

ACADEMIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE OF TEACHING FOR UNIVERSITY PERFORMANCE

Jonna Käpylä¹, Jenni Poutanen², & Elisa Enlund²

¹*Faculty of Management and Business, Tampere University (Finland)*

²*Faculty of Built Environment, Tampere University (Finland)*

Abstract

This study aims to find out how the value of teaching is perceived in the valued outputs and impacts of universities, and their metrics, and how this relates to the nature of academic work. The study was conducted as a qualitative interview study (n=23) in two Finnish higher education institutions in relation to the work environment change projects. By examining the interplay between the nature of academic work and the metrics used to evaluate teaching performance, the study provides new insights into the structural and systemic reasons for the undervaluation of teaching and suggests ways to address them. This study shows that, compared to research, teaching in higher education lacks metrics to assess its performance in terms of quality and at the individual academic level. However, the nature of academic work is such that it highlights the importance of measuring individual academic performance in career advancement. Together these two aspects may create a mechanism that leads to undervaluing teaching.

Keywords: *Performance measurement, higher education, teaching, academic work, interview study.*

1. Introduction

The two main jobs of universities are research and teaching, and the prevailing conception is that teaching and research are complementary and overlapping activities (Cadez et al., 2017). Even though the research-teaching-nexus is valued as symbiotic in general beliefs, it contains tensions (Cadez et al. 2017), and it has also been convincingly argued that teaching and research are unrelated and not naturally complementary (Hattie and Marsh, 1996; Marsh and Hattie, 2002; Maisano et al., 2023). However, in the performance measurement systems of universities the research is more highly valued (Cadez et al., 2017). As the managerial performance measurement paradigm with control mechanisms drives the core actions of universities (Kenny, 2017), this lack of attention to teaching in measuring performance has led to an undervaluation of teaching and concerns that research-based performance evaluation is detrimental to quality teaching (Cadez et al., 2017).

This paper discusses the valuation of teaching at universities in the context of performance evaluation and measurement, and the role of teaching in the valued outputs/impacts of universities and their measures. The research aims to describe academic perceptions of the value of teaching for university performance and evaluates the perceived nature of academic work in relation to the experienced performance outputs/impacts, their metrics, and people, who produce these outcomes. Thus, this study aims to find out *how the value of teaching is perceived in the valued outputs and impacts of universities, and their metrics, and how this relates to the nature of academic work*. By examining the interplay between the nature of academic work and the metrics used to evaluate teaching performance, the study provides new insights into the structural and systemic reasons for the undervaluation of teaching and suggest ways to address them.

2. Academic work and performance evaluation in higher education institutions

Academic work, as defined in this paper, is carried out in universities or higher education institutions and consists of scientific research, education and social interaction with the society. The nature of academic work is seen as self-managed, intrinsically motivated with high levels of personal commitment, and with academic's identity that is closely aligned with their work (Kenny, 2017). Academic work can be categorised as knowledge work, which Kropsu-Vehkaperä and Isoherranen (2018) characterise as focusing on information handling and processing as the main task and producing knowledge as the main output. The innovative and creative element is crucial in knowledge work, which is not just the application of already

existing knowledge. De Sordi et al. (2021, p. 65) define knowledge work as “the continuous, systematic and predominant expansion of organizational knowledge through the mechanism of exploration” as opposed to mere exploitation of knowledge. There are many similarities between knowledge work and academic work: it is primarily produced through mental processes, it requires the need for balancing between concentration and interaction, and it involves a wide variety of activities with frequent shifts between them (Indergård and Hansen, 2024). This raises the question of whether there is something special or peculiar about academic work compared to knowledge work in general. Indergård and Hansen (2024) argue that the key distinctive feature of academic work is the academics’ constant alternation between supervision, teaching, concentration work and administrative tasks, i.e. even more frequent shifts between an even greater variety of activities. They also see that some academics close links to practice, for example through fieldwork and architectural practice, are different from traditional knowledge work. However, the relationship between knowledge work and academic work has not been widely addressed in the literature, nor linked to the discussion about performance measurement at higher education institutions.

