Comment

Accountability and surveillance: new mechanisms of control in higher education

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Abstract
In the past decade, higher education institutions in South Africa have witnessed a firm and decisive move towards corporatisation. It may well be argued that this is an inevitable trend, driven largely by globalisation and the need to remain or become competitive in a highly market-oriented local and international higher education sector. This need to attain a competitive edge demands that the status quo cannot remain. Higher education institutions have to respond to indicators of quality contained in the international rankings machinery. In an era of fiscal austerity, this necessitates a greater extraction of output from existing higher education production factors. Labour in particular requires a more sophisticated disciplinary regime: one that defines the work of academics in explicit quantifiable terms, and sets and measures performance standards for the different facets of an academic’s work. In this commentary, I present a Foucauldian analysis of the effect of accountability and performance regimes on academics at a South African university. I argue that particular constructions of performance expectations produce particular effects. This paper draws attention to the subjugating effect of stringent control technologies on the lived experience of the higher education pedagogue with a view to exploring possibilities and spaces of resistance.

Introduction
In this paper I draw on the inspiration of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1979) to analyse the effect of accountability and performance regimes that have become a feature at the higher education institution where I currently work (University of KwaZulu-Natal) as academic cluster leader (line manager and academic head for social sciences education) and former head of school. In writing this piece I am also guided by Foucault’s understanding of truth telling, or parrhesia, as outlined in *Fearless Speech*
Suriamurthee Maistry (2001), where he suggests that moral truth telling is characterised by frankness, truth, danger, critique and duty (Foucault 2001). I am acutely sensitive of my complicity in the subjugation process as I perform my role as line manager; I am also aware that blindly applying Foucault’s concepts as universals in seeking to understand present-day social phenomena would be inadvisable. Rather, I will attempt to use the concepts thus appropriated as heuristics: tools to think with and make meaning. Veroz aptly reminds us that Foucault’s concepts should be used as ‘a posteriori “principles of intelligibility” rather than as a priori universals, even when they are historicized to fit current practices’ (Veroz 2013:127). Bauman and Lyon argue, for example, that while Foucault used the panopticon (solid modernity) as the arch-metaphor to describe modern power, we are in fact in a post-panoptical stage (liquid modernity), where power vendors have the ability to recede into absolute inaccessibility with remarkable ease yet retain their effectiveness as if they were physically present (see Bauman and Lyon 2013).

The past three decades have seen a dramatic change in the way the world conceives the purpose of education. There has been a distinct shift from understanding the ends of education as a social good to instrumentalist conceptions of education for economic profit (Nussbaum 2010, Sen 2009). Post-apartheid South Africa is also culpable in having opened itself to domination by market-driven neoliberal economic policies (Harvey 2007), the manifestations and applications of which are increasingly brazen. The section of South African intelligentsia that is represented in higher education appears to have acquiesced in the notion that the neoliberal premise is the premise. Higher education leadership in particular appears to be experiencing a jouissance (Zizek 2008) – a high-level state of enjoyment and pleasure – in embracing and celebrating neoliberal principles of performativity, accountability, competition and individualism. Competition is accepted unconditionally as a desirable, acceptable value and is seldom questioned in its application. My paper examines how the effects of this regime play themselves out.

