The impact of performance management systems on the governance of universities: the case of an English university (0232)

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The aim of this paper is to understand to what extent the introduction of performance management systems has actually affected the roles, influences and accountabilities of the key actors in the governance of universities, these being students, academics, non-academic staff or lay members. To illustrate what is happening, this study presents data from a high performing English university, and findings are clear. In spite of a substantial increase in the measurement of performance in most areas, there seems to be a lack of action, especially regarding individual performance. In relation to the key actors in the governance of the university, they are now held more accountable and their roles have changed. Students became more involved in decision-making; academics feel that they have lost some of their autonomy; and the influence of non-academic staff became gradually more important, as the university grew and decisions needed to be made faster.

New government orientations and economic, technological and social changes have modified the nature of public services, leading to an increased interest in the transference of management practices from the private sector into the public sector (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000, Doherty and Horne 2001). In many of these services, a new management, more concerned with the organisation and coordination of services towards an increased efficiency in service delivery, has been implemented (Bleiklie et al. 2000, Mwita 2000, Pollitt 2003, Kirkpatrick et al. 2005).

Similarly to what has happened in many public organisations, the last decade has seen unprecedented pressures to reform universities. The most relevant ones have been: a shift from an elite to a mass higher education system; cuts in state funding, difficultly financing the institutions exclusively with public funds; the emergence of new approaches, such as New Public Management; and greater competition between universities (Hood 1991, Shattock 1999, Amaral and Magalhães 2002, Chevaillier 2002, Salter and Tapper 2002).

Increasing demands to become more efficient, effective and accountable, have led to an increased interest in introducing control mechanisms aimed at assessing organisational performance. As a
result, performance management systems (PMS) have been implemented in some universities and many of these institutions have started to rethink their forms of organisation, governance and management, often moving from traditional models of participative management towards more corporate models of management (Vilalta 2001). In several countries, including the UK, a battery of performance indicators were developed to monitor the quantitative aspects of performance (Cave et al. 1988). It was the beginning of what Neave (1988) called the ‘Evaluative State’ regarding higher education.

Even though many universities claim that they have implemented PMS and that they are now more accountable to their stakeholders, it is still not clear what the real effect of these new managerial arrangements on the governance structures of these institutions has been, particularly concerning the roles of key actors. Therefore, the central focus of this paper was to understand the extent to which the roles, influences and accountabilities of the main actors in the governance structures of universities (academics, students, non-academic staff or lay members) have been affected by PMS. The following research questions were considered: What activities undergo performance measurement inside universities? Who measures? How is performance information used and by whom? How have the roles, influences and accountabilities of key actors changed?

To illustrate what is happening, it was decided to study the case of an English university in-depth. The UK higher education system was chosen because it has gone, together with other British public services, through major reforms since the 1980s, putting progressively in place mechanisms of financial control and other instruments, in order to fulfil demands for increased accountability (Scott 2004). This particular university was selected because it is internationally recognized by its good performance.

Data was assembled by using mixed methods, which comprised documentary analysis and thirty-seven interviews, conducted to academics, non-academic staff, students and external representatives. Data analysis has shown that there has been a substantial increase in the measurement of performance in the university over the years. Most areas are now assessed, albeit many interviewees agree that better measures could be in place in some of them. The two areas that lack measurement are employers and third mission, even though most interviewees considered them important areas to consider in the future.

This increased level of measurement is mainly due to a greater competition between universities, and demands to become more efficient, effective and accountable, translated from the policies implemented by the British government since the 1980s. Many of the interviewees mentioned the lack of action regarding the data. This issue was particularly raised regarding individual performance, both of academic and non-academic staff. These findings are consistent with some literature on the public sector (see Hood 2006; Radnor and McGuire 2004), which suggests that the focus for many public service organisations is on measurement, leading to an excessive amount of data collected with little action. This gives rise to unintended consequences, which include measure fixation, misrepresentation and gaming (Smith 1995).

In terms of governance, it was apparent that the introduction of PMS led to some changes in the governance of the university, following the general trend towards centralisation of authority in the
institution-level governing structures. Changes occurred, not so much in terms of the existing governance structures, but more in terms of the roles and influences played by each one of the Estates that constitute them.

There was the feeling that there has been a decline in the ‘academic-voice’ in institutional decision-making and a decline in the ‘academic freedom’. Nevertheless, it was noted that academics still have an active voice, especially in strategic decision-making. Nevertheless, their role has changed considerably. They are now held more accountable for their actions, meaning they are more assessed.

The pressures to become more efficient, effective and accountable, which came both from the state and the market, have also changed the role and influence of non-academic staff, even though administrators have always had a strong role at this university. As the university grew and decisions needed to be made faster, the influence of non-academic staff became increasingly important.

Also the roles and influences of students and lay members have changed. Even though students have the least weight in decision-making, they are increasingly heard in the governing bodies, as they became ‘customers’ of the higher education system. In what lay members are concerned, they have always played an important role in the university, being the majority in the ultimate decision-making body of the university – Council. Nevertheless, there is the general feeling that they could be more active in the university.

Understanding the effects, some of which unintended, that the introduction of PMS have had on the governance of universities and mainly on the roles, influences and accountabilities of both the internal and external accountability mechanisms of universities, will arguably help in correcting and overcoming some of the problems that emerge when PMS are built and implemented.

References


