Worth in academia in times of change - Reformation of the German university sector and its consequences on the construction of worth (0368)

Melike Janßen[1] [1]*University of Bremen, Germany*

Topic

During the last decades, German universities have undergone profound changes as part of governance reforms. In particular, these reformations encompassed the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) practices that were implemented to facilitate the quantification and comparability of academic performance. This has led to an increase in competition amongst universities on the inter-organizational level and researchers on the micro level. In conjunction with these reformations, a plethora of instruments was introduced to monitor, compare, and evaluate academic performance in order to allocate resources and to substantiate performance-based salary, and promotion, etc.. As a consequence, professors are increasingly expected to provide an account of their performance and to adhere to new evaluation criteria. However, given the extant *plurality of worth, different meanings of excellence* across and within disciplines, and diverging epistemic practices, the implementation of *universal* performance measures (critically described as "governing by numbers", Heintz 2008), both in research and teaching, becomes a challenging endeavour. As a result, NPM has caused substantial indignation and defiance among German university professors.

However, little attention has been paid to exploring the mechanisms and boundary conditions that inform individuals' perceptions, responses and acceptance or rejection of evaluations and associated criteria.

By taking an actor-centered perspective, the present study addresses these issues and examines the effects of NPM on the *construction of worth* across university professors of different sub-disciplines and related effects on teaching and research. It also examines the reported tensions between individual and organizational understandings of excellent scientific knowledge and conflicts between new performance management measures and academic identity concepts. Therefore, this study contributes to an enhanced understanding on the interplay between individuals' (and disciplinary) construal of worth, NPM, and the eventual adoption, modification, or rejection of NPM criteria of worth.

Research Questions

Within the context of the present research project, I aim to address the following research questions:

- How do academics perceive the changes and how do they deal with them?
- Do these changes actually influence the *construction of worth*? Can we find traces of modification of worth in academia due to managerialism in the university sector?
- What are the behavioural consequences: are there emerging evidences, e.g. in terms of endorsed practices, redefinitions of worth/success in order to optimize one's profile?
- How do rankings, ratings, and other forms of both individual and collective performance measurements affect research and teaching?

Empirical background

The present study is based on qualitative data which were collected as part of a larger research project on the consequences of performance evaluation procedures at German universities (2014-2016), funded by the German Federal Ministry of

Education and Research (BMBF). Drawing from 64 semi-structured and biographical in-depth interviews in five different disciplines of Humanities, social, natural and engineering sciences, I will present a framework for analysing academics' varying perceptions and reactions to performance management. Drawing from this, I will develop a typology which captures the individual differences in dealing with performance measurement and related consequences on research and teaching. Based on three key dimensions - *assessment, concern, and coping* - we can establish distinctive types of patterns of interpretation and action.

Results

We conclude that a true deterioration of long-established values and practices has not taken place since academics are still able to maintain personal standards of performance and incorporated criteria of worth. However, while some academics obtain a sense of recognition by experiencing a congruence between their own performance and evaluation criteria and those installed by NPM, tensions and ambivalences similarly emerge with other academics who struggle with NPM and feel that their academic identity and convictions of how their job has to be carried out become endangered by NPM. The reasons for this variance are associated with various factors. For instance, we identified individual scientific motivation, disciplinary affiliation, career stages and the governance context within universities to function as relevant boundary conditions. In this sense, individuals' resistance can be understood as a struggle over jurisdictions amongst and across professions and in a similar vein, as an acrimonious fight on the predominance of values and beliefs in academia.

References:

Heintz, B. (2008). Governance by numbers. Zum Zusammenhang von Quantifizierung und Globalisierung am Beispiel der Hochschulpolitik. In Schuppert, GF. & Voßkuhl, A. (Eds.), Governance von und durch Wissen. Schriften zur Governance-Forschung 12 (pp. 110-128).. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Lamont, M. (2012). Toward a comparative sociology of valuation and evaluation. Annual Review of Sociology 38, (1), pp. 201-221.

Power, M. (1997). The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification. Oxford: Oxford University Press.