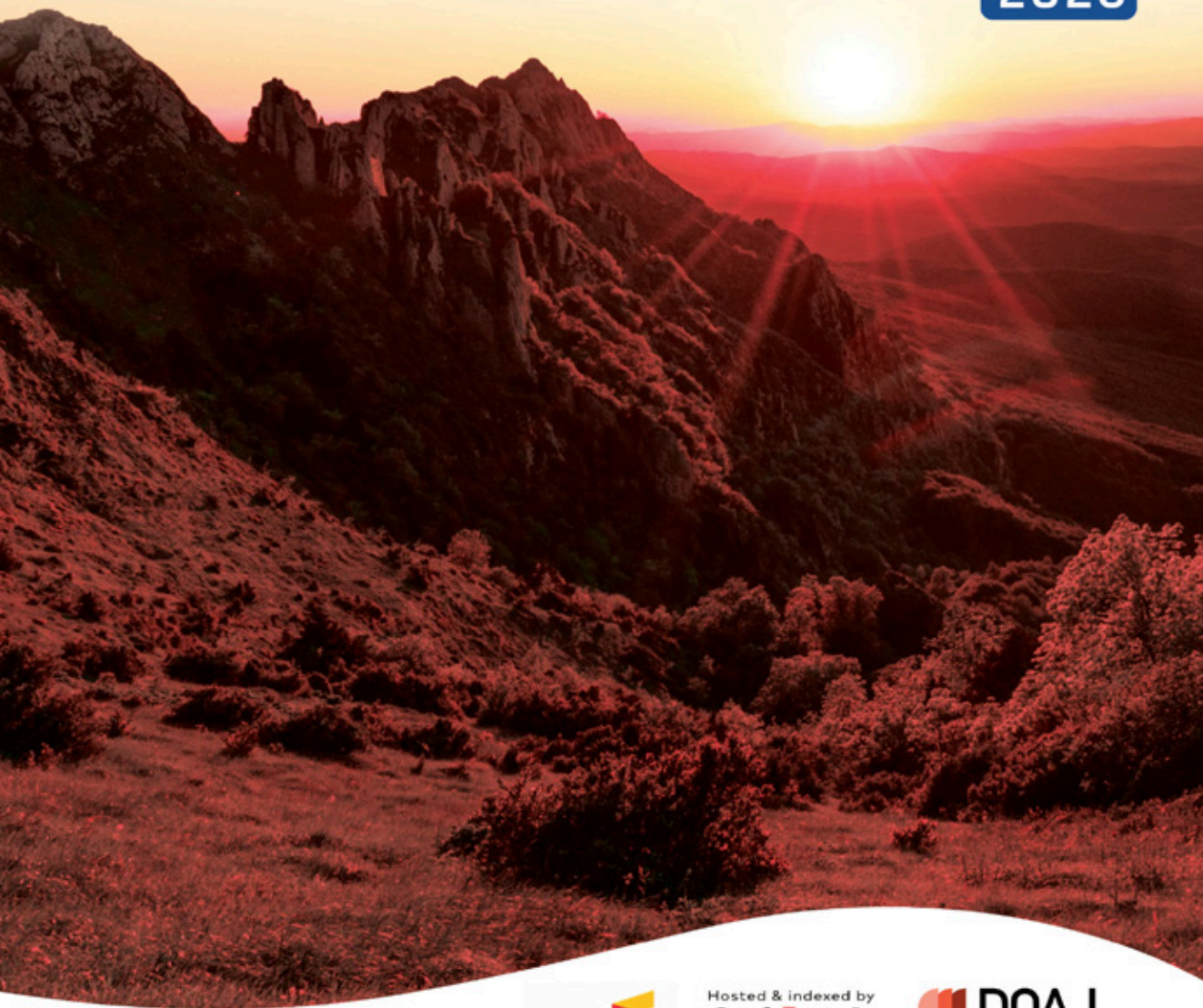


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Deconstructing Performance Management Analytics in Zimbabwean public universities: A case of a double-faced assemblage

