

Digital performance management in higher education: transforming the control of academic work?

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Performance measurement and management tools in higher education are being digitalised across Europe to different degrees. How does digitalisation permeate performance measurement? How does this potentially influence academic work and professional autonomy? Drawing on the extant literature, we can see that the range of EdTech actors that develop digital solutions for performance management is very diverse. They promise increases in efficiency, user friendliness and transparency of performance measurement and management processes. Opponents draw attention to the possible negative effects on academic work. The transfer and valorisation of performance data takes place not only in performance review talks with academics, or in management debates on university performance, but also through trading of gathered data by EdTech companies. This brings the performance management closer towards surveillance capitalism in higher education, which may curb professional autonomy.

Full paper

Across the world, higher education systems and institutions have adopted a range of performance measures to monitor and evaluate performance of universities as part and parcel of neo-liberal reforms

in higher education (Ferlie et al., 2008; Leisyte & Dee, 2012; Welppe et al., 2020). Using their autonomy and organisational actorhood (Hüther & Krücken, 2018), universities have been pro-active in learning how to play rankings and performance games by shaping their visibility through public relations and marketing, by positioning and profiling themselves nationally via performance agreements with the governments. This has fostered a shift towards creation of performance management systems at HEIs with goal oriented and increasingly professionalised human resource management, especially in those systems that have high institutional autonomy (Estermann, et al. 2011, Türk, 2016).

In the past years, and especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this trend has been increasingly aided by digital technology tools that are adopted by higher education institutions and governments through public private partnerships with EdTech companies or through boosting in-house Information Technologies (IT) and Human Resources Management (HRM) capacities.

The increased usage of digital performance tools, however, is a rather new phenomenon in higher education systems. These tools are interpreted differently and adopted to various degrees, paces and shapes depending on the governance model dominating particular HE systems, public administration cultures, level of digitalisation in a country (Broucker et al., 2019; Capano & Pritoni, 2020), as well as different levels of institutional autonomy of universities (Leisyte et al., 2017, Estermann, Nokkala & Steinell, 2011). Thus, we pose the following research questions: How does digitalisation permeate performance measurement? How does this potentially influence academic work and professional autonomy?

The extensive literature review has shown that performance measurement and management tools in higher education are being digitalised to different degrees (Leisyte, 2022, Lim, 2019). When it comes to HRM tools, it seems that the first steps towards digitalisation of performance management have been taken drawing on digital information management systems in systems with high resource and digital capabilities, like in the US, UK, Australia, the Netherlands. In some cases, the linking of performance data harvested for HR purposes with other personal data available, occurs in the highly managerial 'smart' HEIs in the US where also privacy

rules are not as strict as in the European HE context (Uskov et al., 2018). But this is rather an exception than the rule. We could see that personal data is valorised by HEIs for personnel decisions, and for strategic decision making in those HEIs that have strong managerial core and high institutional autonomy. At the same time, especially in the European context, the traditional academic ethos, the collegiality of decision making, and the public servant status of professors in some countries, like in Germany, coupled with strict data protection regulation, do not easily allow for pooling of the data and its valorisation. Inertia and resistance to change in digitalising workflows is another important factor to consider, when discussing the digitalisation of performance management in higher education at the meso level. Here the COVID-19 pandemic may be a strong catalyst for change, as the administration simply must change to working in digital formats. Finally, the usage of external services from EdTech companies is another important development in the digitalisation of performance management in HEIs. The capabilities that may be lacking internally will be bought in from the outside, through which valorisation of performance data may occur. In this new HE performance ecosystem, one can then imagine academic surveillance capital being produced and traded.

Drawing on the extant literature, we can see that the range of EdTech actors (e.g. SageHR, HReasily) that develop digital solutions for performance management is very diverse. They promise increases in efficiency, user friendliness and transparency of performance measurement and management processes. Opponents draw attention to the possible negative effects on academic work. The transfer and valorisation of performance data takes place not only in performance review talks with academics, or in management debates on university performance, but also through trading of gathered data by EdTech companies. Further, linking different data sources with the support of digital architecture provides knowledge to the HEIs and allow HEIs to gain a broad spectrum of control over academic work. This brings the performance management closer towards surveillance capitalism in higher education, which may curb professional autonomy (Zuboff, 2019). This could be seen as a possible dark side of the effect of digitalisation on performance management systems and processes.

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