The relationship between research and teaching performance is not straightforward and previous studies have found both negative and positive links between them (Cadez et al., 2017). Cadez et al. (2017) finds that research productivity (i.e., amount of research output) is not related to teaching quality, but instead research quality is positively related, concluding that high quality research improves teaching quality. On the contrary, for example, Coccoresse et al. (2024) show a trade-off between research and teaching quality concluding that teachers pursuing greater research quality may be compelled to neglect teaching. The relationship between teaching and research is thus complex and influenced by various factors. The contradictions highlight the fact that both teaching and research should be the focus of university performance measurement if measurement is to drive action. This is because the productivity or effectiveness of one does not necessarily guarantee the productivity or effectiveness of the other. Rather than being complementary, there could be at least some decoupling between them (Hattie and Marsh, 1996; Marsh and Hattie, 2002; Maisano et al., 2023).

3. Research context and method

The study was conducted as a qualitative interview study in two Finnish higher education institutions in relation to the work environment change projects, where certain facilities of the universities were renewed. In Finland, the universities are independent legal entities with autonomy to make decisions on their internal administration. However, the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM) steers universities’ performance through funding. OKM is the main funder of universities, and the most significant part, 76 %, of the total funding allocated to universities consists of funding based on performance-based indicators, of which 42 % have come (in 2021–2024) from education indicators (Bachelor’s degrees and Master’s degrees 30 %, continuous learning 5 %, number of employed graduates and quality of employment 4 %, student feedback 3 %) and 37 % from research-based indicators (PhD degrees 8 %, scientific publications 14 % and competitive research funding 12 %) (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.). Universities may decide on the internal allocation of funding independently based on their strategic choices. Besides the funding by OKM, higher education institutions receive financing from other sources, i.e. external funding, which is mainly related to research project activities.

The data consists of 23 interviews conducted in June–October 2024 representing both top and middle management, researchers, teachers and administrative staff at the universities as well as representatives of the work environment change design and the property owner. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on three themes: 1) nature of academic work, 2) productivity of academic work and its metrics, and 3) effectiveness of academic work and its metrics. Thus, we approach the measurement of university performance from the perspectives of productivity and effectiveness. We define productivity as the relationship between outputs and inputs, with the aim of maximising outputs while minimising inputs, and effectiveness as the long-term impacts or changes generated by an activity. These general definitions were also communicated to the interviewees. Interviewees were then asked how they understand academic productivity/effectiveness, what factors contribute to/hinders them, and further how they can be measured. Following these themes, interviews also included questions related to the work environment change and its objectives, implementation process and status but these were excluded from this study. However, due to the context, interviewees may have approached the issues of academic work and its productivity/effectiveness specifically from a work environment perspective. To reduce this bias, these topics of academic work and its performance were asked before moving on to the issue of work environment change. The interview data was analysed by using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis steps, which involved coding the data and then searching for, reviewing and defining themes.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Nature of academic work

The results of the interview study show that there are many similarities between academic work and knowledge work. Interviewees recognised that academic work consists of independent work and collaborative work, which was also seen as a question regarding knowledge work in general (Indergård and Hansen, 2024). In addition, the innovative and creative nature of academic work and the search for new perspectives was brought up, which is also acknowledged to be a key feature of knowledge work in general (De Sordi et al., 2021).

