

Under surveillance? Performance measurement, governance and self-governance in academic work *

Kirsi-Mari Kallio, Annika Blomberg, Robin Roslender & Tomi J. Kallio

ABSTRACT

During the last decade or so, performance measurement (PM) has become an everyday activity in the higher education sector. Owing to the adoption of PM, previously collegial university management has taken steps towards a managerial model that emphasizes accountability, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. However, the new judgmental PM systems seem to undermine important aspects of academic work, such as creativity and quality of work and cause increased stress and pressure to publish.

Foucault invites us to look at the ways various techniques of power and control impact and structure human behavior. His concept of ‘governmentality’ refers to the organizational governance, but also to self-governance, which the individuals under the organizational governance engage in. According to Foucault individuals internalize the norms, ideals and targets of the control system, and start to self-discipline and regulate their own behavior accordingly. Internalizing the control mechanisms makes individuals aim at achieving a ‘normative self’, which at least in the context of academic work remains out of reach for many academics. Somewhat surprisingly, however, it has been found that despite dissatisfaction and disquiet, most academics are complicit with the demands of performance measurement. However, the genuine interest in the work itself – the labor of love – is being stretched and at the risk of being lost.

In this paper, we use the framework of Michel Foucault in looking at the ways in which various techniques of control impact and structure human behavior, and aim at problematizing the use of PM practices in the context of academic work. We examine the PM systems introduced into universities in the Foucauldian sense as forms of surveillance and self-surveillance, and explore how academics deal with the norms and ideals of the PM system. The empirical data of the study consists of open-ended questions collected from a large survey for university employees collected in 2015 with 672 respondents. The analysis is still ongoing, but the preliminary results show that the PM impacts the university employees’ relationship with their work. Partly, it seems to have guided the academics’ working towards the ideals of PM, yet there are also those who resist the PM ideals.

Keywords: Performance measurement, governmentality, self-governance, universities, Foucault

Introduction

During the last decade or so, throughout the western world and beyond, PM and individual performance evaluation have become everyday activities in the higher education sector (see eg. Kallio et al. 2016). According to recent studies it seems that the PM system introduced into universities has created tensions: the pressure to publish has increased, and some studies have also reported the increased amount of stress experienced by university employees (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). In addition, the new judgmental PM systems seem to undermine important aspects of academic work, such as creativity and quality of work (Kallio et al., 2016; Kallio & Kallio 2014).

In this paper, we are looking at the performance measure system as a form of control. The theoretical framework of this paper is inspired by Foucault (1977), who invites us to look at the ways various techniques of power and control impact and structure human behaviour. In this paper we use Foucault (1977) and his conceptions of power, control and governmentality to understand the effects of this new regime of performance measurement on academics and their relationship with work.

Foucault's (1975) concept of 'governmentality' refers to the organizational governance, but also to self-governance, which the individuals under the organizational governance engage in (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips, 2006, 228). Governmentality requires, first, certain technologies of power, which "determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination" and secondly, the technologies of the self, which allow individuals to perform and act in ways that enable them "to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault et al. 1988, 63). According to Foucault (1975), individuals internalize the norms, ideals and targets of the technology of power, such as a performance measurement system, and start to self-discipline and regulate their own behavior accordingly. Internalizing the control mechanism makes individuals aim at achieving a 'normative self', which at least in the context of academic work remains out of reach for many academics (Harding, Ford & Gough 2010).

Somewhat surprisingly, Clarke, Knights and Jarvis (2012) found that despite dissatisfaction and disquiet, most academics in their study were complicit with the demands of performance measurement. They, however, suggest that a genuine interest in the work itself – the labour of love – is being stretched and at the risk of being lost. In line with Clarke, Knights and Jarvis (2012) this paper aims at complementing

the current literature problematizing the use of performance measurement practices to academic work conducted at universities (see also: Clarke et al. 2012; Kallio et al. 2016). In this study, we aim to examine the PM systems introduced into universities in the Foucauldian sense as forms of both governance and self-governance, and to explore how academics relate to the norms, targets and ideals of the PM system and how it influences their work.

