
Post-Modernism, Deprofessionalisation and Commodification: The Outcomes of Performance Measurement in Higher Education

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Introduction

The central argument of this paper is that current regimes of performance measurement in the UK's higher education sector are unlikely to deliver any real improvements in performance. Rather, the paper argues, the most likely outcomes will be further increases in the deprofessionalisation of academic staff and commodification of the work they carry out. The paper reaches this conclusion for three main reasons. First, the regimes of measurement reflect the triumph of a flawed post-modern philosophy which privileges and emphasises system deconstruction and economic functionality. Second, the regimes reflect a further installment in the two decade old story of New Public Management (NPM) and the transformation of the public sector through the importation of private sector practices and philosophies. Finally, the regimes will not deliver on their objectives because they are fundamentally flawed in terms of management process.

Our first point of theoretical intervention is, therefore, post-modernism and any discussion of post-modernism is hindered by a lack of a clear definition of the concept itself. This lack of a universally accepted explanation is illustrated by Gellner's (1992) point that *"it is not altogether clear what the devil it is" as "clarity is not conspicuous amongst its marked attributes"*. The outcome of this is that much of the debate on post-modernism is spent on explaining what it is not (modern) rather than what it is. This temporal nature of the concepts is also difficult to analyse because all we can be sure about is that modernity is what preceded post-modernity. If when it happened is problematic, then its durability is also questionable; for example, Lash (1990) suggested a decade and half ago that *"post-modernism is patently no longer trendy"* (Lash, 1990) only for Gellner (1992) two years later to suggest that it is *"strong and fashionable"*. Against this backdrop, all we can do is offer propositions and assumptions about modernism and post-modernism which will inevitably generate disagreement and debate but at least can serve as a vehicle for getting the narrative going. The central assumption that we are going to make is that one of the main contrasts between modernism and post-modernism is how they view and treat systems. Modernism has a specific focus on systems where the emphasis is placed on the discovery of underlying meaning and coherence whereas post-modernism, whilst still having a system focus, suggests that they are inherently unstable as they will always contain contradictions. For the modernist, systems are understood because science is the glue which binds together, for example, the technical, the aesthetic and the ethical. Thus in modernity, knowledge has a value in and of itself, knowledge for the sake of knowledge. There are two points of difference between all this and post-modernism which are crucial for the purposes of this paper. First, fragmentation and deconstruction are not sources of lament for the post-modernist because unity, coherence and meaning are not necessarily going to be present no matter how hard one looks. Second, knowledge is different in a fragmented world: Knowledge is valuable because of its functionality. The key question is not *"what do I know?"* but rather *"how can I use what I know"*. The value of knowledge is in its utility.

Having established a broad conceptual base for much of the argument which follows we now move to consider how that argument is constructed. The paper is organisation is a fairly straightforward manner. The next section provides some further context by considering the broad rationale for performance measurement as a, primarily, private sector endeavour imposed onto the public sector through the vehicle of NPM. We will then provide an example of public sector performance measurement in action by considering the assessment of the quality of teaching and research in higher education. The weaknesses of these approaches are then considered in the paper's penultimate section before a final consideration of the deprofessionalisation and commodification outcomes are discussed.

The Rationale for Public Sector Performance Measurement

Analysis without context can be meaningless and so, before discussing the specific example of performance measurement in higher education, it is important to place current regimes of management in the public sector into a wider historical context. This raises the concept of New Public Management (NPM) which is a reflection of a number of different trends. For example, Hood (1991, pp 4-5) suggests that NPM consists of a number of different doctrines which are blended and mixed according to the specific public sector circumstances under discussion. These doctrines include more emphasis on “*professional*” management, the introduction of explicit measures of performance, a focus on outputs and results and an ever greater role played by “*private sector styles*” of management practice. Furthermore, in discussing changes in the public sector over the past two and half decades, Pollitt (2003) provides illustrations of how these doctrines have manifested themselves in specific changes and draws attention to privatisation, contracting out and reforms such as the internal market in the NHS. The outcome of these doctrines and reforms has been the creation of a new set of principles which govern practices in the public sector; Ferlie and Steane (2002) suggest that all this boils down to “*managers, markets and measurement*” (p. 1461).