The normalisation of the university academic
Each university academic at UKZN is expected to achieve specified norms in four performance areas — Teaching, Research, Community Service, and University Service — weighted respectively in the ratio 45:40:10:5 — a formula that is closely adhered to in the School of Education for example. Academics
are expected to use this as a basis for distributing their hours of labour. The established norm then gets reified in various spaces, developing increasing degrees of concreteness. In the process, various strata of enforcers internalise this norm as absolute and incontestable. Colleagues who have an inclination for research rather than teaching as the substantive part of their work (or vice versa) are constrained and coerced into rearranging their working life to comply with the norm, amounting to a deliberate moulding in terms of institutional expectations rather than of ability or personal inclination. Each performance area is further disaggregated into key performance objectives to which quantifiable sets of measurement criteria are attached, and a four-point rating scale applied to each performance objective. The Research key performance area, for example, has sub-objectives such as ‘research productivity’, ‘research profile enhancement’, and so forth. ‘Senate-approved’ research productivity expectations specify minimum research productivity units for all levels of academic staff. Similarly, the Teaching key performance area is disaggregated into sub-components with attached measurable criteria which take their cue from the University Promotions Criteria, a document that spells out tangible ‘quantifiables’ that count as evidence of performance in teaching. At face value this might seem no more than standard practice, but establishing norms for university academics has an overt disciplining effect in that it erects a set of predetermined expectations by which academics are judged; explicitly specified key performance areas, with associated performance objectives and measurement scales, set in place rigid criteria by which academics are calibrated and standardised. While it may be argued that setting norms for university academics is not unusual or unrealistic (and provides a mechanism to bring delinquent academics in line), there is insufficient understanding of the way such mechanisms play themselves out in practice. Any norm thus premised on flawed assumptions calls for serious reappraisal.

The norm in question here assumes, firstly, that there is equal ability to achieve specified expectations, and secondly, that the nature of the work of university academics is homogenous across the array of subject fields. To give a prime example, the work of scientists in the social sciences and of those in the hard sciences is normalised in each case as if both categories of scientists inhabit the same space. Senior management in the institution is openly, dogmatically and unapologetically intolerant of any suggestion of difference. But ability to secure funding, attract high-calibre students and establish national and international research projects differs hugely across
academic disciplines; it is common knowledge that funding for research that translates into direct economic utility value for industry (the pharmaceutical industry, for example) is far easier to secure than funding for research in the ‘soft’ sciences (relating, say, to issues of social justice such as race, gender or child abuse). So the blanket assumption of equal capability is highly problematic.

The perpetual examination of the university academic
The examination to which the individual academic at UKZN is subjected functions in accordance with four distinct but mutually sustaining mechanisms: an online Performance Management System, the Integrated Talent Management System, the Teaching Workload Instrument, and the Promotions Policy Instrument. These are officially sanctioned institutional mechanisms designed to monitor and regulate the performance of workers. Sophisticated and complex apparatus of this nature is fairly new in the South African higher education context. For the purpose of this paper my focus is on the operation of the performance management mechanism as it applies to the academics who work at a cluster level in the university structure. These academics are the proverbial ‘point of delivery’ or ‘at the chalk face’ subjects: subjects at the operational level. They range from tutors to senior professors, each reporting to line managers designated by the title of academic cluster leader.

The Performance Management System requires that at the commencement of an assessment period each academic must capture and declare (electronically) the full extent of his or her performance expectations for the next twelve months in each key performance area as stipulated by university guidelines. A principal tenet of performance management is that each human unit contracted as labour must demonstrate quantifiable utility value commensurate with expectations of the associated post. Maximisation of individual utility value becomes paramount and is most efficiently achieved through careful diagnosis at an individual level. Each individual’s recorded performance management transcript has the status of a contract between the individual and the institution, and its inception marks the commencement of systematic profiling for that individual. Foucault notes that a permanent record coerces individuals by making them clearly visible. In the case of UKZN, the Human Resources department has full access to each individual’s contract and the extent to which he or she has historically achieved. With the viewer remaining virtual (and invisible), the viewed subject is kept under
constant surveillance in an unrelenting perennial round of mid-term (six-monthly) reviews intended to monitor ostensible progress and generate a ‘cycle of knowledge’ about the individual. In the ‘micro-economy of perpetual penalty’ (Foucault 1979) there is no escape, no respite from constant observation, scrutiny and inspection.

