The Metrification of ‘Quality’ and the Fall of the Academic Profession

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In 2012 the British sociologist Roger Burrows published an article titled ‘Living with the H-Index. Metric assemblages in the academy’. In the opening lines he explains the long term effects of the economization of the university on the workfloor as follows:

“Something has changed in the [British] academy. Many academics are exhausted, stressed, overburdened, suffering from insomnia, feeling anxious, hurt, guilty, and ‘out-of-placeness’. One can observe it all around: a deep, affective, somatic crisis threatens to overwhelm us [...] We know this; yet somehow we feel unable to reassert ourselves [...]. In our brave new world, it seems that a single final criterion of value is recognized: a quantitative, economic criterion. All else is no more than a means. And there is a single method for ensuring that this criterion is satisfied: quantified control”.

In this article I will take Burrows diagnosis as point of departure and I will argue that the neo-liberal reforms of the universities since the 1980’s have installed a type of governance—usually known as ‘New Public Management’—that is undermining the very idea of professionalism. NPM does so basically by replacing professional ideas and practices concerning the judgment of quality—and thus of professional selection—by the ‘metrification of output’ in both the domain of teaching and of research. As the very idea of the modern university is based on the idea of professional specialization, NPM is simply making the discussion about ‘the idea of the university’ irrelevant while we speak. NPM does so because metrification implies the replacement of professional autonomy by permanent quantified assessments, by the gradual replacement of tenured faculty positions by casualized academic labour and—in the Dutch case—also by ‘performance agreements’ between the government and the universities. I use the example of the Dutch universities in order to analyze ‘Impact Factor’ measurement and “performance agreements”.

The basic argument behind my thesis is that professions need professional autonomy in order to function properly and that quantified control makes this impossible. In order to explain this I want to elaborate on the sociological characteristics of professions and on the differences between professions on the one side, and workers and employees on the other.

The crucial sociological distinction is that professions determine their own standards—their own criteria of evaluation—in order to ensure the quality that their professional performances specifically require. Therefore all professions determine their own professional hierarchy; locally, nationally and globally. This hierarchy is ultimately based upon the reputation of the individual professionals. His or her reputation is in turn based on the assessment by the professional community; in this case, the contribution of the individual scholar to the profession’s body of knowledge. Moreover, professions determine their own procedures of inclusion and of exclusion. Because of this self-determination, professions are basically self-governing institutions when it comes to quality standards. In order for the professions to function, academics need this autonomy, and universities—in order to take quality control seriously and to function professionally—need representative shared-governance by the teaching and researching members of the faculty.

In the Netherlands, however, the principle of shared-governance was replaced in 1997 by a strictly bureaucratic top/down model including a strict hierarchical ordering of all faculty positions and tasks, like in an idealised Weberian bureaucracy. Typically all faculty activities since the introduction of the ‘Universitair Functie Ordening’ (UFO) in 2003 are subdivided in a limited number of ‘competences’—since 2011: 40!—which are strictly connected to ‘functional profiles’ (“functieprofielen”) and thus to the hierarchical positions. Typically too all important activities require the authorisation and the signature by ‘the superior’ (“de leidinggevende”).

This model received the Orwellian name ‘steering at a distance’ and was—also faithful to the inverted logic of Orwell’s ‘1984’—advertised as the solution to ‘the problem of bureaucracy’. Since then, the academic-professional concept of quality has been replaced by the NPM-idealisation of ‘educational efficiency’ in teaching and ‘impact factor’ in research. And since ‘educational efficiency’ and ‘impact factor’ are fixed in quantitative terms and are controlled by NPM-management based on its political priorities—namely, budget cuts on public spending—the academics can no longer work according to their own professional standards. Both the self-governance of professionals concerning quality standards and the professional time regime (that is the time needed to meet the professional criteria) have been replaced by a rigid regime of quantified control. As to the individual and collective ‘performance’ in research the ‘impact-factor’ of publications has over the last 30 years turned into the ‘golden standard’ of ‘quality measurement’.

