PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AS PANOPTICISM: EMBEDDING INTELLECTUALLY REPRESSIVE CONDITIONS IN ACADEMIA

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Abstract

This paper explores how performance management (PM) in higher education has become an oppressive panoptic tower in its pursuit of institutional accountability. Panopticism, derived from the panopticon, is used as a metaphor for academic surveillance. Using Foucault’s notion of panopticism, we argue that academics have succumbed to the ‘normalization judgment’ effected through systemic institutional surveillance practices.

In this case study, we explored how PM facilitated through target-setting performance contracts is experienced by a selection of South African university academics. There are indications that performativity is creating a reality that is constraining, alienating and individualizing, thereby detracting from the academic enterprise.

Keywords: Panopticism, Neoliberalism, Performance Management, Accountability, Academic Autonomy.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the introduction of formal performance management (PM) systems
for academics, South African higher education institutions (HEIs) have been characterized by increasingly stringent hierarchical and bureaucratic managerialist practices. These are rationalized as reasonable measures to ensure transparent accountability that is intended to maximize efficiency and counter the strategic and operational management deficiencies in HEIs. However, contrary to this justification, such measures are predicated on surveillance that resembles the panopticon in prisons, leading to ‘coercive’ compliance. Strangely, academics seem to have succumbed to the ‘normalization judgment’ effected through systemic institutional managerial practices, to the extent that they ‘willingly’ subscribe (Morrisey, 2013) to this neoliberal rationale for leading and managing HEIs. Neoliberalism is the catalyst for managerialism or New Public Management (NPM), which in HEIs is effected through PM systems. Furthermore, despite the growing discontent with and criticism of managerialism and PM (Amaral, 2009; Lorenz, 2012), HEIs are intent on reinforcing the system.

In response to the pressure to increase performance, academics are opting to engage in careerism, which Clarke and Knights (2015, p.1866) describe as the “frantic pursuit of careers”. In this way academics are redefining their purpose as custodians of knowledge production in order to gain legitimacy and status. This trajectory risks obscuring the primary role of the academic profession, i.e. teaching students to be critical and active citizens. As the managerialist approach gains more traction in HEIs, it is becoming a threat to education values that are founded on critical, social and political orientations. Claire and Sivil (2014, p.63) argue that it “…undermine[s] academic motivators, such as curiosity, success and recognition by peers rather than money”.

PM, as it currently exists, defies the logic of it being an inherently necessary and worthy management tool. Evidence points to it producing more detrimental effects than benefits (Ball, 2015). In the light of this evidence, this study addresses the following question, ‘How does PM influence academics’ and managers’ professional lives’? We deployed Foucault’s notion of panopticism as an analytical framework to problematise the practice of PM in HEIs. In Discipline and punish (1977) Foucault explicates the notion of panopticism, which is a metaphor for surveillance mechanisms used in prisons, as a technique of power.

2. Panopticism

Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon (1785), which is a surveillance mechanism used in prisons, offered Foucault a precise metaphor to reveal how modern technologies of power function. He then coined the term ‘panopticism’.

_The panopticon consists of a tower situated at the center of a large courtyard, surrounded by a series of buildings divided into levels and cells. Each cell window falls under the direct scrutiny of the tower and each inmate is visible to the surveilling alone. The cells thus become ‘small theatres in which each actor alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible’ (Foucault 1977, p.230)._
The panopticon is “an all-seeing individual or institution, which may or may not be watching a certain person or society at any given time” (Foucault 1977, p.205). As a monitoring apparatus, the panopticon enables a few supervisors to control large numbers of prisoners by foregrounding hierarchy through its imposing visibility. Foucault (1977, p.205) argues that the panopticon as a metaphor of control, “…is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction... it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use”.

Panopticism then defines power relations among people in their daily interactions. It serves as a framework for the relationship between the prisoner (employee) and the watchman (organisation). It also delineates the boundaries of each one’s responsibilities, where the prisoner is conditioned to believe that the watchman is on constant watch (Foucault, 1977). Hence the essence of their existence within the prison walls is to obey the rules. The panopticon, as a large structure is physically overbearing, yet it is its psychological dimension that eventually enables the panopticon to achieve its goal, i.e. to control prisoners’ behavior. The structure is visible but unverifiable, as the watchman is not visible to the prisoners (Shore & Roberts, 1995). Accordingly, panopticism manifests its power through its spatial dimensions and its invisible policing. In its structural visibility to the prisoners the panopticon foregrounds a visible power hierarchy that is intended to condition conformity, while threatening to penalize non-conforming behavior.