One of the recurring themes of NPM as both practice and theory is the importation of practices into the public sector from elsewhere. This importation takes two general forms and, whilst it is possible to consider them separately, we would also make the point that there is significant overlap between them. The first form of importation is international as public sectors in one country import practices from public sectors in another; Hood (1991, p. 3), for example, suggests that NPM as whole is a reaction to the “*development of an international agenda*” for public sector management. More specifically, Walshe (2001) draws attention to the UK’s approach of learning from the USA about healthcare management and suggests that this occurs because of the similarities internationally in the challenges facing healthcare professionals such as rising costs, technological change and growing public expectations. Similarly, Ferlie and Steane (2002) suggest a set of common characteristics in public sector management across western Europe, north America and Australasia with benchmarks and quality standards becoming commonplace. In drawing conclusions about this trend, Walshe (2001, p.31) sounds a note of caution and suggests that “*the unthinking and uncritical adoption of bright ideas from other countries ... is foolhardy at best.*”

The second form of importation is that of private sector management practices finding currency in a variety of public sectors across the world, with a focus on the UK. Hood (1991, p. 5) suggests the commonality of this approach by arguing that NPM in general represents the marriage of “*administrative reform*” with “*business type managerialism*”. More recently, McNulty and Ferlie (2002) have considered the experience of the NHS in adopting Business Process Reengineering (BPR) and are sceptical about the extent to which this form of private sector management has really transformed the way in which the NHS operates and is managed. Ferlie and Steane (2002) examine the issue more broadly and conclude that the adoption of private sector practices has, to many intents and purposes, blurred the distinction between public and private sectors where the government’s role has become much more of a facilitator of services compared to the front line provider of services. The paper will now turn to examine the rationale for such importation from non-public sector organisations.

Central to pretty much all measures of organisational performance is an understanding of the relationship between economic inputs and outputs. Performance as measured by such mechanisms as labour and capital productivity, return on investment, customer satisfaction, service quality and all the rest are simply different means to the same ends; what does the organisation get out for the investment put in? Whilst discussion of performance measurement

starts with this simple and basic notion, the problem is that the process through which assessment is made is usually complex. Williams et al. (1993), for example, in examining comparative productivity performance between Japanese and American car assemblers, argue that the problem of complexity manifests itself because performance is affected as much by market conditions, industry structures and social settlements as it is by purposive management action.

Preoccupations with performance measurement, however, are clearly built on the assumption that it will bring real and tangible benefits to organisations. Meyer (1994, p. 101) suggests that performance measurement is useful in so far as it can *"tell an organisation where it stands in its effort to achieve goals"* but also points out that it is less useful in explaining *"what it should do differently"*. This point notwithstanding, other authors suggest a legion of benefits to be gained from good performance measurement and objective setting. Drucker (1995, p. 23) discusses the benefits in terms of generating new and additional resources, clearer understandings of economic chains, wealth creation and as both the *"creatures and creators of a material environment in which opportunities lie"*. Equally prosaically, Kaplan and Norton (1992, p. 124) in discussing the balanced scorecard, suggest the benefits are in the translation of the *"company's strategy and mission statement into specific goals and measures"* which allow for, amongst other things *"products to market sooner and innovative products tailored to customer's needs"*. If there are organisational benefits at the strategic level, there are also benefits further down the organisation's food chain; *"the average quality of decisions made day in day out will be vastly higher than before. When that happens you can bet the company's performance will show it"* (Ness and Cucuzza, 1995, p. 70).