The empirical data of the study consists of open-ended questions collected from a large survey for university employees collected in 2015 with 818 respondents. The results show that the PM measurement as governance but also as self-governance impacts the university employees' relationship with their work. Partly, it seems to have guided the academics' working towards the ideals of PM measurement, yet there are also those who resist the PM ideals and work towards being able to do the things that they are motivated and passionate about. The analysis of this study indicates that both the increased surveillance and especially the self-discipline brought by the PM system have had a deteriorating influence on academics in terms of motivation, well-being and quality of research. Simultaneously as it might have increased the publication activity in terms of quantity, it has created tensions and contradicting demands that are very challenging to accommodate.

Background: PM trend in Western Universities and Institutional Changes in the Finnish University Sector

In the sleek of modernization New Public Management (NPM), a doctrine offering private sector practices as a cure for public sector inefficiencies has been introduced (Hood, 1995). However, NPM has not been a mere success story. Named by Lapsley (2009) as potentially the "cruellest invention of the human spirit", many have not seen the numerous transformations in the public sector purely as a positive phenomenon. What is said here also relates to higher education organizations, and thus the previously collegial university management has transformed into more managerial model that emphasizes e.g., accountability, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, marketization and quality assessment in academic work (Ylijoki 2005; ter Bogt and Scapens 2012; Kallio et al. 2016). With the introduction of NPM, numerous performance measurement (PM) and performance evaluation activities have entered the university sector.

In Finland, there are 14 universities which all are publicly administered by law and thus operate under the Ministry of Education and Culture. In the Finnish university PM model, called "management by

results" (MBR) the financing of universities is determined regularly in budgetary negotiations between the ministry and each university in Finland (Kallio & Kallio 2014). The negotiations determine the objectives and the consequential amounts of financing for each university with detailed objectives about the performance for each university. According to the Finnish Ministry of Finance, "proper performance management includes the ministries ensuring that proper performance targets are set (also regarding their own operations) and the agencies presenting true and fair information on their operations in their annual accounts" (MOF, 2005). Therefore, the Finnish PM model has shifted the focus of PM from *ex ante* planning and budgeting into accountability and *ex post* control (see e.g., Kallio et al. 2016; Hyvönen et al. 2009).

While the funding scheme of universities and hence the PM output targets have been reformed several times during the years that the PM model has been in operation, the basic idea of the Finnish PM model is to clearly distinct between strategic outcome targets and operational performance targets. The attainment and reporting of the social impacts and outcome targets is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture, while both the ministry and the universities are responsible for attaining and reporting the operational performance targets (MOF, 2005). In the Finnish PM model, the output targets of each ministry should be set primarily as indicators (i.e., presented numerically) and only secondarily as verbal targets. The targets, when set in an ideal way, should thus be concrete and operational and cover as large a part of the operations as possible. Moreover, the targets should be derived from a government agency's strategy and be essential to operations. In practice, however, the nationwide PM system has not been that successful in steering public institutions mainly because of the difficulties in deciding on solid performance targets, as various studies have shown. (see e.g., MOF 2010; Kallio and Kallio 2014.)

Theoretical background: the Foucauldian idea of power, governmentality, subjectivity and academic work

Instead of looking at power as something possessed by persons, groups or individuals (see e.g. Ailon 2006), many writings inspired by Foucault (1975) and his thinking treat power as something that resides in discursive formations, in other words in linguistic practices and material systems and conventions, which organize social institutions and produce subjectivities (Alvesson & Deetz 2000, 104). The techniques and practices of power create norms and structure behavior in subtle, everyday ways by

normalizing certain ways of being and acting, in other words by “socially constructed normalcy” (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006, 228).