As the panopticon is enduring and intangible, but felt, it is ingrained in people’s minds, manifesting as fear (Schmelzer, 1993). Fearful that they are always under the radar, inmates of their own accord control their behaviour to conform and avoid punishment. Thus obedience and self-discipline (Soderstrom, 2011, p.17) naturally follows. The physical gaze in extending to the psyche, it attains more potency in its colonizing and repressive impact. One becomes accountable to oneself for one’s own behavior. One is then unconsciously complicit in one’s own oppression. It renders the observed powerless and creates a sense of inadequacy within individuals, a vulnerability that gives others power over you (Shore, 1993). Under these conditions conformity buys one the appearance of ‘freedom’.

In an organization, surveillance subordinate’s employees. In HEIs “the rise of academic managerialism means deans now have legitimacy and formal power to make decisions about faculty activities based on research outputs” (Alvesson & Spicer 2016, p.35). In the same manner that the panopticon achieves traction through fear, so PM in HEIs is driven by fear, i.e. fear of losing rewards, promotion opportunities and research grants (Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith & Randell-Moon, 2011; Clarke & Knights, 2015). This squashes any semblance of performance for self-actualization that is known to be self-sustaining and propelled by passion (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Given that fear is a heightened emotion that translates to a physiological response that prepares the body for fight or flight, it cannot be sustained for extended periods of time without being detrimental to both body and mind i.e. exhaustion and burnout that lead to demotivation and low productivity (Schmelzer, 1993).

Foucault (1977, p.230) warns of the individualizing effect of a panopticon, as inmates are
not in a position to canvass support for resistance, “if the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences”. However, unlike inmates in isolated prison cells, academics do have the organizational space to offer resistance. Yet, despite their discontent with PM, mentioned earlier, panopticism’s numbing and threatening effect dissuades academics from offering resistance (Flemming & Spicer, 2008). Butler (1997, p.84), in her interpretation of Foucault’s position on power, argues that power “not only unilaterally acts on a given individual as a form of domination, but also activates or forms the subject”.

Panoptic surveillance is presented (Foucault, 1977, p.293) as a “widely applicable mechanism in multitude of settings whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used”. Thus the panopticon as a metaphor for surveillance provides a pragmatic lens through which the impact of PM in HEIs can be analyzed. The prison analogy is demonstrative of systems put in place for academics to account for their performance through binding performance contracts that encompass key performance areas, key performance indicators and targets. Academics’ apprehension with the demand for accountability lies in the extent to which they perceive the system to be prescriptive and hence controlling (Seyama, 2013; Ball, 2015). Through prescribed intelligence gathering strategies institutions have knowledge of and are privy to academics’ every move, thereby holding power over academics (Soderstrom, 2011). Finally, HEI’s practice of panopticism implies that academics cannot be trusted, thereby justifying their surveillance. This all begs the question of how PM can be justified as a tool intended to manage performance?

3. Neoliberalism Encroachment in Higher Education

For the past three decades HEIs have been managed within the NPM paradigm, which sought to control finances and people in an attempt to strengthen institutional accountability to stakeholders and to offer quality service (Broad & Goddard, 2010). Academics, as HEI employees, have their services measured against institutional key performance areas and indicators and performance targets (Besley & Peters, 2006). All these are considered in terms of the economic value-add to the institution. From this perspective, academic value has shifted from intellectual capital as a good in itself to an economic commodity. Pressure is on academics to redefine their identities and roles as those of economic agents (Morrisey, 2013). Consequently, the focus of academic purpose, i.e. social advancement, is being skewed towards that of entrepreneurship. Webb, Briscoe and Mussman (2009, p.4) argue that, “this particular economic value is oppressive and dehumanizing”.

Webb et al. (2009) assert that neoliberalism, as a political-economic theory, is based on the assumption that free market systems have optimum potential to stimulate economic growth and therefore provide the resources governments need to fulfil their social roles, i.e. enhancing human capital development and therefore further economic growth. Some, however, argue that with this approach, the state abandons its responsibility to safeguard citizens’ rights, that require
it to partly or fully provide, for example, “education, welfare, security, health, etc.” (Lorenz, 2012, p.602). In this view, corporatizing public institutions at the expense of serving the public good, is a social injustice.