If the benefits of setting objectives and measuring performance provide the rationale for management action, the next logical step in the discussion is to consider the processes involved in that management action. As Williams et al. (1993) have pointed out, albeit in a different context, the management response will depend on the interpretation of the measures and targets; accountants will call for new financial systems, engineers for new technology, personnel managers for more training and so on. The literature suggests a wide variety of management options from, for example, strategic processes drawn out of the balanced scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1992), improved management of teams (Meyer, 1994), return on management activities (Simons and Davila, 1998), ABC activities (Ness and Cucuzza, 1995), the performance management manifesto (Eccles, 1991) and so on. For the purposes of this paper what is important is the translation of these principles into a public sector context. After all, as Drucker (1995, p. 23) argues *"what is important is not the tools. It is the concepts behind them"*.

Measuring the performance of the public sector through private sector practices and principles is hardly a new or recent idea; in many ways the origins of the modern regimes of assessment lie in the 1980s and the early work of the Audit Commission (Local Government Finance Act, 1982). With an early emphasis on the performance of local authorities in the UK, the work of the Audit Commission is important not only in terms of its managerial legacy but also as a tracking device to assess how structures have changed (Power, 1987). The Audit Commission began with a problem definition which stated that public sector (under) performance was a product of (poor) public sector management and the solution to these problems was the creation of frameworks which mimic the private sector (Audit Commission, 1988, Banham, 1987). In response to this specific problem definition, the public sector has, for example, been subjected to increased competition through compulsory competitive tendering and the imposition of quasi-competition through internal markets and best value systems. The broad managerial context for these changes was the need for public sector organisations to become more strategic in their behaviour with the need for, for example, *"corporate vision"* and *"a shared culture"* (Audit Commission, 1986, p. 15).

Lawler and Hearn (1995, p. 9) argue that this kind of public sector managerialism *"implies that there are certain core functions of management applicable across all organisational contexts and that certain management techniques can be transferred across contexts - in this case, from the private to the public sector"*. This is broadly representative of the view that the current relationship between public and private sectors is about transferring practices from one sector to the other (Adcroft and Willis, 2002). Holloway et al. (1999) suggest that one of the main examples of this transfer is in the increased importance attached to benchmarking in the public sector; two-thirds of managers in the education and health sectors are involved in benchmarking of some sort or another. On this issue, Drucker (1995) argues that benchmarking is built on the assumption that *"what one organisation does, any other organisation can do as well"*. This rationale is followed through in a process based around measuring existing performance, comparing that performance to either an industry or market leader or some desired performance in the future, analysing the causes of differences in performance before implementing management actions to bridge the gap, often through emulation.

In the NHS, for example, the rationale for benchmarking (and the associated regimes of performance measurement which are a necessary requirement for benchmarking) is focused on the *"significant variations in clinical practice between clinicians and institutions"* (Walshe and Sheldon, 1998, p. 15). Overall, this will *"encourage greater benchmarking of performance in different areas, and the publication of comparative information will allow people to compare performance and share best practice"* (NHS Executive, 1998, p. 6). Thus, whilst the intention is to make *"quality and effectiveness central to performance measurement"*, the logical argument to make is that this (laudable) aspiration can only come to fruition if the regime of performance measurement is fit for purpose. Holloway et al. (1999, p. 352) raise some important qualifications for the use of benchmarking and performance measurement as effective management tools in this respect and suggest that this effectiveness depends *"on taking a relatively holistic approach"* where all elements of interaction, especially *"softer"* (and therefore harder to measure) aspects are *"fully appreciated before changes are proposed"*. The paper now turns to consider performance measurement in higher education.

Measuring Teaching and Research in Higher Education

Higher education offers an interesting and specific challenge for public sector management; how to maintain the quality of a service that is subject to ever increasing demand and take-up at the same time as units of resource are being diminished. For example, between 1998 and 2002, the number of new enrolments into higher education institutions increased by over one-fifth and the total number of students studying in higher education increased by over 6%. Whilst these figures suggest significant drop out rates, we would wish to avoid the debates about the implications of widening access and, instead, examine two of the key measurement processes through which this is managed. Thus the case study focuses on the Subject Review process and the role of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in assessing the quality of the student experience and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the role of the Higher Education Funding Councils in assessing the quality of research. We begin with the student experience.