Power in organizations is used through various disciplinary techniques, such as assessment, measurement and categorization (Costas & Grey 2014), in which people or groups of people are made visible and compared, homogenized, hierarchized and excluded, in other words “normalized” or “individualized” (Foucault 1975, 183; Roberts 2005, 620). These ‘technologies of power’ act to encourage or discourage certain types of behavior. Different methods of objectification are central to the working of disciplinary power; the methods of objectification aim at obtaining ‘objective’ knowledge concerning the individual with which the individual can be assessed, compared and normalized (Roberts 2005), and rewarded or punished (Berström et al. 2009). Thus, through these methods the individual can be transformed into something manageable and controllable. Many technologies of power, such as the PM system, function in a quite subtle way; it seemingly innocently informs how an individual ranks in the system while the rank itself functions as a reward or punishment.

Foucault (1975, 194) also discusses how power acts through subject formation, as it produces the individual as well as it produces the knowledge required for forming a subject, making individuals behave and act in particular ways as they draw on the current knowledge and discourses in constructing their subjectivities. In addition to influencing behavior, disciplinary power affects the self by making individuals actively involved in the construction of their subject positions. Therefore, a degree of involvement of the objects of disciplinary power is necessary for its functioning (Bergsröm, Hasselbladh & Kärreman 2009). Therefore, in the process of organizational governance, such as of objectifying and quantifying the performance of an individual (or department, faculty etc.), the individuals often come to engage in self-governance in which the individuals internalize the aims, norms and ideals of organizational governance and start to discipline themselves accordingly (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips, 2006; 228). The knowledge and practices of organizational governance are internalized and transform into self-discipline, thus making individuals engage in self-surveillance and self-correction (Alvesson & Deetz 2000, 104). Thus, governance takes place where self-regulation intersects with mechanisms and processes that make domination and control appear legitimate (Vince & Mazen 2014), making autonomous subjects “exercise their freedom in appropriate ways” (Fournier 1999, 283). The concept of governmentality often aims at the betterment of the subjects, meaning that it is not only oppressive and negative, but also productive and positive (Roberts 2005). The betterment goes on under constant

evaluation and assessment, which is conducted in terms of certain rationalities and reasons and leads to particular truth production techniques and practices (Rose 1999, 6–7, in Roberts 2005). This kind of control does not take place through coercion or dominance, but through a promise of a better future and opportunities for personal development (Roberts 2005).

Academic work is a typical example of knowledge work, which in many respects differs from work common in the industrial society (cf. Bell 1973). Knowledge workers are considered to resist hierarchies and direct control, and control in knowledge organizations is often based on culture and norms rather than structure and hierarchy (Alvesson 1993; Kunda 1992; Robertson & Swan 2003). Knowledge workers tend to be individualistic and strive for autonomy (Alvesson 1995), and it is not an uncommon situation in academia that supervisors cannot perform the tasks and duties that their subordinates can as the work is highly specialized and differentiated (Owen-Smith 2001, 431-432). Academic work is characterized by a collegial control system, which is based on gaining and maintaining a good reputation and skills and dependent on trust (Owen-Smith 2001, 430). A central way knowledge workers, such as academics, are governed and controlled is through ‘systems of truth’ that constitutes subjects as ‘appropriate selves’; that is as free and autonomous subjects who behave, act and feel in appropriate ways (Fournier 1999, 284). Therefore, the individuals’ inscription in the academia produces discipline, as they come to internalize the academic code of conduct as something that they follow in constructing their ‘selves’ as academics.

Empirical data

The principal empirical data of this study was gathered in 2015 from 12 faculties in three geographically spread Finnish multidisciplinary universities. Four faculties – economics and business, mathematics and natural sciences, humanities, and education sciences – were represented from each university. The data were collected by an Internet-based survey questionnaire that was sent to all the employees in the chosen faculties. This totaled 672 people in research and/or teaching-oriented tasks. The response rate of 22.5 percent can be considered a good or sufficient result for an Internet-based survey (see e.g., Baruch and Holton, 2008; Shih and Fan, 2009; Melnyk et al., 2012). A non-response analysis that was executed by university, faculty, and field of science indicated no systematic loss. Secondary data, in the form of interviews, was collected in the spring of 2016 via semi-structured interviews of administrative managers

at the 12 faculties studied. The role of the secondary data was to deepen the understanding of the PM systems currently in use in the studied faculties to back up the findings from the survey. The fact that most of the respondents decided to answer to the open-ended questions and that many wrote long answers also reflect the fact that the respondents had opinions over the matters and wanted to express them. The quantification of the qualitative data was done in a non-exclusive manner, meaning that one response could be coded into two groups of explanations.