Buller (2014) observes that neoliberalism has resulted in the emergence of strongly diverging purposes in academia: First, social purpose, which is “to produce an informed electorate, train the leaders of tomorrow in critical thinking, engage students in serious reflection on ethical and social issues and second, economic purpose, which is to prepare their graduates for meaningful lives of service, work, and leisure”. Prior to the introduction of neoliberal thinking in HEIs, the two purposes were integral to what academics perceived as their role in education (Buller, 2014). Currently, the economic purpose dominates higher education discourse and practice. These two diverging purposes reflect the sharp contrast between what university management views as the economic benefit of PM and how academics view PM as detrimental to a university’s social purpose. Empirical evidence emanating from some South African HEIs reveals escalating tensions as management takes an increasingly autocratic and bureaucratic stance with respect to PM (Claire & Sivil, 2014). For example, increasingly stringent accountability measures are reflected where every aspect of academic life has to be formally reported through memorandums, more descriptive and inflexible performance contracts, higher targets, harsh penalties such as the loss of an annual bonus and promotion, threats of job loss, etc. (Claire & Sivil, 2014). Metz (2011) reasons that the more education institutions demand quantitative data for outputs in relation to students’, teachers’ and researchers’ performance, the more blinded they are to quality attainment and education’s basic aims.

PM is perceived to be diverging from its intended purpose of enhancing academic performance to a power tool that cuts at the heart of academic autonomy (Claire & Sivil, 2014). The numbers’ game seemingly is accorded higher priority than quality. The culture of accountability that is so narrowly defined to privilege an economic agenda at the expense of the public good unrelentingly encroaches on academics’ identity, freedom, daily roles and purpose (Lorenz, 2012). Accountability measures as reflected in PM systems imply a view of the “academic-as-problem” (Thomson & Cook, 2014, p.701). Trow (cited in Amaral, 2009) points out that the NPM critique of the competence of public institutions is indicative of a loss of trust in those institutions. To keep them on a tight leash in order to conform, accountability has become an alternative to trust.

This state of academics under scrutiny raises questions about their freedom to teach students to be critically conscious and to be prepared as empowered and active citizens. Academics’ freedom is curtailed when they cannot freely think for and express themselves. For this reason, it is necessary to examine the nature and impact of this surveillance culture on the lives of individual academics and how they respond to it.
4. Research Design

Since our research interest was to understand how an evolving PM system in a particular university, that we refer to as South University, impacts on academics, a qualitative case study method was deemed appropriate to capture the particular nature and complexity of this single case. A single case offers a deep account of the context for a particular case and interrogates participants’ experiences and perceptions “within that case to build a complex and holistic picture” (Creswell, 1998, p.15). Our aim was not to gain an insight into other cases, nor to identify typical findings or statistically generalize the results. Rather, our purpose was to maximize what could be learned about the specific case under investigation (Stake, 1995). Rather, our purpose was to maximize what could be learned about the specific case under investigation (Stake, 1995). A single case can provide in-depth learning (Bryman, 2001, p.47). Nevertheless, Stake and Trumbull’s (1982) notion of ‘naturalistic generalization’ is a useful concept as it allows for the possibility, and in a relatively homogenous environment such as in South African HEIs, the probability that readers in other HEIs will vicariously recognize their own experience here.

Our case is a South African HEI. We chose this particular university as it exemplifies a formal PM system that has been implemented over a number of years and that cascades through the university hierarchy from the vice chancellor to junior lecturers. To protect the identity of the university we do not provide any further details about it.

4.1 Data collection

We conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 lecturers, senior lecturers and professors. Participants from the education, engineering, health sciences and science faculties were purposefully selected. Their experience in academia ranged from 5-25 years (age 30-60 years). This stratified selection provided a wide spectrum of disciplines giving a sense of how academics with diverging paradigms and identities across the institutions are experiencing PM and as such enhances the trustworthiness of the study. The interviews lasted from 45-80 minutes. The interviews took the form of what Kvale (1996, p.125) refers to as “an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest”. This was particularly important given our own membership with these academic communities, and because the candidness of revelations depend very much on the trust that is built up (Fineman, 2001) between the researcher and participant, and this helped in attaining rich and (often) emotional data set. A single broad question was asked: ‘How is your experience of South University’s PM system?’ The open-ended questions permitted us to engage participants to delve deeper into their experiences, thereby producing thick narrative descriptions for genuine analysis.