The steep rise to the ‘top’ of ‘impact factor’ measurement has recently been analyzed by the Austrian sociologist Christian Fleck and both its short history and its utter lack of any disciplinary rationality are nothing less than bewildering. This holds for the fields that are recognized as ‘disciplines’, the journals that are excluded and the new ones that are included in the citation indexes, the time span that citations are tracked, and last but not least: the way in which the nationality of the authors of publications is established by the firms that produce the citation indexes.

Fleck did a case study of the field of sociology with remarkable results:
Dutch researchers is significantly higher than of most re-
posed 'fact' that the 'output' alias the 'productivity' of
lisher may explain, among other things, what is known
journals is identified with the nationality of the pub-
be explained by the relative low number of Dutch re-
surement. The relative high 'productivity' can partially
in a footnote.
Flecks 'discovery' that the nationality of the academic
journals is identified with the nationality of the pub-
isher may explain, among other things, what is known
as 'the Dutch paradox'. This paradox refers to the sup-
pose 'fact' that the 'output' alias the 'productivity' of
researchers outside the Netherlands,
conditions than their casualized ‘colleagues’. The point is that casualization has become the NPM-rule while tenure-track and tenure have become the exception for newcomers in the university system. 23

Utrecht University is by no means the only institution promising the Dutch government exactly what it asks for; that is, more ‘quality’ in education and research for less money. All do. For instance, the ‘Fontys Hogescholen’–a conglomerate of professional schools–have promised to ‘deliver’ 95% of its students with a degree within 5 years! In comparison to Fontys the promise of Utrecht University even appears fairly modest: it will only raise its present percentage of 74% ‘successful students’ within 4 years to 77% in 2016–in 2006 the percentage was 69%–so there is still plenty of room for further ‘improvement’ in the future.

So much for my educational examples of quantified systems of control, systems of which the ‘Performance Agreements’ only represent a top level, together with the university rankings. Below this top level there is a whole network of other quantified control systems, working from the level of the individual faculty member over the institutional and national levels to the international level. I am referring to the citation index, workload models, transparent costing data, research assessments, teaching quality assessments and university league tables. Ideally, all these systems are somehow coordinated by so-called ‘Human Resource Management’ which is an integral part of New Public Management. 22 In fact, they all put increasing pressure on all faculty members, especially on the fast growing majority without tenure or tenure track, while stimulating a bewildering variety of perverse and counterproductive effects, ranging from strategic citing over (self-)plagiarism to outright fraud. 23

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Characteristic of all these external systems of control is that they basically replace the idea of professional quality by measurable quantity. They exchange professionalism for metrification. This metrification is predominantly based on so-called output indicators: output of research, output of teaching, etc. New Public Management claims that metrification confers ‘transparency’ and ‘objectivity’ to ‘quality control’ in close and self-serving professions. Therefore (supposedly democratic) ‘transparency’, (supposedly democratic) ‘accountability’, and (economic) ‘efficiency’ are the buzzwords in NPM–discourse. All the ‘free market’ rhetoric notwithstanding, Richard Münch and Len Ole Schäfer have argued that ‘output-financing’ of the universities simultaneously generates oligopoly-formation and “a kind of academic cannibalism” in which the financially successful departments, universities, etc. are driving the financially less successful ones out of competition. This tendency is undermining the diversity and capacity for innovation of the university system as such. 24

In the last instance NPM has moved the power of the professions to determine their own criteria of evaluation to a very small number of mainly Anglo-Saxon corporations that produce the data for university rankings. For the humanities this is very bad news because the humanities hardly matter for these corporations. The ‘free market’ rhetoric produces the data for university rankings. Below this top level there is a whole network of other quantified control systems, working from the level of the individual faculty member over the institutional and national levels to the international level. I am referring to the citation index, workload models, transparent costing data, research assessments, teaching quality assessments and university league tables. Ideally, all these systems are somehow coordinated by so-called ‘Human Resource Management’ which is an integral part of New Public Management. 22 In fact, they all put increasing pressure on all faculty members, especially on the fast growing majority without tenure or tenure track, while stimulating a bewildering variety of perverse and counterproductive effects, ranging from strategic citing over (self-)plagiarism to outright fraud. 23