Foucault would argue that such coercion, with associated compliance for fear of censure and blocked promotion (or even dismissal), seeks to ‘make people docile and knowable’ (Foucault 1979:172). With personal behaviour and academic conduct of university academics thus monitored and regulated, performance management begins to work as a ‘disciplinary apparatus’ and becomes what Foucault refers to as a ‘microscope of conduct’, rendering conspicuous the performance of the individual (Foucault 1979:179). In the university performance management regime, microscopic conspicuousness signifies fine-grained dissection of the rich work of an academic into atomistic statements of quantifiable and measureable performance objectives. This invidious watching of individuals is meant to make them docile and at the same time more productive.

Individual humiliation

The performance management apparatus works as a specific, intentional dislocation of the individual from the collective. Each individual in the institution reports to a line manager. All must comply with the ‘norms’ of the post; for academics, the checking of compliance with norms is done by academic cluster leaders. Cornered into a position of vulnerability, even the most outspoken academics are brought into line. The discourse of subordination in the performance management architecture is explicitly articulated in relation to its corporate undertone. Academics are referred to as ‘employees’ (not ‘faculty’ or even ‘lecturer’) and the responsible person to whom they report is called the ‘manager’. The ‘employees’ capture their performance contracts online, which must then be approved by the line manager. Before approval, the system requires the employee to finalise the contract (referred to as a ‘performance agreement’). Colleagues click in a tick box that they have ‘discussed’ the details of the contract with their line manager, although ‘agreement’ and ‘discussed’ become part of a decidedly questionable terminology in their implication that mutual understanding has indeed been arrived at by both parties or that both are truly satisfied and in accord on the matters at issue. Anyone engaging in the performance management process with reluctance, for whatever reason, becomes complicit
in their own subjugation through the fiction that the contract is consensual. In reality, as already indicated, there is no authentic discussion in the true dialectic sense of the word. In reality, line managers simply follow a set process of verifying compliance with the norms of the given post. There is no room for contesting the parameters of the norm. ‘Performance Agreements’ are in essence simply imposed, not negotiated or discussed and agreed.

In the examination process, each academic ‘meets’ with the line manager and a score for each KPA is determined on a scale of 1 to 4 and averaged out to arrive at a final score on the same 1 to 4 scale. In essence it is a session in which the rich qualitative work that academics do through the course of the year is reduced to a number: 1 or 2 or 3 or 4. This score is ‘evidence-based’ in keeping with the principles of a performative culture, and academics are expected to maintain a portfolio of tangible evidence to support the scores that they are eventually allocated. To achieve a full score of 4, for example, the employee must maintain a portfolio of measurable evidence that meets the criteria for exemplary performance as defined by the university’s Promotions Policy document. In a Foucauldian perspective, reduction of human effort to a number in such a way plainly objectifies the subject. A simple number thus attached to one’s performance serves a constant reflection of what one is worth. The score arrives as an ostensible ‘truth’ about the individual and remains for a twelve-month period until the next evaluation takes place. Performance management thus enables the institution to track individuals and monitor their progress over time in a clear illustration of what Foucault would see as the full exercise of disciplinary power – creation of case histories of adherence to the norm or digressions therefrom. As Foucault puts it, ‘(i)t is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection’ (Foucault 1979:188).

In the performance management process, individuals are ranked, and their ranked individuality becomes organic in that it autonomously creates and sustains disciplinary practices (as will be explained below). The human subject thus becomes subject to the demand for perpetual progress towards some optimal goal, subordinated to a hierarchical network that establishes perpetual visibility. When Performance Management, the Integrated Talent Management System, the Teaching Workload policy, and the Promotion Policy work in concert, they constitute what Foucault points to as a dense surveillance network in which individuals are distributed more widely in the field of power (agents at different levels of the university hierarchy). Line
managers, functional managers (deputy vice-chancellors, academic leaders for teaching and learning, deputy deans for research and teaching and learning, etc) coalesce as a hydra in service of the enforcement agenda. In this way, disciplinary power constructs an architectural space that facilitates total supervision.