In responding to voluntarily participate, our sample was self-selective. All the interviews were audio-recorded, with the participants’ consent, using hand-held digital recorders, and the researchers transcribed all.
4.2 Data analysis

We read and re-read interview transcripts to fully familiarize ourselves with data and probed through participants’ accounts for themes. To make sense of data, we coded the raw data into first order categories associated with PM, such as performance contracts; review/feedback meetings; performance appraisals and ratings. We then analyzed how power dynamics underpinned experiences and meanings participants derived through engagement with the PM process. This exposed the ‘how’ and ‘why’ PM has taken the form it has. By employing the inductive process, we determined associations between the categories, thereby revealing the themes. The presentation of these themes, together with their interpretation within our panoptic analytical framework, is related as panoptic encounters.

4.3 Ethics

We followed South University’s Faculty of Education’s Research Ethics Committee’s (2014) research ethics guidelines. As guided by the minimum standards for ethical research, the study met the requirements for protecting participants’ confidentiality and anonymity; their right to freedom of participation and withdrawal; avoiding any potential risks; representing their voices in a fair and transparent manner and ensuring that their consent to participate is fully informed.

In conceptualizing the study, we considered various challenges of ‘insider research’. Mercer’s (2007, p.2) cautionary remarks were helpful:

*Greater familiarity can make insiders more likely to take things for granted, develop myopia, and assume their own perspective is far more widespread than it actually is [...] the ‘obvious’ question might not be asked [...] the ‘sensitive’ topic might not be raised [...] assumptions might not be challenged [...] people may not share certain information with an insider for fear of being judged [and ultimately] the potential for [data] distortion is usually greater within the context of insider research.*

In line with Mercer’s caution about insider researcher limitations or challenges we engaged in epoch to distance ourselves from the participants’ experiences. This enabled our unprejudiced probing. However, we were cognizant that in our privileged position we had inside information about performance management policies and processes. Clarke and Knight (2015, p.1870) agree “it is perhaps easier to conduct in-house research because of a familiarity with the culture that facilitates the construction of meaningful questions as well as the currency of detecting any dissembling on the part of respondents”. But there is always a risk that if we are too familiar we might neglect important aspects or be biased in our interpretation and analysis (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Thus we were deliberate in continuously re-visiting and reflecting on our data and analysis thereof with the view to identifying our biased positions.
As insider researchers, it was easier to gain access to participants and as members of the academic community we were recognized as colleagues having shared experiences of the same phenomena being investigated. Therefore, a trust relationship was easily established with participants (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). They did not perceive us as having power over them with the potential to influence their careers, as we do not hold managerial positions. Consequently, there were no power plays between us (Mercer, 2007). Such rapport was fundamental to the ease of dialogue during interviews, which led to open and in-depth discussions that provided rich data for analysis. However, we were sensitive to and respectful of participants ‘taking us into their confidence’. For example, in our reporting we have kept faculties, departments and disciplines anonymous. We have also avoided recounting whole participants’ stories, which have the potential to identify those participants or their departments and faculties.

4.4 Limitations

The study could illuminate on how leadership has come to be perceived as repressive by interrogating the whole academic leadership, including deans, deputy vice chancellors and vice chancellor. The study could benefit in the future from a broader base by extending to other universities of varying composition.

5. Performance management practices as panoptic encounters

What we draw as findings from the interviews carried out for this research is how performance management practices are experienced as panoptic encounters that are repressive as they encroach the ‘how and what’ of their performance.

5.1 Accountability as a panopticon

In this section, we show how for the research participants PM as a so-called ‘legitimate’ accountability tool is experienced as a surveillance mechanism that creates an oppressive work environment for academics. As Gordon remarked “…performance management from the best of my knowledge is a process and has sent a strong message…to academics that management is keenly watching them and securitizing their performance”. For Jeremy, “it [PM] is primarily reporting … for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. To start with the PM … you fill a form … which is more detailed about almost everything that you are doing, and it is more on numbers. Because I think the main purpose of it is to quantify”. Most participants’ lived-experiences reveal a system unrelenting in its intent to use accountability to surveil academics in order to gather evidence and knowledge about them so as to control them effectively. They agree on the character of the target setting performance contract, that it demands total explicitness of performance, including the ‘how much’ of performance. Dillon (2007, p.9) captures the situation well stating, “you cannot secure anything unless you know what is it… securitization demands
that people … are transformed into epistemic objects”.

