

Ethical Dilemmas Caused by Performance Measurement in Universities

– Exploring the Experiences of Finnish Scholars ¹

Tomi J. Kallio
Professor, PhD
Linneaus University
Kalmar, Sweden

Kirsi-Mari Kallio
Associate Professor, PhD
University of Turku,
Pori, Finland

Janne Tienari
Professor, PhD
Hanken School of Economics
Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

During the recent decades, performance measurement has been introduced into the Western universities. As a part of this development, in more recent years, more and more detailed, and usually quantitative performance criteria have been introduced into academia. Earlier studies indicate that individual scholars tend to experience dilemmas caused either explicitly or implicitly by the universities' internal PM systems. These dilemmas further cause perverse outcomes that potentially have severe effects for individual scholars, universities, science, and even the society as a whole. While earlier studies hint on the existence of dilemmas in the context of university PM and have reported certain perverse outcomes caused by PM, in this paper we go further and take them into our explicit focus. In the study we focus on the academic staff (faculty) – holding titles such as researchers, lecturers, associate professors and professors – in natural sciences, social science and humanities. We apply a large longitudinal qualitative data collected from three multi-disciplinary Finnish universities in 2010 (n. 966 informants) and 2015 (n. 672 informants). Our tentative analysis of the data has revealed a myriad of different kinds of dilemmas which PM in universities cause. Many of the dilemmas also contain ethical dimensions which make them particularly challenging for those scholars harboring a traditional academic ethos. Moreover, the dilemmas entail a wide range of perverse outcomes caused by PM. At this point of the analysis, the perverse outcomes have been constructed as rather wide general categories. In the tentative analysis we have identified the following four general categories as the perverse outcomes of PM: i) neglecting quality in academic work, ii) lowering research ambition, iii) neglecting the relevance of science, and iv) ethically questionable behavior.

Keywords: Performance measurement, performance management, dilemma, perverse outcome, universities, higher education

1. Introduction and the purpose of the study

Bringing private sector ideologies and management tools into public organizations is not a new phenomenon, and in the context of public higher education Gumpert (2000, 68) suggested almost two decades ago that in the U.S., “the dominant legitimating idea of public

¹ Work in progress, please do not quote or cite

higher education has changed from higher education as a social institution to higher education as an industry.” Besides the U.S., the same development has touched also numerous other countries and has been discussed under the rubric of New Public Management (NPM) at length by scholars. Broadly speaking, the discourse on performance measurement and management (Radnor & Barnes 2007) in public organizations fall under the realm of NPM. It has been suggested that performance measurement (PM) has been introduced to literally hundreds if not thousands of universities (ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012; Kallio et al. 2017).

The NPM ideology landed in Finland in the early 1990s. This launched a chain of events which finally in 2010 led to the enactment of the renewal of university legislation and in the adoption of highly nuanced PM-based funding scheme in Finnish universities. The enactment of the new university legislation and the adoption of new funding scheme by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture have been discussed at organizational and system levels in numerous studies (see e.g. Välimaa 2012). These studies have provided empirical evidence suggesting that individual scholars in universities tend to experience dilemmas caused either explicitly or implicitly by the universities’ internal PM systems.

According to Collins English Dictionary “A dilemma is a difficult situation in which you have to choose between two or more alternatives.” It is not unusual to face dilemmas in professional work such as the one conducted by scholars in universities. However, some dilemmas also contain ethical dimensions which make them increasingly problematic. Nevertheless, professional workers typically have strong professional ethos containing normative ethical rules which are taught to them during their education and indoctrination periods and which should help professional workers if they face ethical dilemmas in their work (cf. Mintzberg 1979). In case of university faculty, this professional ethos can be labelled as the academic ethos (Kallio et al. 2015). Despite the fact that the practical scholarly work is somewhat different in natural sciences, social, sciences, and humanities, the academic ethos, having its basis in research ethics and Mertonian type of norms of science (see Merton 1973), is rather universal. Based on their professional ethos, scholars should thus know which alternative to choose when they face ethical dilemmas in their work.