As a principal data, we used open survey questions and their answers dealing with the respondents' perceptions of the effects of PM on research activity. Many respondents wrote long answers, indicating the respondents were concerned with the topic. From the methodological perspective, the use of open questions in a survey resembles a semi-structured interview setting, i.e., respondents do not have to choose from predefined options but can use their own words and expressions while answering to the question (see e.g., Kovalainen and Eriksson, 2008.) The data analysis of the open question answers took place primarily qualitatively, but some quantifications of the data were also made with the assistance of NVivo software tool. The data analysis is still ongoing and the results presented are only preliminary and tentative by nature.

Overall, the PM system currently in use seems to have disappointed many of the scholars, leaving them frustrated by the inflexible and often unfair system, which is perceived to even the employees in too many aspects. These same type of results have been reported before e.g. by Kallio et al. (2016), Kallio & Kallio (2014), to name a few. We wanted to move beyond this type of stories and to get a deeper and more nuanced understanding of performance measurement as control. Control in academic work is often exercised in a subtle rather than direct form, in which the personal betterment and keeping up with an ideal of 'appropriate academic' are central. As one cannot become better without knowledge of the current situation, performance measurement system offers an appealing system of standards. It informs us of what is normal and what is desirable, and gives 'objective' and numerical information of how individuals do in terms of the system. Although various accounting systems never completely manage to control individuals, the promise of being in control seems to have made different performance measurement systems appealing mechanisms also in universities, where the performance at work is difficult to objectify, quantify and measure (Kallio & Kallio 2014; Kallio et al. 2016). In addition, although academics are generally considered to resist direct control (Alvesson 1993; Kunda 1992; Robertson & Swan 2003), there are studies indicating that despite of disquiet, academics comply rather

than resist the increased control brought by the new public management reforms (e.g. Clarke et al. 2012). In this paper, we are interested in PM as a form of organizational governance, but also as a source of self-governance, and wish to explore how academics relate to the norms, targets and ideals of the PM system and how it influences their work. We see the PM regime as a form of control with disciplinary effects, in which the individual involvement is necessary. Therefore, exploring how the respondents experience the effects of the PM system, how they relate to it and how it influences academic work, provides us an opportunity to understand the disciplinary effects of PM and their implications on academics and academic work.

Empirical analysis

When asking the respondents whether the PM system has affected their publication activity and if so, in what manner, 638¹ respondents decided to answer this open-ended question. At first stage, a simple categorization was made with the assistance of the software. The categorization is presented in the table 1 below.

Table 1 Categories of the responses to the publication activity

Name	References
Does not affect	274
Directs work	124
<i>Answers dealing with the deterioration of the working climate and ethics</i>	64
Pressures to perform and stress	83
Frustration towards the system, and mentions about bureaucracy	45
Lowers publication activity	45
Increases publication activity	37
IDK	16
Total	688

¹ Due to the non-exclusive manner of the data analysis, there are more total hits in the data than total responses. This means that some responses were coded into two categories.

In the responses, a large group of the respondents (32.7 per cent) stated, that the PM system itself did not affect their publication activity. Typical reasons for these responses were intrinsic motivation towards work, internal (personal) pressures to perform, or the fact that they were in teaching-oriented duties with no actual time to do research, as the following quotes exemplify:

[PM does not affect my research activity] much. The interest towards my research subject is intrinsic.

Female teacher in business and economics, 5–10 years' experience of university work.

[PM] does not affect [my research activity]. What I study and write about comes from my own interests and from the desire to develop.

Male teacher in educational sciences, 0–5 years' experience of university work.

I really don't have much time to do research since I teach so it [PM] does not affect [my research activity].

Female teacher in natural sciences, 21–30 years' of experience of university work.