Along with the similarities, three distinctive characteristics of academic work emerged from the interview study: 1. the diverse nature of the work, 2. independence and autonomy (with freedom and responsibility), and 3. entrepreneurial and personal spirit. The diverse nature of work comes out both at the organisational and individual level; the job description of many individuals is very diverse, including teaching, research and administrative tasks. Tasks cover a wide range of responsibilities and can change throughout the day. As a result, academic work is often multi-locational. This was well summed up by two interviewees, who said, *“The work is very varied compared to quite a lot of professions.”* and *“It is work that takes many different forms. It's certainly not one kind of work, in my opinion.”* This finding is in line with the study by Indergård and Hansen (2024), who argue that frequent shifts between a wide variety of activities distinguish academic work from knowledge work in general. Another key feature of academic work was its independence and autonomy. Interviewees described it by saying, for instance: *“It [academic work] is quite free, based on your own interest, your own enthusiasm.”* Interviewees also emphasised the independent nature of academic work by highlighting the need for concentration and own space, but discussed also the importance of community and peer support. Although the need for collaboration and teamwork were acknowledged emerging more often, the concept of academic work as individual work and demanding concentration and peace emerged strongly. While autonomy is seen as a key characteristic in knowledge work (Drucker, 1999), the analysis suggests that it is highly emphasised in academic work.

The third distinctive characteristic, the entrepreneurial and personal spirit, was somewhat related to the autonomous nature of work, but deepens it by recognising the personal, identity-based nature of academic work and the individual responsibilities and obligations associated with it. The workroom was seen to have symbolic significance – perhaps because academics' identity is so closely aligned with their work (Kenny, 2017). Academic work was equated with entrepreneurship by saying *“It is, in a sense, a group of private entrepreneurs out there who are taking forward their own discipline.”* and *“It [academic work] is a bit entrepreneurial in modern Finland.”* Previous research has also emphasised the managerial, competitive and individualistic paradigm that has entered academia (Kenny, 2017), highlighting *“the challenges that a neoliberal agenda with its attendant focus on measurement, accountability, marketisation and consumerism has presented to academics”* (Brew et al., 2022, pp. 942). As a result of these changes, performance measurement of the individual academic's outputs has come to the fore in universities.

Overall, the results imply that academic work is work that is subject to a wide range of requirements (due to the diverse nature of the work) and these requirements seem to be particularly strongly targeted at individuals personally, because the nature of academic work is independent and autonomous. Furthermore, academic work is also described as entrepreneurial due to individual freedom but also responsibilities, which may derive from the performativity of academic work recognised in the previous literature (Kenny, 2017; Visser et al., 2024).

4.2. Role of teaching in university performance and its metrics

In describing productivity of academic work, quantitative indicators and OKM objectives were highlighted. The role of teaching was presented, alongside research, as the key outputs of university and was mainly described in terms of the number of degrees produced in the target time, as well as number of thesis guidance and credits. Teaching productivity was thus described through quantitative measures that did not take quality into account. It was also pointed out that teaching is typically jointly produced, whereas research outputs are more easily attributed to a specific individual: *“It is not the individual teacher who produces those degrees as a whole, but rather they are the result of the collective effort by a larger group.”* The interviews also highlighted the productivity requirement arising from the measurement: *“It's true that productivity is this kind of input-output ratio, but in the long run it seems that resources have not increased, but still you should produce more and more.”* At the same time, many highlighted the importance of personal enthusiasm, motivation and attitude to productivity in academic work and the individual's own ability to influence the promotion of productivity due to the autonomous and free nature of the work: *“You could be doing 15 hours of totally low quality work, but you could be doing two or three hours of really high quality work. So, what's the input is how much effort you put into it, and effort is more than just hours worked, how you approach it and how seriously you do it.”* Both these aspects can be seen as putting

productivity pressure on the individual academic worker, which can also reduce motivation and increase stress: *“Sometimes we are under conflicting pressures: we want to invest in quality and feel burdened by the fact that we have to get an inferior publication or a degree with less competence at the expense of quality.”*