There are indications in recent studies that PM has a tendency to dilute academic ethos and force individual scholars to make ethically questionable decisions (Kallio et al. 2015; Kallio, et al. 2017). Such decisions cause perverse outcomes that potentially have severe effects for not just scholars and universities, but for science and society as a whole. While earlier studies hint on the existence of dilemmas in the context of university PM and they have also reported certain perverse outcomes caused by PM (see e.g., Graig et al. 2014; Agyemang & Broadbent 2015), in this paper we go further and take them to our explicit focus. Our research questions can thus be presented as follows:

1. What kind of (ethical) dilemmas universities’ PM systems entail?
2. What kind of more general perverse outcomes these dilemmas cause?

In the study we focus on the academic staff (faculty) – holding titles such as researchers, lecturers, doctoral candidates (faculty members), post docs, and professors – working in natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. We have excluded the support staff such as secretaries, janitors and holders of non-academic administrative positions outside the study.

2. Empirical data and methods

We apply a large longitudinal qualitative data collected from three multi-disciplinary Finnish universities in 2010 (n. 966 informants) and 2015 (n. 672 informants). Given that the case universities and their respective faculties have constantly been developing their internal PM practices and made them more nuanced over the past decade or so, the longitudinal data also enables us to perceive whether the ethical dilemmas the informants report have changed over the time.

Importantly, the open-ended questions were not designed to collect the empirical data specifically related to (ethical) dilemmas or perverse outcomes but instead related to the more general effects PM has on academic work. Consequently, concepts such as dilemma, ethical, or perverse were not used. This is crucial to know, since this type of highly value-loaded and even provocative concepts are known to be particularly impactful in orienting informants' thinking (Kallio 2005). In practice, this means that when the informants of our data either explicitly or implicitly refer to (ethical) dilemmas and the perverse outcomes that they cause, they do it 'spontaneously' without the survey itself leading them into these topics. Consequently, the qualitative open-ended questions in the survey were in this sense neutral.

The dataset of this study is based on the responses to the following open-ended questions: "How does performance measurement affect your work?" (2010 survey); "How does performance measurement affect your work motivation?" (both 2010 and 2015 surveys); "How does PM affect the attractiveness of academic career" (both 2010 and 2015 surveys); and "Does PM affect your research activity and if it does, how?" (2015 survey). The survey was conducted in Finnish language and all the extracts presented in this study have been translated from Finnish into English by the first two authors of the paper.

This study applies qualitative content analysis as its data analysis method. Qualitative content analysis may focus either on manifest or latent content or both of them at the same time, just as in case of this study. Latent content analysis demands interpretation while analyzing data. Interpretation thus had also an important role in this study. (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The following section describes the empirical data and provides a tentative analysis of it.

3. Empirical analysis

3.1 Data description

Given that the open-ended question were originally designed for understanding the effects of PM in more general, not the dilemmas and perverse outcomes of PM in particular, it is astonishing how many responses dealt with these topics. In many cases, the answers to the open-ended questions contained references to more than just one type of dilemma and/or perverse outcome, as the response below responding to the question "Does PM affect your research activity and if it does, how?":

So that it is necessary to manufacture journal articles even when there is no research-based reason to do so. As said, while scholars used to conduct research, now they write articles. PM also has an effect on what one does: one does what gets rewarded.

Moreover, to be honest, there's no point in spending time with developing things in the work community because such work doesn't show in your CV. All the time and energy should be spent on yourself and building up your CV.

In the extract above, the first two sentences relate to dilemmas that PM cause in relation to scientific publishing while the remaining part of the answer deals with dilemmas that PM causes to academic work communities and workplace development. During the data analysis, this type of answers received two (or more) codes. Nevertheless, in order to save space, in this article the multi-coded extracts which are used to illustrate the data, were split into parts unless it was considered that the splitting would jeopardize the understanding of the extracts.