Zama reported on her experience of the performance contract process, “you set the targets…the HOD will ask you what you intend to do this year. You say … basically you are putting your neck out there … you say this, “I’m going to do this, I’m going to do one, two and three” … every year there’s an expectation to do more.” Simon refers to the contract process where HODs commit to targets, whilst the dean questions the extent to which the HOD is fully exploiting the department’s potential to further contribute to the faculty’s strategic goals:

Remember he (the dean) also needs to check … which and how far can he push the department. So, if I seem to be very safe in what I'm choosing he can decide that, 'but I do want you to go international as well to start having international partners’ . . . I think if there’s an HOD who will say they have not been pushed they’ll be lying, because that push is always there.

As experienced by Simon, if the intended performance gain is considered inadequate one is pushed to extend it and some are forced into risk-taking by having to commit to something that is above their capability. Added to that, Simon concedes that performance contract discussions with some staff who are opposed to PM are very aggressive, “making or requesting that they agree with something that they don’t really want to get into”. According to Besley and Peters (2006, p.818) “the essence of contractual models involves a specification, which is fundamentally at odds with the notion of professionalism”. Thus the PM distorts the idea conveyed by professionalism of individuals in work environments deriving their intellectual and positional authority from the liberal conception of rights, freedom and autonomy (Besley & Peters, 2006).

5.2 Colonization of academic performance

I think … it [PM] is fulfilling the mandate that it has. Especially when you consider the approaches that they [management] are using now … It’s all about getting research done, which in some cases ends up frustrating people who might not really be interested that much in research, but are pure teachers (Siya).

This quotation is reflective of participants’ perception that the setting of targets frames or narrows down performance to specific activities, which could have the unintentional effect of narrowly prescribing and colonizing the how and what of performance. Morrisey (2013, p.18) concurs to the evident “colonization of higher education with governmentalized practices of subject formation in everyday university life”. In a colonized performance, we observe a system that is taking possession of academics’ intellect and practices. In this case it is patent that prioritized and excellent performance is predicated on research activities and outputs. Nathan alludes to its restraining impact:
It’s [target setting performance] stifling … I think it’s more to do with the expectations of the management. Look I can understand why they also have targets which they set and… Because the VC [vice chancellor] also has to put his goals and objectives ahead so that he can make headway. And I think it does stifle a lot of things that we want to do at departmental level.

Underlying participants’ concession to target driven performance is the seemingly unavoidable shift of what underpins academic identity and performance. These experiences reinforce our argument that PM is a subtle coercive power tactic and in agreement with Ball (2015, p.5) that with PM’s reliance on quantitative measurement, “we are reduced by it to a category or quotient – our worth, our humanity and our complexity are abridged”.

Jeremy was inclined to conclude that PM underpinned by targets and driven by quantitative measures is failing in its role, “it’s supposed to lead to better performance and it’s supposed to be more like an interactive thing where it is a dialogue between the manager and the people being managed. As it is, it’s not a dialogue, it is one way”. Nathan similarly decried PM’s instrumentality, describing the implications of the demand for targets, “I’ve…tried to go back with the concerns that have been raised with regards to PM, that it has been … autocratic … it’s limiting academic autonomy”. Saltmarsh et al. (2011, p.297) warn that, “the instrumentalist emphasis on quantity of research output and compliance with quality measures operated as a demoralizing disincentive that curtailed, rather than improved, productivity for many”. For Sharne:

*It creates a very unhealthy hierarchy…because at the moment you look … at the hierarchy as it stands, you have HODs, you have deans, you have DVCs. The DVC is punching hard on the executive dean. The deans are punching on the HODs. And it actually creates a very suffocating environment. Because … we had a session with our dean, she was telling us she was actually presenting a mid-year progress report for the faculty. She was told, ‘yes, your faculty is doing very well. In fact, it’s the highest producing faculty in the university but you haven’t met your targets’.*

In Saltmarsh et al.’s (2011, p.302) study, “for staff … the sense of pressure and urgency is implicated in turning hierarchies based on research activity into abusive institutional cultures”. Consequently, for academics the only option to achieve excellent performance is to exceed the already high targets (Seyama, 2013). To compound the predicament, much discontent has been expressed about the absence of or nebulous criteria for excellent performance (Shore & Roberts, 1995; Seyama, 2013). Laura reflected on this dilemma:

*The rating to me is just a mystery. [Be]cause if you give yourself a four then you must motivate that, why you are giving yourself a four? Did you go over and above? How do you go over and above when you develop a learner guide? … my understanding is this is the structure. This is what it should look like. So how do you go above and beyond
that? I ask him what is over and above? I still didn’t get … what more, what other things, other extra, what extra over and above. Working until eight at night? I don’t know.