The subject review methodology differs in two substantial ways to much of the measurement regimes imposed elsewhere in the public sector. First, measurement is not based on Whitehall diktat but is determined by the institutions being measured; the methodology is developed around assessment of the institutions ability to meet its own aims and objectives. Second, the process of measurement is carried out through peer review; whilst some elements of the process are based on standard number crunching, other elements are less obvious and apparent and, therefore, require some kind of academic judgement. Against the backdrop of these principles, the purpose of subject review is to *"secure value from public investment"*, *"encourage improvements to the quality of education"* and *"provide ... accessible public information"* (QAA, 2000, p. 2).

The process involves breaking down higher education provision into a number of different compartments from the broad macro-level to the micro-level until a final measurement drops out. Overall, higher education in the UK is broken down into subject compartments; by the end of 2001, for example, 11 discreet subject areas had been through the review process. Each subject component is then considered on an institution by institution basis which means that provision is assessed across a number of different levels in institutions from, for example, HND through to Masters degree. Within institutions, the overall provision in an institution is compartmentalised into six aspects of provision which cover the whole of the student experience from initial application through to graduation, further study and employment. Finally the aspects are placed into a grading compartment depending on the extent to which aims and objectives have been met.

At the core of the subject review process are the six aspects of provision. Combined together, these aspects work as a sort of higher education value chain which judges the quality of transformation from student input to graduate output. Using this value chain analogy, we can define the primary activities as Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation (CDCO), Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) and Student Progression and Achievement (SPA). CDCO primarily deals with the content of the provision and the extent to which it is, for example, up to date, coherent and driven by learning outcomes. TLA is concerned with the delivery of the curriculum; what happens in the lecture theatres, seminar rooms and examination halls, again with an emphasis on coherence through a clearly articulated strategy. SPA is the only real numbers driven element of the review process and measures, amongst other things, the popularity of programmes, demographics of the student population, progression through different levels of study, graduation rates and employability. Supporting these primary activities are three further aspects: Student Support and Guidance (SSG), Learning Resources (LR) and Quality Management and Enhancement (QME). SSG considers all elements of support that students may need during their studies from academic guidance through pastoral welfare and onto careers advice. LR considers the availability within the provision of things like library resources, teaching accommodation, IT and administrative support. Finally, QME covers two key issues: how quality is assured within the provision and how quality is enhanced within the provision.

The outcome of subject review is not a score; the provision within an institution does not get a final mark. Instead the outcome of a review is a profile of grades across each aspect of provision. This may seem like another pedantic point, given that it is common practice across the sector to view the outcome of the process in this manner, but the important point should not be lost that this is an unintended outcome. Each aspect of provision achieves a grade from 4 where the aspect makes a full contribution to the achievement of aims and objectives down to a 1 where aims and objectives are not met. The graded profile is significant because of the use made of subject review grades. For example, a grade of 1 in any aspect of provision results in a further review within 12 months and three or more aspects graded at 2 requires the institution to produce an improvement plan.

In considering the second key activity carried out by the professional academic, research, we note that whilst there are a number of differences in how this is assessed compared to the student experience, we consider both to be underpinned by the same principles. In terms of contrasts, the outcome of Subject Review, for example, is used in a very different way to the outcome of the RAE. The funding implications for Subject Review are, in many ways, much more indirect and implicit than they are for the RAE where grades awarded directly "*inform the selective distribution of public funds for research*" (RAE, 2006). If the RAE is, therefore, fundamentally an economic exercise in securing research funding, then unlike the Subject Review process, higher education institutions have much more freedom of manoeuvre in terms of how they make their bids; university schools and departments can pick and choose who and what they submit for assessment into the RAE process.

