

Editorial

Editorial: Quantifying Higher Education: Governing Universities and Academics by Numbers

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Abstract

Over the past decades, ‘governing by numbers’ has taken a flight in the higher education sector. Performance-based budgeting and quality assurance schemes orient universities to new objectives, while rankings have globalised the metrified observation of higher education at large. Where previously no indicators existed, they are being introduced; where indicators already existed, they are being standardised for purposes of comparison. This thematic issue aims to work towards a more comprehensive understanding of the growing diversity of quantification-based instruments in higher education sectors in three European countries. The effects of quantification are noticed at all levels of the higher education system, from policy makers at the top of the regulatory pyramid down to students and academic staff. Yet even quantifiers outside of the regulatory system, such as ranking and metrics organisations, may have an important bearing on the operation of the university organisation and the sector at large. Thus, an entire governance landscape emerges in which actors at various levels turn to numbers for guidance. The articles in this thematic issue analyse the life cycle of such numbers, from their origins, through to their production and finally, their consequences. This editorial outlines the central questions and overarching issues addressed by the thematic issue and introduces its various contributions.

Keywords

comparative policy studies; higher education governance; managerialism; performance indicators; quantification; regulation

Issue

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1. Public Sector Quantification in the Limelight

Twenty-five years after Porter (1995) focussed attention on the centrality of numbers in the conduct of modern social and political life, the place of quantification in the limelight of the social sciences appears undiminished. Indeed, as overview articles by Espeland and Stevens (2009) or Popp Berman and Hirschman (2018) have shown, over time, quantification research has increasingly branched out, become institutionalised, and settled on a division of labour.

One of the critical assumptions of quantification studies or ‘governance by numbers’ is the idea that numbers

transform organisational and political behaviour. Two powerful time diagnoses by Power (1997) and, more recently, Dahler-Larsen (2012) have argued that late modern society is characterised by relentless efforts at audit and evaluation. This trend, in a memorable phrase by Miller (2001, pp. 381–282), has generated an “avalanche of numbers” for decision making in “almost any organization.” This has had remarkable effects. As early as 1999, Hood, Scott, James, Jones and Travers, in a landmark study, estimated that policies for control inside government cost £1 billion per year in the UK alone (Hood et al., 1999, p. 42). Since then, the scale of quality-controlling, competition-inducing, and waste-watching in the pub-