Based on the type of information they contained the responses can be classified into four main types. In the first type, both the dilemma(s) and the perverse outcome(s) it causes are manifest content. In the second type, the dilemma is manifest while the perverse outcome(s) remain latent content. In the third type, the dilemma is latent while the perverse outcome(s) is manifest content. In the fourth type, both the dilemma(s) and the perverse outcome(s) it causes are latent content. The exemplary extracts below illustrate these four types; all are responses to the question “Does PM affect your research activity and if it does, how?”

Type 1: *“I try to keep up with my research even though I'm old (58 years). I intend to write at least one article each year... The decision [to write articles] makes me feel often tired and exhausted because my main work, teaching, consumes the best of my energy. Nowadays I try to handle my teaching sloppily by ‘cutting corners’ so that I would have enough energy for research because it and only it is appreciated.”*

In the above extract the dilemma caused by PM is manifest content: the respondent has to choose between focusing on teaching or research and due to the fact that PM system values only the latter she/he has chosen to put her/his best energy to research even though teaching is her/his main work. The perverse outcome of PM is also manifest content: because the respondent does not have enough energy to do properly both research and teaching, she/he has started to neglect teaching.

Type 2: *“As a factor it [PM] forces me to scrape up more joint publications in addition to my own production. This is, of course, just window-dressing – it doesn't change the actual volume of one's own research.”*

In the extract above the dilemma is manifest content: PM forces to maximize the number of publications and the respondent has stated that questionable methods need to be applied in doing so. However, the actual perverse outcome caused by this ethically questionable way of increasing publication volume remains latent content. The interpretation here is that PM has a tendency to increase the volume of scholarly publications also in somewhat artificial ways. In this particular case, it spurs scholars to add their colleagues' names into their publications so that it looks as if they would be more active in publishing.

Type 3: *“Confusingly. It’s not possible to study the topics which are interesting or would need studying; instead it is necessary to calculate what and in which ways is remunerating to study. In similar vein, developing one’s teaching, which I really would like to do, suffers a lot.”*

In the above extract, the perverse outcomes caused by PM are manifest content: on the one hand, the respondent is unable to study interesting and important topics and on the other hand, the development of teaching suffers. Nevertheless, the dilemmas that cause these perverse outcomes remain more or less latent content. The interpretation of this latent content in research is that PM causes dilemmas as it forces scholars to choose between important research topics and those topics that are more remunerating to study. In this particular case, despite of her/his professional opinion concerning what would be important to study, the respondent seems to be – at least tempted – to study the topics that are more remunerating. As it comes to the other perverse outcome, the lack of developing teaching, there is no trace to follow while making the interpretation. Of course, the dataset contains numerous other responses (like the exemplary extract illustrating the type 2 response presented above) in which the informants describe how university PM tends to value research at the expense of teaching. In similar vein, there are several responses in which informants report that the development work in universities suffer as it does not explicitly produce measurable output. Consequently, it is likely that also the informant, who has written the extract above, has faced one or more of these kind of dilemmas. Nevertheless, there is not enough grounds to make an actual interpretation in this particular case.

Type 4: *My research activity would be better if I could work in a supportive work group and if everybody would not be just thinking about the quantity of their own articles but would focus on doing good together. It would benefit also the university, school and department.*

The type four responses, like the extract above, are less straightforward compared to the other types, given that in this type of responses both the dilemma(s) and the perverse outcome(s) they cause, demand interpretation. The interpretation in this case is that university PM encourages scholars to focus on their own work, instead of working together with their colleagues. The interpretation of the perverse outcome is that egoistic behavior caused by PM has a tendency to lead to lack of work group support.

Besides the four types of responses discussed above the data set contained a considerable amount of responses that either explicitly or implicitly hinted about perverse outcomes caused by PM. For instance, the answer “*Lowers it*” and “*Decreases it*” was presented dozens of times and was among the most typical answers in the following two the open-ended questions: “How does PM affect your work motivation” and “How does PM affect the attractiveness of academic career”. Even though it is clearly a perverse outcome if PM lowers scholars work motivation and the weakens the attractiveness of academic career, nevertheless, this type on responses were not considered enough for the analysis of this study. This is because extant studies have already reported how scholars often experience PM having this type of effects (see e.g. Kallio & Kallio 2014). Accordingly, given that in this study we wanted to look beyond this finding and thus more deeply understand, not just

the perverse outcomes that university PM causes, but also the dilemmas behind them. We thus decided to focus on those responses that provided more information. In this quest, the type one answers, providing manifest content in case of both perverse outcomes and dilemmas behind them, were obviously the most helpful ones. Nevertheless, the other three types of responses were also important when building the big picture of the phenomenon.