Despite obvious differences in purpose and process, the fundamental principles of the RAE are pretty similar to those of Subject Review; take the complex phenomena of academic research, deconstruct it into a series of discreet areas which can be further deconstructed into more detailed elements in order that some kind of assessment methodology can be applied. This is built on a clear definition of the activity; *“Research for the purpose of the RAE is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding”* (RAE, 2006). Following on from the definition, the first step in the process is the creation of *“Panels”* responsible for 15 broad disciplinary areas covering medicine, the natural sciences, social sciences, languages and so on. These panels are then further broken down into more specific *“Units of Assessment”* which are more subject orientated. For example, Panel 1 deals with 4 related subjects: Economics and Econometrics; Accounting and Finance; Business and Management Studies and Library and Information Management (RAE, 2004).

The focus, therefore, for individual departments and schools within UK universities is on the Unit of Assessment(s) which best fit their own research activities. That research activity is then judged on a number of different criteria depending on the Panel involved and Unit of Assessment. Business and Management Studies, for example, is reasonably typical of the approach taken and the three criteria are Research Output, Research Environment and Indicators of Esteem (RAE, 2006). Of these measures, research output is the most important and accounts for 70% weighting in the overall assessment: Individuals put forward for inclusion in the RAE can choose up to 4 research outputs from the preceding six years and these outputs are usually expected to be articles in refereed academic journals (although there is some scope for other types of research output). Research Environment, which accounts for 20% weighting, considers issues such as the research strategy and infrastructure, support for research and staff development to improve research. The final element, Indicators of Esteem which carries a 10% weighting, includes a diverse range of issues such as prizes awarded for research, key note speaking at conferences and editorship of journals.

The final step in the RAE process is to come to a grade for each of the submissions made. The final grading is based on three criteria; originality, significance and rigour. Originality is considered in terms of methodological approach and evidence used, significance considers the impact of research on the discipline and rigour considers the overall intellectual coherence of the approach taken. Unlike Subject Review which results in a graded profile, the RAE provides the much clearer cut outcome of a single grade for research on a five point scale. At the top of the scale is research ranked at 4* which demonstrates *“levels of originality, significance and rigour which are comparable to the best work in the field ... whether conducted in the UK or elsewhere”*. At the bottom of the scale is *“Unclassified”* research which falls *“below the standard of nationally recognised work”* (RAE, 2006).

Weaknesses in the System

Having explained the key examples of performance measurement systems in higher education we now turn to consider the extent to which this approach is fit for purpose. The fundamental question centres on the extent to which it is likely that these types of system will deliver significant improvements in performance across the activities to which they are applied. Our conclusion is that this is unlikely as there are a number of systemic problems with this approach to performance management.

Problem 1: as services are broken down and deconstructed into ever smaller components, the less the performance of the whole service is being measured. In making a judgement as to the value of a piece of music, for example, analysis is not carried out on a note by note basis but rather on how the notes fit together; on a note by note basis all pieces of music would be the same; Mozart's C sharp is exactly the same as Andrew Lloyd Webber's. Similarly, we would argue that much

education provision should be treated in a gestalt manner where the overall quality of the provision is determined by how the individual elements fit together. For example, Subject Review in higher education actually militates against taking an overall view of the student experience; the outcome of the review is six individual grades for the aspects of provision and not, despite common practice, an overall mark out of 24.

Problem 2: measurement can be the cause of uncertainty as much as certainty about overall performance because the individual elements measured are rarely independent of one another. Gore Vidal's maxim that "it is not enough to succeed, others must fail" illustrates many of the problems in the public sector where resource constraints are still a fact of life. Improved performance in one area may well be the result of a retargeting of resources which, ceteris paribus, means worsening performance elsewhere. In some higher education institutions, for example, it is not unreasonable to suggest that measurement systems which penalise do not reflect the reasonable strategic priorities taken by universities in terms of their teaching and research activities.