Ball (2003) maintains that where there is no clarity pertaining to performance excellence academics are reduced to being apprehensive about their scholarly competence. They become uncertain of the extent to which they ought to perform, be it not achieving or achieving or exceeding performance targets. Shore and Roberts (1995, p.8) put it aptly that, “with no fixed, shared or officially defined standards for excellence, the lecturer is impelled toward an endless and relentless quest to improve his/her performance and to achieve what is in effect the unattainable goal of total quality in all of their duties”.

5.3 Blurred regulation boundaries: Institutional regulation vs academic self-regulation

Accountability schemes are designed to coerce teachers by inducing self-regulation through surveillance coupled with threat of punishing sanctions (Webb et al. 2009, p.6).

Data supported the notion that performance under the gaze promotes self-regulation through its threat of punishment, thereby inducing individuals to abide by an institution’s normalizing regulations. Hence, there is a progressive process from surveillance (panopticism) to governmentality, leading to loss of freedom, and eventually to academic subjection. From the perspective of governmentality, “government refers to a continuum, which extends from political government right through to forms of self-regulation, namely technologies of the self”, as Foucault calls them (Foucault in Lemke, 2001, p.201). Aaron reflected on his experiences and observations, which are indicative of what Foucault considers the blurring of boundaries between institutional and self-regulation that ultimately control the academic:

There are incentives that are put in place for researchers that reach their targets. So, now the (research) units drive us. We are chasing the units at all costs. We do what we have to do to get the units in and the competition is very high. So by that I mean now we have to account for the research that we do regardless of the work we do as lecturers and administrators wrapped in one. We have to publish in reputable journals and we have to attend conferences that have ISBN numbers and so on and so on. So now that’s the cost I was talking about. So now for you to have a voice within the academic space you need to have papers.

Saltmarsh et al. (2011, p.299) quote Phil, the research director in a business/management department, “we’ve got carrots and we’ve also got a whip, and the whip can be quite substantial when it comes to the back pocket. And so, if you don’t produce work of value to the university, well in particular to the faculty, the faculty requires for it to meet its own key performance indicators ... then there is a monetary penalty involved”. Consequently, academics’ self-regulation
is facilitated by anxiety induced by threats of punishment for ‘deviant’ behavior, for instance loss of rewards, promotion and research funding opportunities. As Shore and Roberts (1995) maintain, one of the most debilitating impacts of this system is the enduring anxiety that academics have to live with.

Participants’ response to performativity is also reflective of Foucault’s view that individuals continually reconstitute themselves as directed by their conditions. Laura described the process:

You choose what you want to do, what congresses to attend, what workshops you want to attend and all the other things in your portfolios you are given. Okay, this is what I want to do… “Did you do this? Did you write this? Did you submit your proposal?” I was still busy with the proposal then, “Did you do whatever? Did you do your data collection?” Because that was also part of that.

From this perspective, performance contracts translate to legitimized surveillance at two levels, i.e. institutional regulation and self-regulation. Ironically, academics develop their performance contracts numbed into the belief that they are ‘free’ to determine their own performance objectives and targets. As can be seen from the quote above, such ‘freedom’ is deceptive. Academics have to align their performance to institutional strategic goals and thrusts and, most importantly, work to attain the set targets. The key performance areas are set together with the performance indicators. The performance framework is already established in the hierarchy. Seemingly, the institution does not coerce academics as, “ultimately it is the individual lecturer who is expected to discipline himself/herself” (Shore & Roberts, 1995, p.7). This is the self-regulation that Foucault conceives as governmentality, i.e. the governing of mentalities, that is so well characterized by Thornborrow and Brown (2009, p.370):

Participants made conscious decisions about where to channel their time and energies, and most often with individual promotions and strategies in mind. In this way, academics transform themselves into perfect neoliberal subjects, for techniques of control work best when they make individuals ‘want’ what the system needs in order to perform.