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Oxford Magazine

Hilary Week, Trinity Term, 2015

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roduces the THE ranking, etc. This also holds for the Dutch NOWT-report that is based on the data of ‘Web of Science’. In the report’s overview of ‘impact factors’ the humanities are all of a sudden excluded on the basis of the argument that... citation scores in this domain are poor indicators of ‘quality’. 36

Because all university rankings are based on a mix of ‘output indicators’, the rankings produce widely diverging results for most universities. 37 For example, two years ago the global ranking of the Dutch university of Utrecht varied somewhere between place no. 50 and place no. 100 in the various rankings. Nevertheless, climbing in these rankings has become the primary policy goal of university management because climbing in ranking is perceived as the only ‘proof’ of the ‘success’ of management policies and of this of the ‘improvement’ of the university’s NPM-‘quality’. The fundamental fact that universities almost invariably occupy quite different positions in different rankings – with the remarkable consequence that the ‘climbing’ and the ‘falling’ of a university may occur simultaneously – is simply ignored. This variety in ranking results may even be seen as a managerial advantage because it always allows management to pick its favourite ranking for its ‘public relations’, as Fleck also observes.

However this may be, the best thing university management can do is to establish its own ranking, as Leiden University understood some years ago. In that case you can fix your own mix of output indicators and you can basically fix your own ranking. 38 We could call this ‘rank fixing’, a term inspired by the recent discovery of ‘match fixing’ in sports. This has been studied by sociologists 39 and is an instance of what “Campbell’s Law” states in social psychology.

Given its fundamental policy relevance in NPM ranking is far from an ‘innocent’ practice. Increasingly university management is channeling research funding exclusively into those branches of ‘their firm’ that make ‘top’ contributions to the university’s position in the rankings and are withholding funding from those branches that do not. This practice has already led to the shutting down of quite a few departments in the humanities and social sciences over the last 20 years – and most certainly there is more ‘concentration’ to come because neoliberal governments are simultaneously deciding which branches of the university are important for ‘the economy’ and therefore worthy of public funding in the future. In the UK and in the US the so-called ‘STEM’ sciences have been labelled as such – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. In the Dutch case the representatives of nine economic ‘topsectors’ have been installed by the government to determine which branches of the university are important for ‘the economy’ and therefore worthy of public funding in the future. In this ‘knowledge-knowhow-cash register’ – and vice versa – academics are actually losing their jobs as a direct consequence of the policy of ‘valorisation’ and of ranking. 39 Moreover would-be future academics in an increasing number of ‘uneconomic’ branches are confronted with blocked or non-existing career paths as a consequence of ranking policies. Small wonder therefore that not all faculty members are enthusiastic about ranking and assessments.

This lack of enthusiasm among the faculty is not unknown to university management given the fact that quite a few authors have published advice on how to deal with this ‘toxic’ problem. 40 Tara Newman for instance advises university managers to actively recruit “missionaries” and “cheerleaders” among the faculty who can help management to solve the problem that “overwhelmingly, administrators are being faced with faculty resistance to assessment efforts”:

“The overwhelming viewpoint of faculty is that accreditation and therefore assessment is other-imposed and not meaningful to their work as instructors”.

Newman explains to management that this lack of enthusiasm of the faculty is based on their lack of understanding:

“When there is a lack of understanding of assessment, faculty members tend to feel imposed upon. Questions of academic freedom arise. When the understanding is clear, however, an intrinsic motivation begins to develop and higher levels of importance are placed upon the efforts”.

Now the ‘trick’ is to convince the faculty that continuous assessment is just part of their profession and to develop “a culture of evidence within an institution”... “If administrators want faculty buy in, they have to invite faculty to be engaged in the process—not merely go through the motions to satisfy external requirement”—especially because in an “overall low-trust environment” faculty will just be “playing the game”. 41 In the end everything depends on making the faculty understand that assessment is part of teaching and management can do this by promoting professional development” and creating “Faculty Learning Communities (FLC)”.