Colleges within the university are regularly updated with statistics on their compliance for each step in the performance management process, disaggregated into data for each school and further disaggregated into data per cluster. The power machinery is then set in motion. Deputy vice-chancellors of colleges, not wanting to be shown up as heading a delinquent structure, pressurise deans, who in turn put the squeeze on academic leaders, who then scramble to set up meetings with individual staff members. The performance score of managers at every level is affected by whether or not those ‘under’ them participate. As an academic cluster leader I sent more emails to colleagues in my cluster on performance management issues than on authentic academic issues. I experienced first-hand the ongoing irritation and resented imposition that the system engenders. Conscientious, diligent colleagues, with proven track records of committed service to their students and the institution, find the need to capture and account for the work they do particularly invasive and time-consuming. In the past four years of working with colleagues in my school and cluster I have met no one who believes that the performance management system is what the university needs or that it in any way enhances the work they do. If anything, all that can be seen is a technical and instrumental shift in energy now devoted to generating so-called ‘evidence’ to hike one’s score.

In the follow-up to the examination, any deviation from the norm (eg, for research production) must be set right. Culprit non-compliers need fixing. Foucault notes that disciplinary power produces certain remedial consequences, given effect at the level of the individual, with an institution seldom ascribing responsibility for ‘labour’ underperformance to its own structures or bureaucracy. The institution then puts in place interventions aimed at bringing the worker to the requisite operational level, the norm, imposing a kind of ‘disciplinary punishment’ that is meant to be ‘corrective’ (Foucault 1979). Financial and other resources are deployed to address areas of worker deficit. The Strategic Funding Initiative at UKZN is one such example. High performers in the research productivity measure are rewarded and incentivised, and a hierarchy is established of good and bad subjects through a published listing of top 30 performers and prolific researchers,
with a further list being maintained of deviant academics not registered for PhD study. Cluster leaders are expected to provide academic support through the development of performance development plans for each academic.

**Schizophrenia and the ‘super academic’**

An effective way of exerting disciplinary power is through the normalisation of competitive values. Competition between individuals, clusters, schools and colleges is encouraged, with ranking tables distributed at board meetings and publicised in other public spaces. High-performing colleagues get the necessary accolades; those who fail to meet the norm (ie, the abnormal) are publicly named and shamed. As Foucault reminds us, ‘(d)isciplinary mechanisms also work through moments of petty humiliation; they seek to get inside us and make us fearful of being different’ (Foucault 1979:118). A prevailing climate of paranoia and anxiety is created. Demanding a fixed set of performance outcomes in predetermined timeframes mimics industry expectation of unit output from investment in a plant. Factory machines, for their part, have high levels of durability but they nonetheless require regular service, and even then there is breakdown and downtime. Breakdown and downtime for university academics has begun to manifest in more frequent reports of illness, mental fatigue, physical injury, and personal crisis and trauma (such as marital breakdown or clinical depression). As academics age, their stamina and physical capacity declines (menopausal challenges present) yet multiple performances continue to be enforced at the same level of intensity.

Shore (2010) traces the emergence of the ‘schizophrenic university’ (or the ‘multiple personality disorder university’) marked by confounding imperatives and overloading of responsibilities: the university that tries to do and be too many things at the same time. The overload translates into a kind of schizophrenia in the subjects who have to execute the multiple aspirations of the institution. UKZN’s lofty vision and mission demands that its academics be exceptional teachers (master pedagogues, mentors, assessors, curriculum developers), high-grade researchers both of their own teaching practice and of their specialist discipline (attending conferences, producing papers, supervising postgraduate research, generating funding), while simultaneously performing substantive scholarly community service. All of this is assessed bi-annually, requiring constant generation of documentary evidence for ultimate allocation of a numerical score. The self-
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regulating, self-supervising, self-interrogating and even self-censuring subjects in the process depend ultimately on the authority figures who determine how (ab)normal they are. The pressure to conform is internalised, perpetual and obsessive. The capacity of the disciplinary power is manifested in its potential to saturate one’s very being through its exploitation of one’s insecurities. Academics in these circumstances become compliant, submissive and obedient, succumbing to subordination but working much harder. The agents of disciplinary power are unapologetic and play on the fear of being different or of falling beneath the norm, sometimes explicitly recommending that an academic should leave the institution or be asked to leave. In recent years, imposition through disciplinary power of norms and perpetual examination have in fact led academics to exit academic work rather than simply move to another institution where the norm may be different. In a sense, disciplinary power carries out a kind of eugenics, a cleansing or excision of the ‘abnormal’ by human resource departments. There is little tolerance for extenuating circumstances that may impede optimal performance such as illness, aging (including both male and female menopausal trauma), personal injury or family tragedy.