[PM] does not affect [my research activity]. My inner policeman is so loud that it makes me work hard.

Male professor in educational science, over 30 years' experience of university work.

Of the respondent who stated that the PM system affects their publication activity, many wrote quite long answers explicating the measuring system and the pressure it has brought. What was the most interesting, though, was the fact that the PM system did not bring as much external surveillance, as some sort of self-surveillance: a constant the feeling of not being effective enough was very heavily internalized into the minds of the respondents. Many of those respondents, who stated that the PM directs work explicitly, associated the PM system as a deteriorating factor of the working climate and ethics. Others expressed the pressures to perform and stress, the frustration towards the PM system, and many mentioned about bureaucracy. Surprisingly, there were also respondents, who perceived the PM system actually lowering their publication activities. Quotes of typical answers from these groups of respondents are presented next.

[PM affects my research activity] in a way that I must strive for more publications (quantitatively). At the same time the quality suffers.

Male researcher in natural sciences, 11–20 years' experience of university work

I plan more for example in terms of publications. This affects the activity level, one has to be ready and alert all the time.

Female researcher in humanities, 0–5 years' experience of university work

[PM affects my research activity] in a way that I do more research but it's worse and more repetitive, and wrong issues become most important.

Female teacher in humanities, 11–20 years' experience of university work

Yes [PM does] affect [my research activity]. I try to keep the pace with my research, although I am old (58 yrs.) My aim is to write at least one article per year ... This makes me feel often tired and distressed, because teaching, my main job, takes the best of me. Nowadays I try do my teaching sloppily, "with my left hand", so that I would have enough energy for my research, because that is the only thing that gets appreciated.

Female teacher in educational sciences, 5–10 years' experience of university work

The publishing pressure makes me feel like I never do enough. I doubt it actually increases my research activity, because I have to manage my teaching and the time to do research is more or less the same despite of PM.

Female teacher in humanities, 5–10 years' experience of university work

I am so one-dimensional. You get what you measure.

Female professor in business and economics, 11–20 years' experience of university work

At the moment research is the priority number one, when results and appreciation are evaluated. This is an extremely oppressive feeling for people who teach, and do not have time to do research in their job description. The feeling of inadequacy is constant.

Female teacher in educational sciences, 11–20 years' experience of university work

On a general level, one effect of the PM systems on university work is that it has diminished the individual agency concerning their work. The position and the related job descriptions determine what kind of tasks are included in the job, while the PM system recognized only some types of jobs and some types of output as something that is assessed and considered valuable. Therefore, the individual agency is limited to deciding whether to engage in tasks that are deemed valuable in the PM system at the cost of other tasks, or whether to prioritize the tasks addressed to you regardless of the fact that they do not produce any measurable or valued results. Some respondents also experienced a loss of agency in that the PM systems' capacity to dictate where and how to publish your research results, which was experienced as diminishing the scientific freedom and the quality of output.

Discussion

In their study of UK business school staff, Clarke, Knights and Jarvis (2012) found that despite the new public management requirements for audit and monitoring that are often experienced negatively, the respondents' relationship with their work seemed to resemble a 'labor of love'. In their study, most respondents seemed to comply rather than resist the demands of the PM system. Our respondents were in many ways more cynical and indicated that the increased reporting requirements and intensified control has decreased their intrinsic motivation, although there were also those who acknowledged the existence of the system, while still continuing to work in the same way as earlier:

PM diminishes my work motivation a lot, nothing is never enough. I have noticed both within myself as well as with my colleagues, that the constant evaluation and follow-up on results makes the work depressing and hard. People have started to demand of themselves more and more. In the end, no result is never good enough and all there is left is the feeling of inadequacy.