3.2 Tentative findings

The tentative analysis of the empirical data has revealed a myriad of different kinds of dilemmas that PM in universities may cause. Many of the dilemmas also contain an ethical dimension, which makes them particularly challenging for scholarly ethos. Moreover, the dilemmas entail a wide range of perverse outcomes. At this point of the analysis, the perverse outcomes have been grouped in rather wide general categories. Thus far in the analysis, the following four general categories have been identified: i) neglecting quality in academic work, ii) lowering research ambition, iii) neglecting relevance of science, and iv) ethically questionable behavior. The mentioned general categories are somewhat overlapping with each other and in mutual interaction. Below, the four general categories of perverse outcomes of university PM and the respective dilemmas are discussed.

Category 1. Neglecting quality in academic work

The most frequently emerging theme in the data dealt in either one way or another with the lowering of quality in academic work. The lowering of quality was caused either explicitly or implicitly by PM. The related dilemmas forced scholars to choose, for example, between quality of publications and quantity of publications; between high quality teaching and lowering the requirements in classroom, which would help everyone to pass; as well as between long term (high quality) research and short-term (low quality) research which is encouraged by the PM system. In aggregate, these dilemmas entail PM having the perverse outcome of neglecting quality in academic work (see more closely Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of involved dilemmas and authentic responses: neglecting quality in academic work

<i>Category (perverse outcome)</i>	<i>Segment (dilemmas involved)</i>	<i>Examples of authentic responses</i>
Neglecting quality in academic work	Emphasizing quantity over quality	“It [PM] affects so that I produce more but poorer and more repetitive research in which wrong values, such as the status of outlet, journal ranking, CV and the accumulation of list of publications, are the most important issues. “It creates pressures to count everything all the time: number of master degrees, number of doctoral degrees and number of publications. No matter the quality.” “[PM] makes us to manufacture texts so that quantity is emphasized over quality.” “The quality of research doesn’t matter, it’s essential to produce credits.”

Lowering the requirements	“[Due to PM] Teaching ... is done at the level of the laziest or stupidest [students] so that everybody will pass and not make the records look bad.”
Fast-food orientation	“Neither the content nor what one learns during the process [of doctoral studies] have meaning anymore. It’s essential just to get [doctoral students] graduated as fast as possible and collect the money from the degrees.” “In my line of work, most of the results do not show right away. So besides the actual research and development of the work environment I have had to, unfortunately, perform also some activities that show easy results.” “[PM] may perverse research. Fast results define the work and more profound research gets neglected.” “There’s hardly any time for actual research as one should publish and run in conferences to report about ‘results’”. “[PM] Lowers the attractiveness [of academic career] among those who want to understand their subject profoundly and diversely. Those who like to write a lot and do not hesitate to publish even a somewhat unfinished articles will enjoy in the new scholarly work. The nature of the work just seems to change from making research into making reports.”
Short-termism	“PM undermines long-term research: it creates the need of generating relatively superficial consecutive projects and producing quick results based on them. The kind of research that deals with profound questions, and is always uncertain in its results, is left out as a matter of one’s own curiosity.” “[PM]... causes the pressure to produce publications at those phases [of research process] where it is not fruitful for the ultimate research questions. Articles written solely for the sake of productivity and records may slow down the analysis of actual research questions.”

The data analysis suggests that the respondents almost unanimously feel that in academic work, it is practically impossible to gain both quality and quantity at the same time. Consequently, focusing on high quantity in practice thus meant lowering quality and vice versa. Only a relatively small number of respondents expressed that PM increases – or potentially increases – quality in universities. The large majority of respondents considered that PM in universities does not reward high quality but high quantity.

