

## **C1.4 Beaumaris Lounge Wednesday 5 September 14.15-16.15**

### ***The ambivalent use of metrics in German higher education (0468)***

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The growing use of metrics to measure and evaluate research and teaching is a global development (Hazelkorn 2009; 2011; Marginson 2016). However, the shape and extent of using metrics varies considerably between countries. Whereas the UK employs with the REF and the TEF a nationwide system of indicators whose results influence institutional funding, German universities face no comparable centralized system. In fact, a high proportion of their funding is related to their input rather than their output which metrics are commonly intended to measure. The need to accommodate increasing numbers of freshmen has furthered a financing tied to incoming student numbers, lacking considerations of quality. Only recently have federal and Land governments launched a competitive funding scheme for enhancing the quality of teaching at German universities. Metrics, however, were not used to evaluate the universities' proposals for this program. Slightly more supportive of metrics was the Excellence Initiative, another competitive funding scheme to support critical masses of research capacity that was launched in 2006. The international reviewers did pay attention to indicators such as acquired third party funding or publications but not in a systematic manner. In the absence of generally acknowledged common standards, what was deemed excellent was ultimately negotiated between the reviewers and the federal and Land ministers of science (Bloch & Mitterle 2017). Apart from such funding schemes there are no relevant rankings on a national scale. Rather, even after the Excellence Initiative had singled out eleven 'elite' universities, their degrees are still considered as equal in status to those of other universities (Stock 2018). However, the use of metrics is widespread on the organizational level. At least some indicators are part of target agreements between universities and state ministries, and between the university leadership and the faculties. Through introducing output-based steering in the wake of New Public Management, the university leadership has gained considerable autonomy in determining how strategic objectives are to be reached. Furthermore, performance-related payment has been introduced on the professorial level. All in all, the German higher education system lacks a central system to measure *organizational* performance but is characterized by the widespread and decentralized use of certain indicators for *individual* performance.

Against this background, our explorative study of German academics' perspectives on metricisation intends (1) to establish whether, and if so, which indicators are used on which level (university-wide, departmental, individual), and (2) to analyze how the use of metrics is perceived by organizational members. To this end, an online survey of academics in eight education and eight economics departments at German universities was conducted. The survey yielded 134 responses equally distributed between the disciplines and academic status groups. The results confirm the widespread use of metrics since the great majority reported at least one indicator used by their university. A variance analysis yielded no statistically significant correlations with structural factors such as gender, academic status, and discipline, and with organizational characteristics such as the amount of third-party funding.

Academics' perceptions of metrics were surveyed across six different dimensions, generated through a factor analysis for both teaching and research performance indicators: (1) metrics on the departmental level, (2) metrics on the university level, (3) institutional dialogue on metrics, (4) utilization of metrics, (5) effects of metrics on academic careers, (6) leeway in the use of metrics. The results reveal two ambivalences in the use of metrics at German universities.

First, metrics are located on the individual rather than the organizational level. Respondents see them influencing their individual priorities in research and teaching. Yet they are only to a limited extent advanced by the organization. Metrics-based goals are seldom communicated and enforced by the leadership and the institutional dialogue on the use and results of metrics is poor. Though the vast majority of respondents report that there is a central unit collecting data on teaching performance, this data is not used for explicating strategic goals of the university; for research performance, it is vice versa. Thus, in German academia, metrics are diffused primarily on the individual level, presumably enforced by external actors such as professional associations or funding organizations, but only to a limited extent by the organization.

Second, metrics are more important in research than in teaching. If metrics are used at all on the organizational level – for setting strategic goals at the university or departmental level, for allocating resources, or for internal rankings – then they are related to research performance indicators. Teaching performance generally plays only a minor role for positioning both on the individual and the organizational level. It is only of secondary importance for career advancement, and universities can not charge tuition fees. The qualitative responses to the survey indicate that German academics regard the organizational use of metrics as a way of upgrading teaching. However, respondents also feared that quantitative indicators such as graduation rates would impede their teaching, especially since there are no common quality standards for teaching.

The ambivalent use of metrics on the individual and the organizational level can be related to isomorphic processes in German higher education: German universities respond to environmental pressures and account for their performance in terms of metrics but these organizational responses are decoupled from their members' actions (Brunsson 1993), as the collegial nature of academic self-governance limits the leaderships' steering capacity (Hüther & Krücken 2013). That metrics are nevertheless relevant on the individual level and that research is favored over teaching suggests an institutional logics perspective which focusses on supraorganizational patterns of values and practices through which individuals provide meaning to their social reality (Thornton & Ocasio 2008): Academics position themselves in the scientific community through their research performance, and metrics have come to be seen as a legitimate way of doing so, as they render performance visible and commensurable (Espeland & Stevens 1998). This process can have both subjectifying and emancipatory effects: On the one hand, academics subject themselves to an external regime of performance indicators and act strategically in teaching and research, on the other hand, common standards of valuation require merit-based academic judgements and decisions.

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