However, many linked academic productivity to quality and effectiveness, but found it challenging to measure: *“Of course, productivity is easy to calculate if you look at the student-teacher ratio, for example. If the same teacher can teach 10 or 100 people, the productivity difference is easy to measure. But the effectiveness, how to get the student to learn. Just because there are a lot of listeners doesn't mean that anything happens in terms of learning. That is perhaps the problem of productivity in academia.”* Furthermore, the results show that teaching is seen to have a significant role in the effectiveness of academic work. Some interviewees focused only on the impacts of research but many brought out the crucial impact of teaching: *“Our most central impact is how we make smart young people even smarter and how they then make a difference in society. The impact of that lasts for a generation.”* In terms of measuring effectiveness, some teaching-related indicators were mentioned such as employment of graduates, but overall, the question of metrics seemed difficult, for example how to measure increased understanding, knowledge and motivation to act for society. It was also pointed out that the difficulty of measuring effectiveness and impacts may hinder their realisation, because of the significant guiding role of indicators.

In summary, the results show that the underestimation of quality and effectiveness in university performance measurement is evident and that this is particularly focused on education, which lacks direct quality indicators, compared to research, where it is possible, for example to measure the level of publication and the number of citations. Of course, it was also noted by interviewees that despite these proxy measures of research quality, these indicators do not give a complete picture of the academic, let alone societal, impact of research.

4.3. Mechanism behind structural undervaluation of teaching

The findings show a paradox in the valuation of teaching. At the same time, teaching is both valued regarding its outputs and impacts and undervalued in terms of measuring those outputs and impacts. Our results provide evidence of how this undervaluation can occur due to two aspects: first, due to the nature of academic work and second, due to the nature of output metrics related to teaching. Academic work is characterised by the diverse nature of work, independence and autonomy, and entrepreneurial and personal spirit in a performative environment that emphasises the measurement of outputs. Academic work can be seen as private entrepreneurship, done for oneself, about things that are meaningful to oneself. Accordingly, researchers and teachers list their academic outputs on their resumes. Thus, the measurement of outputs matters in academic work. We propose that this characteristic may lead to valuing individual outputs over collective or community outputs.

However, regarding the nature of output metrics related to teaching, it appears that performance measures that the interviewees relate to teaching operate at the organisational level (e.g., number of degrees) when compared with the output metrics of research (e.g., publications and their level), which can be allocated to the individual or team level. Thus, teaching output metrics cannot be directly allocated to those people (individuals or teams) that produce these outcomes. As noted in the previous section, the outputs and impacts of teaching are typically the result of the collective efforts of a larger group. We suggest that together these two aspects may create a mechanism that leads to undervaluing teaching in practice.

5. Conclusions

This study shows that, compared to research, teaching in higher education lacks metrics to assess its performance in terms of quality and at the individual academic level. However, the nature of academic work is such that it highlights the importance of measuring individual academic performance in career advancement. This creates a mechanism that leads to undervaluing teaching in practice. At least two alternative, actionable solutions to the problem can be identified. First, a valid measure of the quality and effectiveness of teaching could be developed that could also be applied at the individual level. In addition, related to the productivity metrics of teaching, the allocation of study attainments downwards from the university level to the faculty and unit level and furthermore to individual academics, who teach, could be developed. The credits allocated to the teacher could include some kind of intensity factor, which is linked to the amount of work required to teach the courses that the teacher teaches. In turn, the research metrics could be developed towards measuring community outputs. The second, more radical proposal relates to the transformation of the whole financial steering model, which is based on performance-based quantitative indicators. At present, the funding model does not encourage the development of teaching quality and effectiveness, which raises the question of whether the whole idea of performance-based financial steering should be rejected if it is not possible to measure the fundamental performance outcome of universities,

i.e., teaching effectiveness. Visser et al. (2024), in their critique of the ‘performative’ university, which relies on the quantification, the ideal of perfect control and fabrication, also suggest that the focus should be shifted from metrics to scientific content and quality, for example in hiring, promotion and funding decisions. The same conclusion can be extended to education.

Future research should seek to explore these possibilities further. This study is limited to the Finnish higher education context. However, based on the literature, the undervaluation of teaching at universities appears a general concern internationally as well (Brew et al., 2022; Bull et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2024), so the structures behind the undervaluation of teaching identified in this study may be valid also elsewhere.

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