5.4 Divide and rule: Everyone for himself/herself

We identified a ‘divide and rule’ tactic as one of the distinctive means of neoliberal governance of organizations, i.e. shaping responsible persons who understand that they are responsible for themselves to the exclusion of others. Davies’s (2006) notion of ‘responsibilization’ calls on individuals to agree to take responsibility for themselves while discarding responsibility for others in order to attain the requisite performance targets. In view of that, ‘responsibilization’ reflects what promotes individualism, competition and isolation in work environments.
For Patrick, “the structure I think identifies things people should be doing on an individual basis very much rather than on a group basis”. Jeremy concurs, “it is individualistic. It does not look at the community of practice”. Simon notes that, “staff is looking after its own interests”. Aaron agrees that:

*The information sharing, that is, collegiality falls off, isn’t it? Because now people are trying to push...their research agenda and there’s nothing wrong with that. I mean as human beings we try to survive in the environments we find ourselves in...*

Participants’ views reflect the dark side of individualism, that is, its divisive character even when it was not the intended outcome. The focus on meeting or exceeding performance expectations could detract from academics perceiving their performance as being for the benefit of their departments. Participants’ experiences also confirm that when confronted by the panopticon, academics are prone to securing the self by appealing to instrumental performativity (Clarke & Knights, 2015). They, at times unknowingly, exploit PM’s promotion of individualism thereby undermining any semblance of collegiality, collaboration and solidarity (Metz, 2011). In this respect, PM practices in HEIs promote capitalistic academics that focus on individual performance and the related success and promised rewards (Clarke & Knights, 2015). Here again we see an example of Foucault’s concept of governmentality, “as the choice of options for action is, or so the neo-liberal notion of rationality would have it, the expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision, the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them” (Lemke, 2001, p.201). This is where we see subjectification of an academic as an economically rational individual, which from a neoliberal perspective is quite acceptable. As Costea, Amiridis and Crump (in Clarke & Knights, 2015, p.1868) put it, “the ethos of modern culture means that everyone has total personal responsibility to realize their own human potential and is obliged to strive unendingly and without limits to extend themselves in pursuit of the unattainable ideal”.

In the presence of individualism, competition is bound to rear its head. Nathan reflected, “I think people have their own agendas. Some people promote research...they want to hold [onto] research for themselves and not share with the colleagues”. This gives them leverage to use students’ research for co-authorship. In the same vein, Aaron observes that academics strengthen their competitive edge by:

*...coming up with mechanisms of getting the units...they organize their own conferences. So now there’s nothing wrong with this. To me it is symptomatic of something else...of a competitive environment that is encouraged by the executive and every time we talk to the executive they tell us about money [and] how important it is for the department to be financially viable.*
In the midst of the competitive atmosphere academics become distrusting of each other and they tend to be evasive and conceal their scholarly activities. For some academics these conditions portend isolation, apprehension, “destructive internal rivalries and the fragmentation of solidarity” (Shore & Roberts, 1995, p.8) as seen in Nathan’s department “[it] is causing personality clashes, causing people to feel undermined…And no doubt…staff would feel marginalized and say look why would someone get all the opportunities and others not?” Such a PM system practices a ‘divide and rule’ strategy that conveniently keeps academics in their silos thereby reducing their potential for collective mobilization and rendering resistance innocuous (Shore & Roberts, 1995). Furthermore, some participants allude to surveillance strategies to be alienating those who deviate from the requisite behavior. For fear of being labeled a non-conformist, academics silence their voices. Sharne notes:

…and they [academics] feel that…even in certain cases it is used to settle scores. So that if you are Joe Black and you are my colleague and we are not in good terms I will use the performance management to make sure that the difference that we have are resolved.

Jeremy points out that in such conditions, “you shouldn’t be critical because if you are critical, you are going to disturb the system. You disturb this vehicle that’s moving properly and you come to ask too many questions”. In view of that, insinuations of discontent with the system could render academics non-conformists resulting in them being treated with suspicion and perceived as truant non-performers, which could lead to punitive outcomes. Moreover, Harrison and Brodeth (1999, p.206) contend that “staff alienation has the potential to develop into a more serious problem and can involve reduced quantity and quality of work, absenteeism, stress-related illness such as alcoholism, and even sabotage”.

6. Conclusion

We set out to explore how PM in HEIs has steadily become an oppressive panoptic tower in its pursuit of institutional accountability, efficiency and rankings. Panoptic practices in PM, as reflected in this paper, exemplify how universities are shifting from being beacons of democracy and spaces for critical intellectual engagement to becoming regulatory and disciplinary institutions. This emerging panoptic conundrum has the tendency to invade academics’ intellectual and emotional spaces where notions of enlightened open-mindedness are discarded and where the quality of teaching and research is at risk of being compromised. With target-setting performance contracts we found evidence of a colonized performance that promotes narrowly defined academic activities directed at economic outcomes and career enhancement with little regard for the primary role of education. As academics are pitted against each through divisive practices, authentic collegiality and collaboration cultures are diluted, if not lost. Participants expressed their displeasure at the misuse and abuse of accountability as a surveillance mechanism to enforce compliance and, all the more so, that it is done so under the threat of penalty.
With all this, how do academics respond when their livelihood is dependent on towing the line? In as much as they are cognizant of the governmentality of institutional truth forms, they are willingly engaging in the demanded performance activities because these are critical to their career survival. This is deemed to be the surrendering or abandoning of their autonomy (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016), social values and ethical selves.