Researcher, Ed.sci, male, over 30years'

As the previous extract illustrates, the managerial control of PM does not affect directly, while mostly functions through self-discipline and self-governance. In academic work, it is not the supervisors "voice",

which is internalized as a guidance in your work, but it is the requirements of PM system, that are internalized as something that guides what is done, or at least create a sense of what *should* be done. Even more importantly, it has created a collateral system of standards, which exists along the previous, individually defined or discipline-based standards of what an academic is expected to do and how academic work is performed. Among the respondents, some had willingly given up the old standards and committed to the new ones, some tried to remain engaged with the old ones and ignore the new, while for most the two systems of standard appeared conflicting and required constant balancing, which functioned as a source of stress and frustration.

Interestingly, the performance appraisal discussions were experienced as good and fruitful, although there were some who considered them frustrating, as there are no actual chances of compensation regardless of how well you perform at your work. Therefore, it seems that the supervisors are also between a rock and a hard place in that even if they need to encourage employees to “do that which the university gets rewarded for”, there is not much room for them to compensate for good work. Based on the answers, it is also difficult to say what happens if you do not meet the targets, as there were no mentions of actual ways of punishment. Some respondents complained that it does not make a difference if you meet the targets or not, indicating that similarly as there are no rewards for those performing well, there are no consequences for those performing less well according to the performance measurement indicators.

It is notable that the PM system functions in a seemingly innocent and subtle way rather than through coercion, as many technologies of power (cf. Foucault 1988). Although the failure to meet the targets would not lead to any actual punishment, the information concerning the individual’s performance and his/her ranking in the system acts as a reward or punishment. Thus, a central way the PM system functions is through the employee self-discipline and self-governance. This means that work that might have previously been internally motivated or guided by the discipline’s common practice is now replaced by internalized targets imposed from outside, that is from the PM system. As the employees have no actual knowledge of what will happen if one underachieves in terms of the PM target, nor do they seem to have faith in getting rewarded in case of achieving or even exceeding the targets, the PM system works mostly through comparing, ranking and assessing individuals, thus creating a pressure to act according to the norm and strive for the targets. The ranking and assessment itself then works as a reward or punishment.

Central mechanisms of this type of control are the potential for the betterment of the subjects (cf. Roberts 2005) and confession as a way of gaining knowledge of the self (cf. Foucault 1988; Townley 1993, 536). In the regime of governmentality, confession is way to make individuals ‘conduct their own conduct’, in other words learn to evaluate their own performance, confer their shortcomings and find a way to correct them. The yearly reporting of research activity is a new form of confession, during which one has to investigate his/her performance according to the PM targets in the language of the PM language. Through the computational PM system, one even has to make the own performance visible to colleagues and the public. The public ‘confession’ part of the PM system and the (sometimes publicly announced) individual ranking in terms of the system represent more direct ways of rewarding or punishment, while they also are likely to have enforced the internalization of the PM system as a self-discipline.

Conclusion

Our study looks at performance measurement at universities as an example of Foucauldian governmentality. It seems that the PM has offered a convenient tool to evaluate, measure and compare the academic staff while simultaneously creating them guidelines to follow and new normalcies to aim at. The preliminary analysis demonstrates that the PM system is experienced to have increased surveillance and monitoring, which have effects on academics’ motivation and causes frustration and feelings of mistrust. More notably, the PM system appears to act effectively through self-governance and self-discipline, heavily impacting the university employees’ relationship with their work. Although there are those who resist the PM ideals and work towards being able to do the things that they are motivated about, it clearly seems to have guided many academics’ working towards the ideals and targets of PM measurement. Based on the analysis, it seems that the academics have internalized the norms and ideals of the PM system and developed towards self-disciplining and compliant individuals, who often come to ignore their own intrinsic values, priorities and the practices of their field for the sake of those coming from the PM system. For at least some academics, by redirecting the objectives and by influencing the pace, amount and even the contents of the work, the PM system and especially the internalized regime of the PM system have reduced the quality of working life and made it very hard to feel competent, adequate and capable. Therefore, it seems clear based on the analysis of this study that both the increased surveillance and especially the self-discipline brought by the PM system have had a deteriorating

influence on academics in terms of motivation, well-being and quality of research. Simultaneously as it might have increased the publication activity in terms of quantity, it has created tensions and contradicting demands that are very challenging to accommodate.

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