How evil is competitive accountability in academic life?

Competitive accountability in academic life; the struggle for social impact and public legitimacy, by Richard Watermeyer, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, 2019, 176 pp., £18.00 (eBook), eISBN: 978 1 78897 613 8, £22.50 (paperback), ISBN: 978 1 83910 448 0

Jan van Helden & Daniela Argento

To cite this article: Jan van Helden & Daniela Argento (2021) How evil is competitive accountability in academic life?, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 43:3, 330-333, DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2020.1847240

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2020.1847240

Published online: 11 Nov 2020.
BOOK REVIEWS

How evil is competitive accountability in academic life?

Competitive accountability in academic life; the struggle for social impact and public legitimacy, by Richard Watermeyer, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, 2019, 176 pp., £18.00 (eBook), eISBN: 978 1 78897 613 8, £22.50 (paperback), ISBN: 978 1 83910 448 0

This question is the theme of a recent book by Richard Watermeyer (2019) which focuses on the impact that competitive accountability has on the capacity of academics to act as public intellectuals. In eight intense chapters, Watermeyer shows how a culture of increased competitiveness, based on performance metrics, has given rise to stress and anxiety among academics, who struggle to legitimise their work within marketised and corporatized universities. Watermeyer’s answer to the above-posed question is ubiquitous: competitive accountability is more than evil; it destroys the work of university people who are aiming to meet research impact devices at the expense of their primary mission of being public intellectuals. The underlying analysis is provocative, as it fundamentally questions taken for granted ways in which research is assessed, not only in the UK but also in many other Western countries. Scholars in public policy, education policy and public management and accounting can benefit from taking notice of this book, but this does not mean that all of Watermeyer’s ideas are convincing, as will be explicated.

Competitive accountability

Watermeyer’s understanding of competitive accountability in academic life is a form of public accountability through a research governance technology and its performance-based demand for academic researchers as producers of economic and societal impact. In more pragmatic terms, this means that universities and faculties alike compete with each other through performance metrics that emphasise publications in top journals, which are promoted as high-impact outputs. According to Watermeyer, competitive accountability has become an important facet of academic praxis, but it is harmful to the moral authority of academics and the societal contribution of science. His claims rely on an analysis of the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

REF is the research assessment exercise in the UK which takes place every seven years. It generates assessments by expert panels for a large variety of research fields which drive the government’s block research grants to institutions. In his review of REF 2104 Watermeyer signals that REF prioritises applied research at the expense of basic research due to its emphasis on research impact. Watermeyer points to a lack of clear criteria for assessing research impact, which gives rise to an inherent subjectivity bias due to room for presenting compelling narratives about research quality. He also criticises academics for being too nonchalantly adaptive to this new wave of research impact assessment, as propagated by research funders, regulators and corporatized universities. And he fears that academics make themselves more invisible and less relevant through their collusion with ‘competitive accountability’ (Watermeyer, 2019, pp. 68–69, 82–83).
**Contested claims against accountability**

Why would accountability of academic performance be unjustified? Universities are predominantly resourced through taxes. This not only implies that universities have to account for the way in which government funding is spent, but it also raises a duty to show the achievements of this funding, for instance, through numbers of qualified students as a result of teaching programs and publication outputs as results of research. So, constraining to research, which is the focus of Watermeyer’s book, publication metrics matter. But, they have to be designed in a sensible way and used properly. And this is the main challenge, not only in the REF but to all of us engaged with academic research. Research assessments are too often exclusively based on publications in top journals while ignoring publications in lower rated outlets. This winner-takes-all principle marginalises research in niche domains, like public sector management and accounting, or accounting education (Van Helden & Argento, 2020). Journals rankings are part of academic life, and it is a common wisdom that some journals are better than others, in the sense that review procedures are more demanding and rejection rates higher. It becomes problematic when these rankings are privileging certain types of research, for example, quantitative over qualitative studies or economic over social theories.

**Research rigour or impact?**

Watermeyer’s understanding of research impact is biased. Relevance for practice in the sense of contributing to potential solutions of practical problems is obviously seen to bow to the interests of external stakeholders like business corporations and government organisations. However, finding effective medications for certain diseases or predicting economic effects of external distortions are exemplary demonstrations of the relevance of research work to funders, especially taxpayers. In addition, REF gives only a relatively low weight to the societal impact of research (20%), while academic quality and rigour is given a much higher weight (65%), in addition to the sustainability of research (15%). Why oppose research impact so strongly when it is a minor criterion in the REF?