Observing this academics’ careerism as a response to the accountability and performativity culture, Jeremy is troubled by PM’s impact on academics’ agency that “chances are that we are going to fail to be critical, even in our own work…As a result it will manifest itself in terms of the student who is coming out”. This is the risk that should persuade the scholarly community to work together to alter the current performative trajectory and meaningfully engage in a more critical performativity, which appreciates that HEIs ought to be functional and sustainable. Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman (2009, p.545) offer:

*Five elements of a performative approach to critical performativity: an affirmative stance (getting close to the object of critique to reveal points of revision), an ethic of care (providing space for management’s view point and collaboration with them to achieve emancipatory ends), a pragmatic orientation (being realistic about what can be achieved given structural constraints), attending to potentialities (leveraging points of possibility for changing managerial practices in an incremental rather than radical revolutionary manner), and a normative orientation (ideals for good organizational practice).*

Given that with this paper, we seek to contribute to the deliberations on what is taking place within the shadowy corners of PM as a coercive and calculating mechanism, its constraining nature and subjectification of academics, maybe academics ought to consider one of Morrisey’s (2013) suggestions of resisting the system. Such resistance it is hoped could delimit the oppressive and colonization impact of panopticism. As observed in this study, participants are caught up in a conundrum of complying with the system they are critical of. Some perceive themselves to be working towards the practices of freedom by publishing to gain the related scholarly ‘power’. Such compliance, however, to Foucault’s disappointment, this approach is a veiled form of resistance since academics are in any case complying, which “serves to reinforce rather than challenge the dividing practices of managerialism” (Clark & Knights, 2015, p.1875). A number of authors have alluded to some academics’ ‘compliant resistance’, which to a large extent is implicit (not surprising due to risk to their careers), for instance, cynicism (Flemming & Spicer, 2008), re-focusing on students as the primary goal as in Clarke and Knights’ (2015, p.1877) study where “some respondents reflected on a more ethical sense of subjectivity where the commitments to publishing did not displace their ‘open’ and embodied engagement with students and a concern to facilitate their emotional, moral and intellectual development”; Playing the game (one is conscious of the controlling power, but functions at a distance thereof (Clarke & Knights, 2015) and “creating a space, and thus a confrontation with power, within which it is possible to make oneself thinkable...
in a different way” (Ball, 2015, p.13) This “indicates a pragmatic response, not any deep compliance to any particular script” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016, p.41). The mentioned modes of resistance are not pragmatic at the level of changing the system. As Alvesson and Spicer (2016) point out that such approaches are regarded as ineffective resistance. But, it is more conscious in refusing its subjectivity or it represents Foucault’s (1997) notion of the ethic of the care of the self that Postma aptly explicates:

*It is a realization of who one is not, a de-identification from what one is expected to be or coerced into being. It is at the root of the self’s resistance to forms of subjugation. This self is different from the entrepreneurial self-enforced by the neoliberal order. Positively, truth about the self is approached through a reflection on the self in the light of ethical norms. It is the truth about the own intentions, motivations, satisfactions and desires (Postma, 2015, p.39).*

Bearing in mind the ‘esteemed’ critical role of academics in their communities, such responses could corrode academics’ public intellectual credibility. Considering that some academics are playing the game’ and giving the system what it wants, Alvesson and Spicer (2016, p.31) suggest that “what is needed is a de-gaming of academics”. It appears that the ways of changing the system need a much broader value-shifting agenda as creating non-oppressive working conditions must be understood as the role of academics together with HEIs’ leadership. Maybe with more courageous, open and frank discussions beyond performance review meetings with line managers we can acknowledge this reality. We need a far more fundamental re-think, a reflective and progressive and open-minded dialogue to debunk some of the noted managerialist thinking and practices. In so doing, perhaps we can begin to answer Morrisey’s (2013) question, “in the world of education, does one have to be in a benchmarked competitive environment in order to be productive and accountable? Can we reason and insist upon other ways of being accountable and productive?”

**References**


