

# The Materiality of Research: ‘This Device is Licensed’: The Material and Immaterial Bureaucracy of Research by Derek Dunne

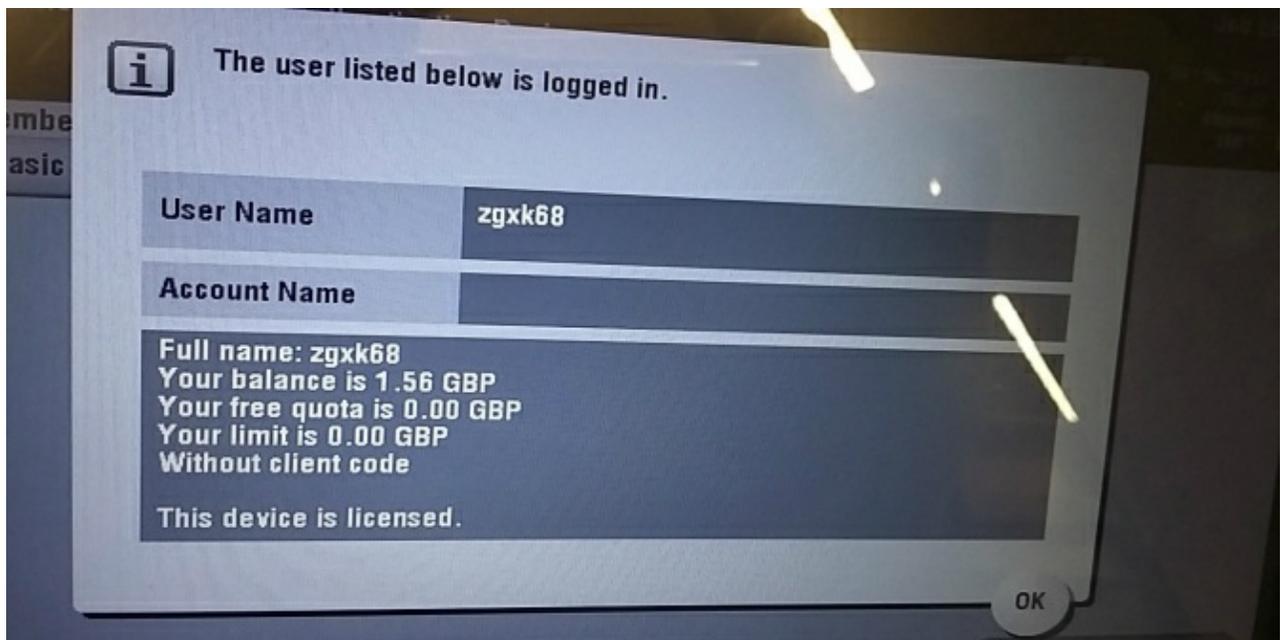
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In this feature essay, **Derek Dunne** draws attention to the hidden bureaucratic labour that is increasingly part of academic life. Rather than see this as the ‘white noise’ to be tuned out of everyday working practices, he calls for us to question the forms that are put in front of us demanding our acquiescence, whilst also locating potential sites of resistance.

This essay is part of an LSE RB series examining the material cultures of academic research, reading and writing. If you would like to contribute, please contact the Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at [lseviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lseviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk).

## ‘This Device is Licensed’: The Material and Immaterial Bureaucracy of Research



**Image Credit: Photo courtesy the author**

I deal with paperwork all the time. Travel documents, teaching licences, border-control bureaucracy, requests for funding, residency permits – things no doubt familiar to many readers. What’s different is that the paperwork that I deal with is 400-years-old, forming part of my ongoing research on the bureaucracy of early modern England and its impact on Shakespeare and literary writing. There is something very early modern indeed about the proliferation of paperwork under Elizabeth I (and later James VI/I) in the ways that it foreshadows, and to some extent created, the bureaucratic machinery with which we now interact daily. Shakespeare, too, was no stranger to form-filling, as each of his plays would have needed a licence to perform, another to print, and yet another to tour.