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Abstract

Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been an upsurge in the deployment of performance management analytics to drive productivity for a sustained competitive advantage. Despite this, scholarly works on the subject, particularly in less developed and emerging economies, have remained subdued. Drawing on critical human resource management (CHRM) and post-structuralist theory, the study on which this paper is based interrogated the role of performance management analytics in a selected public university in Zimbabwe. The study followed a qualitative research approach, and triangulated archival ethnography, 'get-along' key informant interviews, and participants' lived experiences. It established that performance management analytics were a 'double-faced' assemblage: simultaneously operating as tools for organisational coordination for the collective good and as instruments of surveillance and control. The power of the analytics rested on their omniscient gaze and ability to act as both normalising and self-regulatory artifices. The effectiveness of the different types of surveillance was dependent on the integration of the different performance management analytics and stakeholder responses.

Keywords: analytics; assemblage; dispositive; panopticon; performance management; surveillance

Introduction

Since the turn of the new millennium, one of the topical issues to occupy the Human Resource Management (HRM) field has been the mobilisation and deployment of analytics to drive organisational performance. The upsurge in the usage of data-driven organisational control practices was largely triggered by growing market uncertainties and the corporates' quest for a sustained competitive advantage. Consequently, various mechanisms have been deployed to direct employee attention, behaviours, and performance to align with the organisation's goals and objectives (Cardinal, 2001, cited in Chown, 2020, p. 2). Contemporary literature is replete with a cocktail of terms denoting variants of data-driven decision making tools common in human resource management practice namely 'personnel analytics', 'people analytics', 'human capital analytics', 'HR metrics/analytics', 'workplace analytics', and 'talent analytics' (Ball, 2010; van den Heuvel and Bondarouk, 2017; Mohammed, 2019; Giermindl, Strich, Christ, Leicht-Deobald and Redzepi, 2022; Kayas, 2022).

Despite this, human resource (HR) analytics remain relatively novel, evidence-based, and data-driven approaches to workforce management (Gal et al., 2020 and McAfee et al., 2012, cited in Giermindl et al., 2022, p. 410). HR analytics are data-driven decision-making tools involving addressing both strategic and operational HR concerns by making use of data (HR, business and/or external data) and encompassing the following process: 'identification of a business problem, research design for the specific HR issue under scrutiny, data management, data analysis, data interpretation and communication' (Belizón and Kieran, 2022, p. 604). The exponential growth of HR analytics research suggests a paradigm shift toward data-driven decision-making in HR management, reinforcing the importance of existing theories of evidence-based practice for effective HR strategies (Sakib, Chowdhury, Younu et al., 2024). The study, on which this paper is based, largely borrowed from the critical human resource management (CHRM) perspective and sought to examine the practices of performance management (PM) analytics among academics in a selected Zimbabwean public (state) university.

Workplace surveillance refers to management's ability to monitor, record and track employee performance, behaviours and personal characteristics in real time (Ball, 2010). The definition follows other scholars' (Ball and Margulis, 2011; Liu, 2017; Kaya, 2022) interchangeable use of the terms surveillance and monitoring, since they both denote the collection and use of information

to facilitate the management of employees. Although the average university academic would expect their performance to be monitored, evaluated and objectives set for them and information gathered on their activities (Ball, 2010; Lyon, 2007; cited in Kaya, 2022, p. 1), they tended to be uncomfortable with overt and traditional performance monitoring techniques, namely clocking in, counting and weighing output and piece-rate payment (Ball, 2022).

University management worldwide deploys other forms of performance monitoring that are pervasive and much less easily identifiable and regulated. In this paper, 'university academics' denotes all teaching staff, mainly lecturers and professors. The popularity of workplace surveillance tools dates back to classical performance management practices informed by the classical Taylorist, Weberian bureaucratic and Fayol's administrative architecture, emphasising efficiency through close monitoring of the work process (Casey, 2002; Lægaard & Bindslev, 2006). Over the years, their increased currency followed the need to strike a healthy balance between the need to optimise productivity and empower employees in line with contemporary management best practice. In pursuit of business growth and sustainability, organisations have adopted HR/people analytics to cope with the growing uncertainty and competition triggered by globalisation and digitalised capitalism. At a global level, the need for data-driven performance management decision-making has become part of a large number of profit-making organisations for a relatively much longer time than in the public sector. However, in the African context, their practical relevance remains largely subdued.