Problem 3: scientific approaches to measurement assume objectivity achieved through dispassionate analysis of the available evidence but subjective interpretation of the evidence is often the case. Is a glass half full or half empty? Where the process of measurement involves professionals from the field under measurement, it is impossible to get an absolutely objective measurement. For example, in considering the quality of curriculum design and delivery in higher education subject reviewers will inevitably be influenced by their own intellectual and pedagogic preconceptions. Where much of the analysis of the student experience is based on the assessments of those directly involved as deliverer and participant, it is dubious as to whether the subjectivity of this information can always be objectively screened out. If it is difficult to imagine a world in which intellectual predispositions can be ignored in the assessment of teaching, it is practically impossible to dream of such a world as far as research is concerned.

Problem 4: the use of the results of performance measurement in league tables assumes that all those being measured start from the same point. There are usually more sources of difference between same-service providers than there are similarities. In "Animal Farm" the final rule of the farm was that all animals are equal; all the four legged characters started from the same position and had equality of access to the farm's resources and structures. One of the key messages of the allegory, however, was that whilst all animals are equal, in reality some are more equal than others. Performance is determined by a whole series of internal and external factors from the entry qualifications of undergraduate students to the socio-economic conditions faced by the local hospital. Educating undergraduates at universities with high levels of available resources offers fundamentally different challenges to educating undergraduates when resources are in limited supply just as undertaking research with a high teaching load can be every bit as challenging. These differences are rarely, if ever, reflected in league tables.

Problem 5: in any complex process of service delivery there will always be elements of that service which are beyond scientific measurement. In such cases, proxies are used whose relationship to the thing being measured can often be tenuous. Incensed with the vanity and folly of the court in the 17th century, Jonathon Swift wrote Gulliver's Travels not as a children's adventure story but as piece of political satire. In making his point, and wishing to avoid persecution, Swift chose the vehicle of Gulliver and the mythical lands of Lilliput, Brobdingnag and the others because some things just could not be said. Similarly, some things cannot be measured but the dominance of scientific approaches demands that measurements are made of the next best thing using some kind of proxy. For example, measuring the extent to which students are supported through their studies in higher education is difficult and so the proxy of access to support mechanisms is used

regardless of the efficacy of those mechanisms. Similarly, it is unreasonable to expect an RAE panel to read every piece of research submitted and so, in many cases, in which journal something is published will be taken a proxy for its originality, significance and rigour.

Problem 6: the choice of targets and performance measurements can be used to cynically influence the results of measurement. In boxing it is called building a record. Young prospects no longer achieve their shot at the title by taking on all comers and improving but rather through the careful selection of opponents; the next fight is chosen, not necessarily because the fighter represents an incrementally better opponent but because they can be beaten. The choice of what and how something is measured can often be about creating an impression of improvement rather than delivering any real improvement. For example, in higher education, the subject review process makes it difficult to differentiate between activities which are driven by objectives and objectives which are born out of activities.

The Likely Outcomes of Performance Measurement

The purpose of any performance measurement system is, necessarily, to change behaviour in order to improve the performance being measured. From the perspective of this paper, this change in behaviour is the key issue, especially the changes in behaviour which occur outside of the context of performance improvement. For example, will the changes in the behaviour of academic researchers bought about by the RAE have any benefits other than the possibility of an improved RAE score? Our suggestion would be that behavioural pain is a poor price to pay for any funding gain. Paul Krugman suggests that, as getting published is more important than what is published, the key in economics is to *“make a conceptually minor but mathematically difficult extension to some familiar framework”*. The pressure to publish fundamentally changes the objective of academic research away from generating new knowledge to stretching existing knowledge as far as it will go. Whilst the idea of being published as being more important than what is published is deliciously post-modern, there are some wider implications of all this.

Given the weaknesses in the regimes of performance measurement highlighted in the previous section, we are obviously sceptical about the extent to which actual performance can be improved through this kind of intervention and so will focus instead on what we see as the most likely outcomes. Our argument is that the increased use of performance measurement and the importation of private sector management principles and practices will have the dual effect of commodifying education and deprofessionalising higher education academics. As per our earlier discussion, we would also suggest that these outcomes will not be limited to just the exhibit presented earlier but will have wider applicability across both national and international sectors.