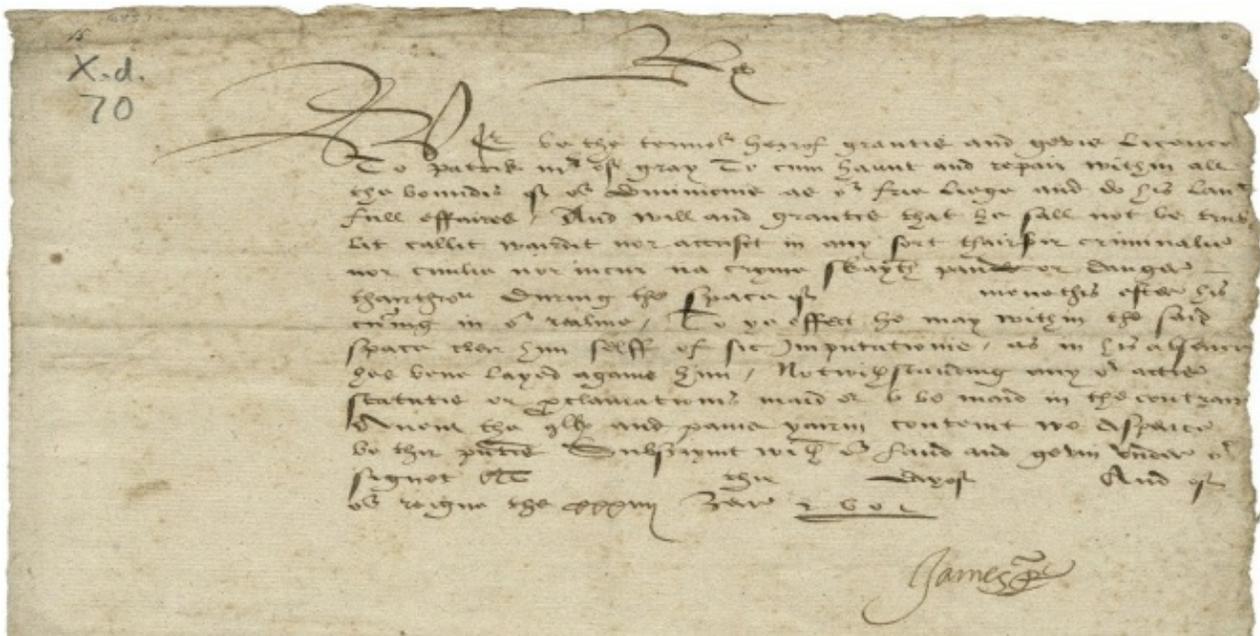
I’ve written [elsewhere](#) on the growth of printed and manuscript forms in Europe from 1500-1700. Here I want to take

a look at the multiple forms of bureaucracy that undergird our present-day research, in many cases making possible that research in the first place – or not. My opening quotation – ‘This device is [licensed](#)’ – flashes up at me every time I swipe my library card in the photocopying machine. That card was obtained by filling out a [registration form](#) for the University of Durham’s Computer and Information Services team, where I am a visiting [IMEMS](#) fellow. And, needless to say, the fellowship itself required its own application form.

While a certain amount of form-filling is to be expected in any profession nowadays, the rapid growth of bureaucracy in higher education is inescapable, forming a significant proportion of any academic’s workload. Where jobs previously asked applicants to demonstrate teaching and research experience, now administration has become a key requirement for most university positions. This makes a certain sense when one of the main duties of university staff is the completion of funding bids that can run to over 50 pages, quite apart from the innumerable time-sheets, examination spreadsheets, attendance lists and appraisal forms that are part and parcel of third-level teaching. King’s College London has recently advertised [research fellowships](#) of three to six months to assist current faculty in putting together major funding bids. Instead of being viewed as a distraction from research, a thoroughgoing knowledge of bureaucracy is becoming a prerequisite for academia itself.