**Romantic ideas about public intellectuals**

The author points to the erosion or disappearance of academics as public intellectuals (Watermeyer, 2019, pp. 11–13). On the one hand, their role in public debates is claimed to have decreased over time because the media landscape also gives voice to other experts and quasi-experts. So, academics have lost their unique position in this respect. On the other hand, academics as university workers are supposed to have become embedded in a changing institutional field which emphasises knowledge production in a market. Consequently, academics compete with each other on knowledge as a commodity. Although these arguments make sense to some extent, they indicate an overly romantic idea of the position of academics as public intellectuals. Only a small minority in the social sciences and humanities is and has been part of the intellectual elite, which is engaged in discourses about societal issues, and who publish their thoughts in books and newspapers. The large majority of them, and this probably holds the stronger for academics active in science and medicine, are just – not more and not less than – ‘normal people’: they, hopefully, are committed to their job, are paid relatively well, but are more likely being engaged in jogging, attending football matches and watching the newest Netflix series than reading the newest novels or books on philosophy, history and sociology, and making up their mind about how to unpack this knowledge for
societal relevant debates. The latter are the pre-eminent characteristic of public intellectuals. As Said (1994) argues ‘...the intellectual is an individual ... articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public ... being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them)’.

A third way out?

Although the label of a ’third way’ may refer to a contested idea from the Blair era, it is our opinion that we need a third way out of the heated discourses of proponents and opponents about research assessment systems based on publications in high-ranked journals. Whilst acknowledging that journals can be ranked according to their academic quality, we need to avoid exclusively including so-called top journals in research assessments: this mitigates the influence of the inherent bias in ranking journals, it gives voice to niche domains in research which are often relatively lowly ranked, and it diminishes attempts of scholars for purely focusing on journal rankings. Moreover, whenever journals in a certain area privilege specific types of studies, such as quantitative above qualitative studies, this stifles pluriformity in research and should lead to either the erection or upgrading of journals in less privileged areas. Our main message is that we as scholars should not be passive adopters of the research measurement systems that are imposed upon us. Instead, we need to engage ourselves in debates about these systems. So, it is not the problem of administrators and legislators, it is our problem to have appropriate research assessment systems (see also Chatterjee, Cordery, De Loo, & Letiche, 2020).

An issue for all

When we write ‘our’ we mean that this is not only a problem existing in the UK but can surely be recognised in other Western countries. Research assessments have become challenging as they need to include more than just quantitative measures, e.g. number of publications, of research productivity.

In the Netherlands, for example, all research units at the universities and research institutes are assessed every six years. Each research unit prepares a self-evaluation report focusing on the aims and strategy of the unit. An assessment committee evaluates the units based on their report and a site visit. Research productivity and quality have been the main assessment criteria for long, but some changes have been made in the course of time. Criteria have been broadened to include the impact of research for society and the viability of the research unit. In addition, the most recent assessment procedure includes aspects of recognition and rewards of researchers like Open Science, PhD policy, academic culture and talent- and diversity policy. The assessment of each research unit plays a role in the institutional quality assurance cycle (source: https://www.vsun.nl/sep).

Grossi, Lövstål, Mauro, & Sinervo, 2021 report about Sweden that government funds for research and PhD education used to be based on past allocation until the late 2000s. Currently, 20% of the funds are allocated based on two indicators, i.e., research productivity and research funds obtained from external sources. Discussions to establish a tighter performance-based research funding system, focusing on scientific quality and research impact, have led to a proposal which was not implemented. The evaluation of how Swedish universities and university colleges interact with surrounding society is also being discussed.

The above examples reveal that research assessments are in place in many developed countries (see for a comparison between the UK and New Zealand, for example; Chatterjee
et al., 2020), and that they are adapted over time, due to experiences and demands coming from society: research impact is included in addition to research productivity and quality, and more discretion to university-specific priorities seems to be emerging. Watermeyer’s book encourages academics all over the world to reflect on both the potentials and downsides of these accountability systems.

References

Jan van Helden
University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands
✉ g.j.van.helden@rug.nl

Daniela Argento
Kristianstad University, Kristianstad, Sweden

© 2020 Jan van Helden and Daniela Argento
https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2020.1847240

The case against education: why the education system is a waste of time and money, by Bryan Caplan, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2018, 416 pp., $29.95/£25.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780691174655

This book is thought-provoking as it reveals controversial but realistic issues in education systems. Education in any form is undoubtedly indispensable in human life; however, the relevance of what is learned and its practical impacts raise concerns about the value and benefits of formal education. The author introduces this book by giving an account of his personal schooling experience until the present as a professor of economics at George Mason University. Notwithstanding his educational advancement through to the academic ceiling (PhD), the author reiterates that the ‘education system is a big waste of time and money’.

Caplan admits that school teaches some useful skills – literacy and numeracy, and develops human capital. But the crux of this book rejects ‘human capital purism’, which is the idea that all education teaches useful skills required on the job, and these job skills are the rationale education pays off in the labour market.

Caplan argues that while an investment in education may be lucrative, it is wasteful due to ‘signaling’. According to Caplan, the qualities that education signals are intelligence, diligence and conformity. He adds that while not all education is signalling, one-third of students’ time in school develops signals, and at least one-third of the financial reward students enjoy is also signalling.