We would define commodification in terms of the transformation of relationships into quasi-commercial relationships with an emphasis placed on the economic activity of buying and selling and the management activity of performance measurement. This could manifest itself, for example, in the commercialisation of activities such as research in higher education institutions where there is an increasing focus placed on *“harnessing knowledge to wealth creation”* (Department for Education and Skills, 2002, p. 12). At a more micro-level, Lincoln (1998, p. 263) notes the American experience where researchers are forced to *“consider their work as a form of commodity”* but also draws attention to the commodification of society in general. This could manifest itself in the commercialisation or corporatisation of organisations previously exempt from business pressures. Again the American experience may be instructive; Altheide (1987, p. 619) argues that the process inevitably spreads to all non-profit organisations that are forced to adopt *“business processes and ideas”*.

If the process is one of commodification, then the outcome must inevitably be the resolution of “worth into exchange value” and the conversion of “the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the man of science, into paid wage labourers” (Marx and Engels, 1848, p. 56). This we would broadly categorise as deprofessionalisation. Weber (1927) distinguishes the professional through the rationalisation process involved in making decisions and this is further developed by Ritzer and Walczak (1988, p. 4) who define a professional as someone whose activities are value driven where the crucial values are “altruism, autonomy and authority”. Transformation through commodification changes the basis of decision making such that values become much less important than the rules, regulations and performance measures of the organisation. For example, Bottery and Wright (2000) argue that a mixture of market initiatives and increased central control has fundamentally changed the nature of teaching as a profession and Ritzer and Walczak argue that there has been a substantial “decline in the ability of the medical profession to distinguish itself from bureaucrats and capitalists” (p.1).

The root cause of these outcomes is the importation of inappropriate principles and practices into the public sector, we reject Drucker's earlier argument that what works in one organisation must automatically work in each and every other. There are fundamental differences between public and private sectors which will always serve to limit the efficacy of the practices transferred. Pollitt (2003, p. 24), for example, suggests that the public sector is different because of the context in which management decision making is made; unlike many private sector organisations, public service providers must be explicit in their displays of “equity, impartiality and a certain moral enlightenment” which results in a clear “ethical distinctiveness”. The line of argument presented in this article leads us to conclude that when such ethical distinctiveness is lost, commodification and deprofessionalisation occur which must necessarily have implications for all stakeholders.

Across different sectors there is some ambiguity in evidence and so any conclusions must be suggestive and tentative rather than dogmatic and certain (Adcroft and Willis, 2005). In the NHS, for example, Ferlie et al (1996) suggest that the changes and practices discussed may have served to increase the autonomy of healthcare professionals and they dismiss the idea of a uni-directional shift in power towards managers; NPM and all that it entails is not necessarily about the creation of something new but rather may be about the accommodation of new ideas and processes in an existing system. On the other hand, Walshe and Sheldon (1998, p. 18) suggest that the impact of NPM has been to “limit the extent to which clinical autonomy is seen as acceptable”. In higher education the evidence suggests a slightly clearer outcome. For example, Deem (2004, p. 116) argues that universities have become “more akin to a business than an educational institution” and questions “whether the contemporary UK university can survive the domination of management” over academic leadership (p. 125). Talib (2003) makes the point that under these conditions it is inevitable that there will be some sort of shift away from “professional activities” which may have a high social worth or intrinsic value towards those activities which are management driven. Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd (2003) suggest that whilst all this may improve the accountability of service providers there is no guarantee that it will improve the quality of services.

The purpose of this paper was to question the likely outcomes of performance measurement in higher education. Will it fundamentally improve the quality of the student experience and academic research? Will it result in commodification and deprofessionalisation? By accident or design, our position is that the answer to the latter question is more likely to be positive than the former and, in any case, the answer to both cannot be yes. The results of this will inevitably be disappointing for policy makers, students and academics and, if nothing else, it may all serve to prove JK Galbraith's point that “politics is not the art of the possible. It consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable.”

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