To say that universities are increasingly bureaucratic is hardly insightful commentary. So what are the consequences of our research becoming entangled in paperwork? Well, for a start, it can change the research landscape in several concrete ways. To state the obvious, the research projects that get funded will be those with the best applications. But that is not necessarily the same thing as funding the best possible research out there. Some institutions are strategic in the relationships and alliances built into an application, while others have more substantial resources to ensure that their application materials are top-quality. This would appear to disadvantage projects at both ends of the scale, which are either more traditional (‘I will research this topic alone’) or more experimental (‘It is as yet unclear what the outputs will be’). At a more fundamental level, it stops certain ideas even getting to the proposal stage, since they will be deemed ‘unfundable’. To attempt an analogy with Elizabethan drama for a moment, if as a playwright you know that your work will be examined by the Master of the Revels before it can be performed, that changes what you choose to write about in the first place.

As an early career academic, I can speak with confidence that my own research profile has been shaped by the requirements of the REF. Ensuring the strongest possible REF submission necessitates a certain amount of strategic timing for article submissions, and may even be the difference between a planned monograph and a series of related articles. This may seem like a small thing, but if how research is conducted is being governed by the bureaucracy that surrounds it, we need to think long and hard about the relationship between academic research and all of that ‘innocuous’ paperwork. As an aside, Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of linguistics, would have performed terribly on such an assessment exercise, with his posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics*. While this is not the forum for a debate on the pros and cons of the REF, it is undeniably having a material impact on the way research is conducted today.



## Licence to travel signed by King James VI of Scotland, 1600. Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library

It is a source of endless amusement to me that in studying early modern licensing, there is a provision under the sixteenth-century Act for the Punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars for the whipping of itinerant scholars who fail to produce the proper paperwork. Learning and bureaucracy have a long and painful history together, it would seem. This was part of a system of social control that sought to fix people's movements, particularly at the borders. As Britain gears up to exit the EU, that too will have a bureaucratic fallout affecting our research communities. Access to certain funding channels may be cut off. If visas are required for visiting scholars to conduct research or participate in conferences, then it is quite possible that there will be a change in how – and where – researchers conduct their work. Restricting the flow of people also restricts the flow of information.

Put simply, bureaucracy is a form of social control. This may not be how we normally think of the licensing agreements, travel visas and sign-in sheets that we encounter on a daily basis. Paperwork can seem like the 'white noise' of our work, which we aim to tune out. Like ticking the box beside 'Accept Terms and Conditions', we know not what we do. But in my research, I've found that it is all the more important to listen carefully to such background noise for what it has to say about social organisation and even artistic expression. It is surprising that something that exerts so much power over our working lives is afforded so little time for critical reflection by academics. Perhaps all of us should be paying more attention to the forms that are put in front of us and expect our acquiescence, whether that is the photocopier licence or the online application we should probably get back to writing.

Yet not all bureaucracy is so insidious. Having spent so long searching for early modern licences, I was surprised to learn from a colleague about the [Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society](#), a non-profit designed to ensure authors get paid for the use of their work. All it takes is a simple [form](#). A particularly nice example to finish with comes from the *LSE Review of Books* itself. As you can read on '[Our blog family](#)': 'All our content is free and we encourage reuse of content through [Creative Commons licensing](#)'. This is a form of online licensing designed specifically to encourage sharing and collaboration. In fact, it is the same type of licence used by the Folger Shakespeare Library that gives me permission to use their high-quality digital image, above. Bureaucracy has been around for a long time, and shows no sign of abating. Yet it is still possible to affect positive change in how we use the bureaucratic tools at our disposal. It is up to us to make our own paper work.

2016). He is currently working on a new research project focusing on early modern bureaucracy, forgery, and literary production, and has been awarded fellowships by the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Newberry, and the Huntington, among others. Previously he has worked at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, Shakespeare's Globe, London, and Trinity College Dublin. He is active on Twitter via [@DerekVindice](#) and [@RoguesLicence](#).

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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