Next to the creation of FLCs in order to ‘re-educate’ the faculty, the only problem university management has left is to get the own ranking system—if they develop one—accepted by other universities that have gone down the same road. For good New Public managers that is no problem because they simply presuppose that if the Gods are not cooperative, you just can make them cooperate: they all share a principled preference for the world as it is described in their policy statistics. If you don’t like or distrust the facts as a manager, you better fix them beforehand.
the university front', 'Teachers 'teaching efficiency' is 90% etc. Therefore striving after maximum 'teaching effi-
sesionalism. Bureaucratization and Deprofessionalization in the Academy', in: 
and New Public Management', in: 
University and the Fate of the Humanities 
Re-create Social Worlds,‘

1 See for academics as professionals: Keith Roberts and Karen Donahue, 'Professing Profes-
1. [accessed 28/ March 2014].


2 See recent literature on the effects of rankings: Willem Halffman and Hans Radder, ‘The H-Index and the Sjanghai Ranking’, 60 (May 2012), no. 2, pp. 355-356. Burrows is citing: Grahame Lock and Henk Meijer, ‘The Sjanghai ranking reversed their hierarchy and put Leiden on place nr. 58 in 2013 and Utrecht on place nr. 53 in 2013. For many universities the range of variation among the various rankings is even more impressive.


4 See Willem Halffman and Hans Radder, ‘The H-Index and the Sjanghai Ranking’, 60 (May 2012), no. 2, pp. 355-356. Burrows is citing: Grahame Lock and Herminio Martins. ‘Quantified Control and the Mass Production of “Psychotic Citi-
ties”’.

See for academics as professionals: Keith Roberts and Karen Donahue, ‘Professing Professionalism. Bureaucratization and Deprofessionalization in the Academy’, Sociological Focus, 33 (October 2000), pp. 36-53; Frank Donogue, The Last Professors. The Corporate Univers-
ity and the Fate of the Humanities, New York 2008.

For the historical relationship between education and democracy as ideals in the US see: 
For the effects of the neoliberal time management see: Paula Baron, ‘Working the Clock: The 


6 When all students get their (ECTS) creditpoints on ‘time’ the ‘teaching efficiency’ of the 
teachers is 100%. When 50% of the students are ‘delayed’ in obtaining their creditpoints the 
teachers ‘teaching efficiency’ is 90% etc. Therefore striving after maximum ‘teaching effi-
cency’ always manifests itself in striving after a minimal ‘drop out’ rate. Also ‘selection of 
student performances by the teacher on qualitative grounds always appears as a ‘drop out’ and a 


8 See for the effects of the neoliberal time management see: Paula Baron, ‘Working the Clock: The 


Fleck, op.cit., pp. 344-45.

Nederlands Observatorium van Wetenschap en Technologie (NOWNT), Wetenschaps-

10 See recent literature on the effects of rankings: Willem Halffman and Hans Radder, ‘The H-Index and the Sjanghai Ranking’, 60 (May 2012), no. 2, pp. 355-356. Burrows is citing: Grahame Lock and Herminio Martins. ‘Quantified Control and the Mass Production of “Psychotic Citi-
ties”’.


12 Gris Shore, ‘Audit Culture and Burellarian Governance. Universities and the Culture of Ac-

13 Wendy Espeland and Michael Sauder. ‘Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Re-
create Social Worlds’, American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 113 (2007), pp. 1-40. They point out that rankings usually generate strategic proactive action in the ‘border zones’ of 
ranks, because management tends to find it important that their institutions or keep or 
eg. a position in the national or global top-10, top-20, top-50 etc.

Fleck, op.cit., p. 355.

See Willy Fliess, ‘If you’re so smart why aren’t you rich?’ in: ‘The Social Construction of Expertise in Science’, The Sociology for allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie, Philosophy of Science, Medicine, and 

Science, Technology, and Human Values.
