

## Our Days Are Numbered: Metrics, Managerialism, and Academic Development

'Our days are numbered: Metrics, managerialism, and academic development': in one sense, our days are numbered, because our work time is increasingly dedicated to quantitative analysis, and then planning and providing services on the basis of that analysis. In the other sense, academic development is done for. The research undertaken for this publication will show that the first seems to be true, but the second is not. In fact, academic development is in demand, although in rather different ways than previously.

The research involved a literature search, followed by empirical data gathering, to ascertain the views of academic developers about the effects of metrics on their activities. Data were gathered in two ways. First, heads of academic development (or equivalent) were surveyed about how their L&T development activities were affected by their institution's approach to metrics. 71 responses were received. Second, an open invitation asked heads of academic development to submit a narrative account of their experiences. Seven case examples were produced.

This SEDA Paper notes the significant differences which national and institutional uses of metrics have made to so many aspects of university life: to strategy, to cultures, to funding, to student recruitment, to the motivation of staff and students, and to institutional hierarchies and rankings, locally and globally. In fact, metrics will increasingly affect the forward trajectory and survival of institutions. It is also noted that, in dealing with metrics, we are treading very tricky ground conceptually, given some of the faulty reasoning and shaky assumptions which the publication identifies as underpinning metrics. If we add to this the disjunction between the culture of metrics and accountability, and what were previously thought to be higher education values, it is inevitable that behaviours will be distorted as institutions fight to navigate these challenges, respecting, perhaps, the letter, rather than the spirit, of the law.

I argue that the local and global manifestations of the 'neoliberal project' have created, and continue to create, tectonic shifts. While acknowledging the scale and nature of the shifts, it is also important not to underestimate the extent to which universities have themselves been complicit in the use of metrics. While some have embraced the zeitgeist for self-serving reasons, many are simply following what they see as the imperative of accountability and marketisation. Caught in a pincer movement between the ostensibly inescapable logic underpinning the use of metrics on the one hand, and the compelling power of the critique on the other, academic developers can be forgiven for thinking that there is little or no room for independent thinking, for manoeuvre, or for counter measures.

This is precisely the reason why we need to understand better what can be done in this context, to enhance learning and teaching practices in line with progressive academic values. Engaging with institutional debates around metrics, and surfacing unquestioned assumptions, is integral to developing such an understanding. This kind of critical engagement recognises that every ill cannot simply be attributed to the unwanted effects of managerialism and accountability. Doing so means there is a real risk of missing and then failing to address other issues including, *inter alia*, technological developments, an emphasis on widening participation, employability, or collateral damage from the REF.

I hoped, in producing this SEDA Paper, to provide some ideas and ammunition to help developers shape their arguments and strategies *vis à vis* metrics, so they can contribute in a critically informed way to discussion of future uses of metrics. Ten key findings were:

- the sectoral systematization of metrics, which I have called Metrication
- academic developers have been contributing, and can continue to contribute to more constructive uses of metrics in future, in spite of (and sometimes, pragmatically, with

the help of) the complex managerial infrastructure of policy, agencies and systems now in place

- the various levels of metrics, at local, institutional, national and international levels interact in what I have described as a nested pyramid of dependencies
- academic development units and their funding may be increasingly dependent on the support of institutional senior managers, and subject, therefore, to shifts in institutional priorities
- it is important to ensure that quantitative data is never presented without recourse to qualitative and contextual information
- academic development work is now heavily influenced by metrics, and that metrics-related changes to HE have significantly impacted on academic development practices
- problems with institutional uses of metrics include poor use of data, work being skewed by metrics, using numbers without qualitative contextual support and tricky ethical dilemmas
- potential benefits that accrue from uses of metrics involve developers making the most of the affordances of metrics, such as an evidence base for enhancing learning and teaching
- academic development activities are being directed away from supply-led, generic staff development, and from generic work with departments or individuals, into more demand-led, targeted activities, supporting institutional priorities
- this brings increased demand for academic development services, and workload.

The wisdom of academic developers never ceases to amaze me, and the testimonies of the developers in the empirical data collected for this research provide real insights into what they are experiencing because of metrics, and how they are integrating metrics into their work in the interest of student learning.