Three categories of HR analytics, namely the descriptive, predictive and prescriptive, are identifiable in the literature (Giermindl et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023). Descriptive analytics focus on the question 'what happened?' and help organisations to understand past and present performance, to identify problem areas, needs for action, and business opportunities. Descriptive HR analytics are performed particularly through the balanced scorecard and use key performance indicators such as meeting targets and absenteeism. Predictive analytics focus on answering the question 'what will happen?' relying on explanatory patterns from past and present events to forecast future employee behaviour and performance. HR analytics predict employee behavioural patterns like attrition rates, training costs, and employee contribution (Mohammed, 2019). For example, a high attainment in research and publications output in one faculty department could predict the general engagement levels.

Prescriptive analytics go beyond either forecasting or predicting future outcomes by focusing on answering the question ‘what should be done?’ and recommending decisions and courses of action based on an analysis of past data and alternative, future scenarios (Leicht-Deobald et al., 2019, cited in Giermindl et al., 2022, p. 416). Although HR/people analytics are widely revered, an ongoing problem is that actual employee performance outcomes can be totally at odds with expectations, and this aspect remains largely unknown. Although many HR strategists predict a promising future for HR analytics, organisations are struggling to make them an organisational reality (van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017). The strong theoretical evolution of the HR analytics regime has not been matched by practical relevance. Despite evidence linking HR analytics to organisational performance, its adoption has been very low (Marler & Boudreau, 2017). This puts the efficacy of statistical data-driven performance management systems (PMS) in doubt.

Background and related theoretical literature

The recent drive towards the adoption of performance analytics in Zimbabwean public universities coevolved with the need to transform the higher education sector from the traditional Education 3.0 model anchored on teaching, research and community service to Education 5.0, beginning in 2018 (Togo & Gandidzanwa, 2021; World Bank, 2020). The Education 5.0 model effectively extended the university mandate to innovation and industrialisation, and consequently exerted more pressure on both the employer and employee. The model sought to make universities and tertiary institutions key drivers in transforming Zimbabwe into a ‘prosperous and empowered upper-middle-income society’ by 2030 through modernisation and industrialisation (World Bank, 2020). This resonated with Herbert, Rothwell, Glover and Lambert’s (2020) observation that traditional models of education lacked contemporary relevance by not addressing employers’ requirements for skills and personal behavioural dispositions.

Universities evolved from the colonial legacy of exclusively focusing on research and teaching institutions to becoming innovation-promoting knowledge hubs (Togo & Gandidzanwa, 2021) and producers of goods and services. The Education 5.0 model sought to enhance graduate employability and work-readiness, and demanded total subscription to the 2030 National Agenda through university research, consultancy, university service, innovation and industrialisation. It has also become the guiding template for both curriculum

development, teaching and learning delivery and academic staff promotion. The model potentially intensifies monitoring and surveillance of academic staff beyond the lecture room. Through innovation and industrialisation, university academics were expected to reconfigure their teaching and research foci in line with the new performance management obligations and expectations.

As part of performance monitoring and tracking architecture, most public universities in Zimbabwe have adopted a system widely known as 'Performance Contracting' (PC), an array of management instruments used in defining responsibility and expectations between parties to accomplish common results (Kumar, 1994, cited in Okech, 2017, p. 199). With this system, academics enter into a performance contract with their respective department heads or supervisors, representing the employer (university), spelling out expectations and obligations of each party. It is an outgrowth of the (Integrated) Results-Based Management (IRBM), a New Public Management (NPM) model widely institutionalised in state-owned entities in most African countries since the turn of the new millennium. RBM involved advancing from the customary government practice of the rightful application of government policy frameworks towards an empowered, results- and service-oriented public sector (Okech, 2017). In Zimbabwe, it is crucial to acknowledge the state's direct intervention in the governance and management of public universities. Since the attainment of independence in 1980, the State President has remained the Chancellor of all public universities and continued to influence their management practices through the line ministry.