Towards an emancipatory enthusiasm

Foucault argues that we are never in a static state of subjugation and that subjectivity is shaped in and through power relations. In constructing our subjectivity, we are always working within a context of constraint. While we are constituted by the institution (the university in this case), we simultaneously constitute ourselves. It is important, therefore, for us ‘to be able to reflect critically on the very process of becoming a subject’ (Taylor 2011:173). Engaging in critique, in a Foucauldian sense, is in essence a response to ‘how not to be governed’ (Foucault 1997:28). Bauman reminds us that ‘it is intrinsically impossible to live with the belief that all is lost … humans constitute an endemically transgressive species’ (Bauman and Lyon 2013:143). Even so, navigating relations of power offers no guarantee that one can completely extricate oneself from their influence, making it all the more important to understand the forces that have led us to be what we are; in developing this understanding of our situation, we then have a chance of changing it. So we are not helpless in the face of such forces, although there is always an element of uncertainty about our actions and their outcomes because of the likelihood that we may create new relations of power or reinforce those that already exist. Foucault reminds us that
‘micro-powers’ are like a hydra; they have multiple points of contact. Sometimes the hydra can be destroyed without significant change to the general network, but every ‘localized episode’ has potential to significantly disrupt the network, since we can never quite tell which point of contestation is the weakest link that may cause the power structure to unravel (Foucault 1979:27). If indeed we can identify this crucial point (in the university performance regime) we are more likely to dismantle its hegemonic hold on us.

Where, then, are the weaknesses in the governance network? What are the points of potential rupture? Zizek contends that to contemplate a counter-hegemony one has necessarily to endure the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). We have to pass through a zero-point, after which the situation is no longer seen as a threat, but as the chance of a new beginning. This emerging emancipatory subjectivity, and the turn to an emancipatory enthusiasm, setting the stage for a counter-hegemonic project, will take place only when the traumatic truth is fully lived rather than merely accepted in a disengaged way (Zizek 2011).

Conclusion
In this discussion, I have argued that the architecture of the university performance management regime serves a surveillance function. It automates the functioning of power by inducing a conscious and permanent visibility that decentres, normalises and disciplines the university academic. This disciplinary mechanism creates both subjection and self-subjection of the university academic, making performativity the norm rather than intuitive response to individual capability. While the performance management regime appears to be a fait accompli in South Africa, it is only through a profound understanding of how disciplinary power works within its machinery, that we can attempt to counteract what otherwise appears deceptively normal and intuitively acceptable.

The issue of ‘accountability’ certainly needs further rigorous interrogation. There is little contention that it arises out of a performance discourse; equally, there are critical voices in the academic fraternity, locally and internationally, that vociferously argue for its place in society, but the big question still remains: is there real awareness of the agenda being served? Is this the invisible neoliberal hand fingerling the world for particular ends? While higher education leadership may contend that accountability,
performance and rankings regimes are burdens that higher education institutions have to accept, there is nonetheless a need for critical leadership. Bottery’s caution, more than two decades ago, against education leaders who ‘lower their heads to pull the cart instead of raising their heads to look at the road’ still has currency for contemporary higher education leadership in South Africa (Bottery 1992:6).

References