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English and German academics' perspectives on metrics in Higher Education: Dimensions of fairness and organisational justice (0449)

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Context

A metric tide is observed across many national higher education (HE) contexts (Wilsdon, 2015), reflected in increasingly nuanced and converging ways of measuring organisational research performance which inform research funding allocation processes and are increasing international comparability practices. This trend is more pronounced in research evaluation than is evident in respect of teaching where greater plurality of measurement practices persists across national contexts.

This comparative study examines the influence of institutional-level research and teaching accountability practices in England where metrics-driven agendas are well established and Germany, a relatively new entrant to this arena. In the English context, Research Excellence Framework (REF) is acknowledged as the driver of institutional and individual research agendas. Over the last two years, the pedagogical sibling of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is increasingly influencing the teaching agendas of institutions. Historically, Germany has not favoured the vertical differentiation of universities by metrics-driven agendas. However, the recent Excellence Initiative, a competitive funding scheme emphasising research concentration, reflects increasing concern with international metrics. Therefore, a comparison becomes important to highlight lessons that can be learned from the differing organisational responses in these two changing national contexts.

Thus far, much of the literature on the impact of metrics has focused on either research or teaching-related assessment regimes even though HE organisations are subject to multiple jurisdictions of measurement. Further, such studies have drawn valuable attention to structural and procedural inequalities at the systemic level yet, inevitably, offer a relatively weak theoretical framing of human behaviour at the organisational level. Therefore, the focus in this study on the interplay of teaching and research metrics on organisational responses is timely given the changing policy contexts with increased emphasis on both teaching and research excellence leading to consequent impact on the nature of academic work and their employment contracts (Locke, 2014).

Methods

This mixed-methods study was undertaken in two phases, involving 340 survey respondents followed by 40 interviews from academics in two disciplinary areas, Education and Economics, across the two national contexts.

- In the first phase, perspectives of English academics working within the Education discipline were gathered using an online survey followed by interviews with individuals who self-identified as willing to participate.
- In the second phase, perspectives of English academics working within the economics discipline and German academics working within Education and Economics were gathered using online surveys and follow up interviews.

Analysis

The study draws on the concept of organisational justice, discussed widely in the management literature (Nowakowski et al, 2005), as a theoretical frame for analysis and evaluate its utility in making salient institutional practices which amplify or mediate performative effects of metrics. Interview and survey questions explored:

- The concept of procedural justice through the clarity with which metrics-based targets were communicated at organisational level (informational justice), the extent of institutional dialogue on ways metrics could be used responsibly and context-sensitively (interactional), and whether there was scope to negotiate these targets (interactional justice).
- The concept of distributive justice was explored through questions on extent to which metrics were associated with promotional criteria, recruitment and how, if and in what ways teaching/research metrics contributed to excellence.

Analysis of the data from the English academics portrayed differing organisational accountabilities associated with research and teaching metrics. The potential for interactional justice appeared greater in regard to research than teaching metrics. The focus of dialogue relating to research priorities was indicated to be more proximate to the individual, located at line management level and often supported by research group. A significant theme emerging from the interviews was the extent research groupings supported individuals to define research targets and to working towards them. However, findings indicated varied organisational practices in terms of target-setting and performance monitoring. A broader span of evaluative comments ranging from 'brutal', 'utilitarian' and 'callous' to 'developmental', 'supportive' and 'professionally rigorous' were observed in relation to the organisational strategies surrounding research metrics. In relation to teaching metrics, it was harder to identify accountabilities associated with these measures which were portrayed as legitimate. The interview accounts portrayed differing organisational practices in relation to teaching metrics which mitigated or amplified the associated accountabilities in performative or relational terms.

In some contexts responses indicated limited scope for dialogue and process control at early career stage, with staff being more closely monitored through probationary and teaching accreditation mechanisms. However, the extent of process control for early career academics differed across organisational contexts. Survey data demonstrated that REF metrics were more influential on recruitment strategy, promotion criteria and resource allocation. An aspect of distributive (in)justice expressed related to the specific performance consequences associated with these metrics in particular institutional contexts. Significantly, in these accounts respondents talked less in terms of outcome satisfaction in individual terms but at the organisational level. Several respondents highlighted the significance of current metric systems in maintaining an institutional emphasis on both teaching and research.

The preliminary analysis of the German context highlights the importance of meso-level, management practices in shaping the associated accountabilities in professionally meaningful ways which are less directed by national frameworks.

Much of the research literature emphasises the increasingly individualised, performative accountabilities that are associated with research metrics as also confirmed by this study. However, the current English REF reforms are suggesting a move to more collective accounts of research performance, therefore the individualising organisational practices may run in tension with these changing requirements. In the case of teaching metrics, the rubric of the metrics and the way in

which teaching tends to be organised means that the associated accountabilities are less individualised. However, the proposed move to discipline-based teaching evaluations may mean more devolved and individualised accountability and introduce a new dynamic. In the German context, there is some anticipation that a more developed national system of research and teaching measurement may contribute to a socially just and transparent career pathway. Faced with an insecure and intransparent traditional career pathway, early career academics in Germany in particular may welcome a turn towards performance records expressed in metrics on which to base career advancement.

References

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