Although the representation and materialisation of PM analytics could be framed within a combination of normative structuralism (or functionalism) and critical post-structuralism, it largely veered towards the latter since it borrows from the critical human resource management perspective. Within functionalism, performance management analytics are viewed as legitimate tools for addressing strategic business problems (Belizón & Kieran, 2022). Thus, data-driven decision-making was expected to translate into quality teaching and research, serving as behaviour modelling and stabilising instruments to ensure strategic fit (Paauwe & Boon, 2009). Thus, performance management analytics perform a functionalist role as communicative signs and symbols of individual and collective measurement. However, from a critical human resource management (CHRM) perspective, such positivist and functionalist tendencies have been criticised for presenting employees as unitarist, coherent and autonomous individuals separate and separable from social relations and

organisations (Collinson, 2003). Thus, not all analytics necessarily improved organisational performance and have since been dismissed for lack of rigour, reliability, validity and generalisability (Harley & Hardy, 2004).

Dispositifs and panopticons

Consistent with the CHRM perspective, and in particular critical post-structuralism, performance management analytics form part of HR architecture functioning as techné, apparatuses, apparels or '*dispositives*' (*dispositifs*) (Foucault, 1977, 1980) largely identifying with Bentham's (1995) 'panopticon' and 'disciplinary power' (Weiskopf & Munro, 2012; Rathbone, 2022). To Foucault (1980 as cited in Lee, 2011, p. 8), *dispositif* is 'a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, administrative measures, philosophical and philanthropic propositions and provides a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent'. A *dispositif* is 'literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings' (Agamben, 2000, cited in Lee, 2016, p. 14). Through PMS, relations of power circulate within discourse and in this way particular knowledge and meanings come to be normalised and considered legitimate (Foucault, 1977, p. 199), 'generating reality and meaning, and producing domains of objects and rituals of truth' (Sarup, 1993 as cited in Crotty, 2003, p. 205). Performance management analytics have also become a special language and a mobilising instrument in the dissemination of particular political messages and how it legitimised the processes of constructing and transforming the interests of agenda-setting and giving space to dominant narratives. They resemble a socio-linguistic artifice where justification lies in the discursive hegemony (Johnson & Duberley, 2003).

The secretive and omniscient gaze of the performance management system as a form of asymmetrical monitoring and surveillance is best expressed through the 'panopticon' (Büyük & continuous monitoring by authority, and social control produced by exposure to 'the gaze'. Measurement and assessment render individuals 'calculable' and even 'confessional' selves colluding in their own subordination (Collinson, 2003, p. 535). The new model of organisational control under the neo-liberal forms of governmentality anchored on employee autonomy and participation is a simulation of the panopticon that creates an illusory freedom (Büyük & Keskin, 2012). The PMS and its inbuilt analytics are panoptical; seeing everything within its own architecture, organising subjects

within that space and disciplining subjects to embrace their descriptions and their descriptors (Ahonen & Tienari, 2015; Liu, 2017). The panopticon renders everything visible and transparent but does not engage in dialogue with the subjects that it produces. With the coming of new technology, the PMS can steadily evolve from the traditional Taylorist panopticon (Liu, 2017) to Jeffrey Rosen's (2004, cited in Sprague, 2007, p. 2) 'omnitecton' in which many are watching the many. Thus everyone is under surveillance, all the time, and everywhere. It is no longer the sole responsibility of university management to monitor employee behaviour but that of self and peers. When the performance contracts finally become digitalised and loaded into software of algorithmic management and control, they intensify both panopticism and omnitecticism, leading to reduced freedoms, increased alienation and dehumanisation, and managerial obsolescence (Giermindl et al., 2022). Given the surge in the adoption of digital technology in public institutions, Zimbabwean public universities become a critical case of datafied control to drive innovation and industrialisation. Thus, studies exploring the function of PM analytics become more compelling now than ever before to align the reconfigurations in the universities to changes in the local and international context.

