments. The choice of academics would, of course, be subject to a given budget constraint and some realistic requirements for the range of subdisciplines covered. The initial fantasy ‘price’ of academics will be determined by a simple matrix based on their seniority (lecturer to professor, etc) and the grade of their real department in the last assessment exercise (currently 1 to 5). A rule akin to the limit on ‘strikers’ in Fantasy Football may be required to stop Fantasy departments becoming top heavy.

Like Fantasy Football, the subtlety of the game will not only be in the initial selection of staff, but also in the Fantasy Head of Departments’ subsequent transfer choices. An open market will be set up in which staff can be bought and sold at prices which reflect the aggregate demand for their talents. The overall aim of the game will be to maximise the performance of the fantasy Department in terms of the indicators

used by the Higher Education Funding Council for the RAE—for example, journal papers, books, research contracts, postgraduate students supervised etc. The mechanism is already in place for such indicators to be published on an annual basis. All that is required is for the annual CVCP statistics to be disaggregated to the individual level and for a suitable journal (perhaps *Area*?) to publish them.

The sceptical reader might ask what would be the reward for the players of this game? The chance of winning should be reward enough. However, the words ‘ Best Fantasy Head of a Geography Department 1996 ’ on a CV should ensure rapid promotion into the university administrative hierarchy. After all, if HEFCE want to play games with statistics, then why shouldn’t the rest of us?

Note

1 According to our contracts, the concept of ‘ Fantasy Geography Department ’ is the intellectual property of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

References

Johnston R (1995) ‘ Research performance indicators for Geography ’ *Area* 27, 127–36