Category 2. Lowering research ambition

Compared to the neglecting of quality in academic work, discussed above, lowering research ambition was mentioned in fewer responses. Moreover, there seemed to be less dilemmas involved in this category compared to the other perverse outcomes recognized in the tentative analysis. Nevertheless, the dilemmas entailing lowering research ambition were highly distinct. There seems to be two particular dilemmas involved: the scholars have to choose between safe and risky research and between mainstream and non-mainstream research topics and methods (see more closely Table 2).

Table 2. Examples of involved dilemmas and authentic responses: lowering research ambition

<i>Category (perverse outcome)</i>	<i>Segment (dilemmas involved)</i>	<i>Examples of authentic quotations</i>
Lowering research ambition	Avoiding risky research	“[PM] Does not encourage taking risk and aiming at truly groundbreaking research which involves a chance of failure. It is better to do many insignificant publications so that it looks good at records.” “Due to PM research drifts inevitably towards practices which are far away from the actual mission of universities. ... Scholars are driven by curiosity and the will to understand the surrounding reality. PM considerably constrains this curiosity and weed out the possibilities of making mistakes and testing directions that might be dead-ends. In the long run these [the ability to make mistakes and to test possible dead-ends] enable most profound scientific breakthroughs.” “PM leads into application of artificial indicators instead of focusing on high-quality research and education (which are indeed difficult to measure). PM also encourages to choose “safe” research instead of pursuing real innovations. Via safe research it is easier to meet the performance criteria, e.g. in the form of journal articles, while the true breakthroughs necessitate persistent work and taking risks.”
	Choosing fashionable topics and mainstream methods	I think it [PM] somewhat limits down the possible research topics and approaches. For instance, if one chooses a non-mainstream way of doing research, publishing might become much more difficult. In addition, when thinking of the chances of publishing, some research topics are more attractive. Moreover, due to the time they consume certain research methods are particularly challenging, especially if one thinks of doctoral thesis and the growing demand to publish in distinguished international journals already during the postgraduate phase.

Category 3. Neglecting the relevance of science

What is relevant for different fields of academic inquiry (natural sciences, social science and humanities), is not an unambiguous question. For instance, while writing international journal articles it might be highly relevant especially for natural sciences to focus on basic research, this is not necessarily the case in humanities or more applied fields of social science. The most important audiences e.g., for humanities and business sciences are not necessarily other scholars as pointed out by several respondents. Nevertheless, university PM directs to publish in refereed journals while the other type of publications might not produce credits at all. There are at least three dilemmas involved here. The scholars faced a dilemma in choosing between what they thought was relevant from the practical perspective and what produces credits; between what they thought was primary and what secondary; and between means and ends in research (see more closely Table 3).

Table 3. Examples of involved dilemmas and authentic responses: neglecting relevance of science

<i>Category (perverse outcome)</i>	<i>Segment (dilemmas involved)</i>	<i>Examples of authentic quotations</i>
Neglecting relevance of science	Neglecting practical relevance	“Performance targets somewhat guide to redirect publishing into those outlets that produce more credits. However, the conventions of my field direct to contrary direction, e.g. to publish in Finnish, so that the Finnish audience and possibly also the target group of the study could read about the research in their own native language. Moreover, operating in the networks of my own field somewhat necessitates publishing in such outlets that do not produce much credits.” “[Due to PM] Practicing science has become lightweight and as a consequence there’s less weight in the words of scholars [in the eyes of the public] as well.” “Among us younger scholars the idea of independent “think-tanks” has become increasingly interesting option because writing journal articles just for an academic audience is not that compelling. However, that [writing articles for just other scholars] is what PM aims at.” “A part of researchers and teachers seem to have adopted PM demands and rivalry for mutual excellence without any criticism. In fact, this [adoption of PM demands and mutual rivalry] lowers the quality and meaningfulness of work. Interest towards the actual substance and societal problems vanishes. It has been replaced by mutual status competition and churning out results.” “It produces more publications especially in refereed scholarly outlets (preferably in a language other than Finnish). The problem is that scholars no longer can or will write popular texts. This detaches science from the larger audiences.”
	Focusing on secondary matters	“University lives in its own reality and nearly all sense is lost from the actual work, meaning teaching and research. Now we sit in committees and think about from where to get enough external funding and how we could send our scholars abroad and bring in foreign scholars so that we could get rewarded.” “Doctoral students have adopted a tunnel vision and perceive their outputs mainly as “quantifiable and handy scores” instead of thinking about the common interest of their field of science.”
	Wag the dog	“[PM affects] So that it is necessary to manufacture journal articles even when there is no research-based reason to do so. As said, while scholars used to conduct research, now they write articles. PM also has an effect on what one does: one does what gets rewarded. Moreover, to be honest, there’s no point in spending time with developing things in the work community because such work doesn’t show in your CV. All the time and energy should be spent on yourself and building up your CV. So that it is necessary to churn out journal articles even when there is no research-based

