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Metricisation of English Higher Education: Academics' perspectives on impact of teaching and research metrics on professional practice

Abstract

Higher Education is subject to measurement on the basis of numerous parameters such as research, teaching, levels of internationalisation and often a combination of these. The increased use of various national and international metrics within HE has influenced institutional practices. In turn, institutional interpretations of these metrics influence the professional trajectories and values of academics and can create a kind of individual and institutional elitism. This study captures academics' perspectives on the impact teaching metrics such as the National Student Survey and research metrics such as the Research Excellence Framework on institutional and individual teaching and research practices and priorities. The study includes the findings of the data collected from over 100 academics who participated in the online survey and 20 academics who participated in the interviews. The study identifies differing accountability practices operating in organisational contexts, reflecting relational and managerial orientations, and considers the implications for academic career trajectories.

Key words - Professional Practice; Performative metricisation in HE; Teaching excellence; Research excellence

Long Abstract

Introduction and Background

The increased use of various national and international metrics within HE has influenced institutional practices. In turn, institutional interpretations of these metrics have an impact on the professional trajectories and values of academics and can create a kind of individual and institutional elitism within the HE sector. Kelly and Burrows (2011) have referred to one such metric in England, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) as 'performative metricisation', performance in which dictates academics privileges and institutional support for their research. Incentives such as promotion often drive individual researchers to focus their efforts on research outputs rather than anything else, including students (Finkel, 2014).

A series of normative claims are converging in the literature around the negative influences of research and teaching metrics upon organisational practices. However, in the case of the English Higher Education, empirical studies of academic responses to research metrics demonstrate a situation that is not uniformly negative. Empirical studies have highlighted how differing institutional management strategies can mediate the effects of national policies (Oancea 2014, O'Connell, 2017). Blackmore (2016) highlights how these metrics and indicators serve institutional interests but also individual ones in heightening individual prestige and marketability for academic staff.

Since 2015, the pedagogical sibling of the REF, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is increasingly influencing the teaching agendas of institutions. Therefore, there is value in identifying institutional and individual responses to the teaching and research metrics at organisational level. The study captures academics' perspectives on the impact the various teaching metrics such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and research metrics such as the REF have on institutional and individual teaching and research practices and priorities. More specifically, the study examines:

- Perspectives of early and mid-career academics on the impact of metrics on professional practice; the former group tending to be under-represented within the literature.
- Differing organisational practices associated with teaching/research metrics.
- Individualistic and pro-social academic orientations and how these relate to responses to teaching/research metrics.

Methods

The study used a sequential mixed-methods approach involving an online survey and interviews. Firstly, the survey (with over 100 respondents) was used to determine the parameters affecting the views of British academics on the impact of metrics on their individual and institutional practices. To add valuable context to the analysis, socio-demographic data such as gender, age, length of HE experience, type of HE institution, their disciplinary area and the nature of employment contract was collected via the survey. Additionally, qualitative data was collected in the survey using open-ended questions on the different kinds of institutional, national and international metrics and of these which ones they found helpful/unhelpful in promoting quality of various institutional and individual practices. Follow-up interviews with twenty academics who had volunteered to participate in the interviews was used to investigate their views further and explore how institutional and individual practices have been positively/negatively influenced their teaching and research practice.

Results and Discussion

Initial findings indicate that most of the participants preferred to have a balanced research and teaching profile. Many acknowledged the pressures REF had created on their research due to various institutional interpretations of REF where individuals, as one participant describes, were being classified as 'research possible' or 'research probable'. There were only a few who felt that their individual and institutional practices were effective in mediating the pressures of REF.

Further, a minority of the academics perceived that the REF framework had improved the quality of their research (20%) and/or enhanced their career prospects (21%). However, nearly half of the survey respondents (52%) indicated that the REF metrics encouraged them to engage in collaborations and consider impact-oriented work. Academics orientations to metrics associated with teaching (NSS and TEF) were generally more negative with a small minority (15%) who considered that NSS has a positive impact on the quality of teaching. However, nearly 35% suggested NSS influences their teaching priorities. With regards to the teaching metrics, some participants felt that their teaching was still independent and not driven by performative measures such as NSS.

Some of the negativity towards the teaching metrics is likely to be driven by the uncertainties associated with the nascent TEF. Whilst academics appeared to have more confidence in the criteria for judgement used for their research as part of the REF, they demonstrated less confidence in the student assessment of their teaching by NSS and of the criteria for judgement of institutional teaching quality likely to be used by TEF. Findings also indicate that there were varied institutional practices surrounding metrics in terms of target setting and performance monitoring.

The findings so far give a useful insight into the differing levels of intensity of institutional practices surrounding the research and teaching metrics. The greater frequency of NSS data publication in the public domain appeared to be a contributory factor in this regard. REF metrics, whilst clearly directing priorities are experienced and negotiated, in many cases, in a more sporadic way. Within the survey and interview data there were distinct narratives from early career and mid career academics. Among mid-career group, there appeared to be more scope to make choices on whether and how to be directed and influenced by these metrics. For early career academics, the choices and opportunities for agency were limited in particular ways. Respondent accounts demonstrate differing organisational accountability practices which reflect relational ('giving an account of') and managerial ('holding to account for') (Oancea, 2014) orientations. The organisational and individual implications for academic career trajectories will be discussed.

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