reason to do so. As said, before scholars made research, now they write articles. PM also effects on what one does: one does what she/he gets rewarded for doing. Moreover, to be honest, there's no point of spending time in developing matters in the work community because such work doesn't show in your CV. All time and energy in should be spent on yourself and building up your CV."

"Work (teaching, research, supervising) must be perceived rather as performance targets than contents. The work must be designed in ways that do not advance the task itself."

Based on the analysis it seems that the respondents in many cases felt that the format, especially the one of refereed journal publications, have become more important than the content, that is, what is actually said in the publications. The perverse outcome of the dilemmas is the lowering of the relevance of science.

Category 4. Ethically questionable behavior

All the dilemmas of the other main categories discussed above involve either explicitly or implicitly also ethical dimensions. However, in case of the category four this is quite explicit. Naturally, as in all fields of human activity, there has always been incentives for those willing to operate in ethically questionable ways also in academia. However, based on the experiences of numerous scholars, PM seems to provide additional incentives for ethically questionable behavior, while rather few respondents mentioned that PM systems would in some way restrict such a behavior.

Table 4. Examples of involved dilemmas and authentic responses: ethically questionable behavior

<i>Category (perverse outcome)</i>	<i>Segment (dilemmas involved)</i>	<i>Examples of authentic quotations</i>
Ethically questionable behavior	Hoaxing and taking shortcuts	"When focusing excessively on PM, the downside may involve the utilization of different kinds of shortcuts and production of pseudo results in order to advance one's own academic career. At its worst and extreme, this would destroy the reliability of all scientific research. At least it would considerably erode it." "Sometimes I ponder why nothing seems to be enough here in the university. So, not very attractive [career choice] I guess. The publication pressures also bring hoaxing to universities; sometimes I bemoan how ethical principles are applied based on one's own self interests." "There's a pressure of getting results while the work and gaining the actual research credits is uncertain and vague. The academic world is cruel and not attractive at all if one perceives it from the perspective of piling up funding and fabricating results." "The outcome [of PM] is that things get documented in different ways that they actually take place."

Self-interest and exploiting others	“[PM causes a] Desire to act selfishly by advancing just one’s own career without caring about the others.” “[Due to PM] Those who choose a popular topic which is easy to study succeed in their academic career. In addition, one has to know how to shamelessly exploit other people and financiers. PM corrupts researchers.”
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4. Tentative conclusions and discussion

Marketization has entered the universities, and thus universities are expected to compete against each other in attracting the “best” students and scholars, as well as funding from the market to deliver high-quality services (Engwall, 2007). At the same time, international rankings, league tables and accreditations have become more and more important. This also means that universities and other higher education institutions have been increasingly adopting different performance measurement (PM) and quality assurance (QA) practices. In recent years, scholars have also started to perceive the effects of PM from a broader perspective. For instance, Kallio et al. (2016, 686) suggested that PM “can be seen as a catalyst for changing the very ethos of what it is to be an academic and to do academic work.” Moreover, as our analysis indicate, PM in universities has brought various dilemmas to scholars, many of them ethical in nature.

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