Methodology

Generally, the study that informed the paper followed a qualitative research approach. It largely relied on triangulation of archival ethnography, snippets of 'get-along' key informant interviews and lived experiences of participants. At the time of the study, Zimbabwe had eleven public (state) universities, but one university was purposively selected. This was deemed to adequately capture the national outlook given the largely isomorphic character of governance and performance monitoring occurring in public universities in the country. The selected case was able to reveal broader logics of performance analytics under political and institutional conditions, and this strongly aligned with qualitative and post-structuralist epistemologies. The design was appropriate for the critical aims of the study, and the deployment of archival ethnography alongside academics' lived experiences added analytical richness and credibility.

Key informants (N=12) comprising full-time professors (> five years of service) and early career academics (< five years of service) were selected using a combination of purposive and self-selection sampling techniques. A content analysis of eight purposively selected official documents was conducted, namely academic performance contracting and appraisal forms, department

standard operating procedures (SOPs), samples of lecturer evaluations by peers and students for the period 2018-2025, faculty's annual research publication reports, Education 5.0 framework, University Prospectus (Year Book) and 2018 Ordinance 3 covering criteria for Tenure and Promotions.

Within the realm of post-structuralism (Burrell & Morgan, 1992), the data analysis followed Jacques Derrida's 'deconstruction' approach, examining the nature and possibilities of meaning. Deconstruction focuses on revealing the hidden power relations underlying the symbiosis between appropriative practices and symbols within the realm of organisational culture, gender and politics. The approach offers the possibility of unravelling the power relations, mediating processes, manipulative moments and bureaucratic performances that make official records (Punathil, 2021). This is very appropriate for analysing performance management dynamics. The study was ethically informed as authority was granted by the participating university and consent was sought from selected participants.

Results

Behaviour modification and identity formation

With respect to performance contracting, both the assessor (chairperson of department) and assessed (lecturer) rely on previous performance and their consequences to explain current behaviour, diagnose and predict future performance patterns. Within the normative structuralist or functionalist paradigm, performance management analytics serve as a vital organising force, predicting and modifying human behaviour (Giermindl et al., 2022). The process ensures individuals are supervised, controlled, modelled and transformed into conformity, with the previous year's scores serving as a baseline to set future performance targets. This was confirmed by key informants (Ki1 and Ki2);

Yes, the performance assessment form provides both supervisors and assessed employees an opportunity to determine the current performance level based on previous scores. (Ki1) Setting performance targets based on previous performance gives a more realistic picture of one's strengths and weaknesses (Ki2).

Employee involvement in designing performance indicators, setting targets, the ability to control it and the ascription of wider employee voice in the process stabilises the work environment and was deemed consistent with organisational justice principles: distributive and procedural (Ball, 2022). Self-target setting and evaluation provide a sense of empowerment and confidence. However, this may also strengthen the supervisor's capacity to control both the individual and the process. With universities pursuing heightened employee visibility through

datafied surveillance, academics need to display the appropriate performance and behaviours captured in data, so they become evaluated, acknowledged and recognised for their efforts (Ball, 2022). This reflects the functionalist narrative of PM analytics, but setting one's own targets and self-evaluation also operate as part of a self-surveillance assemblage. High ratings signify the individual's identification with the university performance culture, while low scores symbolise disengagement. This reinforces Tække's (2011, p. >) observation that:

As academics, we internalise the power-holder's perspective and govern ourselves to meet the expectations we think are required of us, or in the most abstracted and advanced form, we internalise the organisational culture and attach to it.

Regular reference to monitoring and evaluation dashboards ensures self-regulation, a sense of accountability and conformity. This puts university academics under the radar and constant gaze, so that they internalise and modify their behaviour to conform to organisational conventions (Gane, 2012 cited in Seyama, 2017, p. 156). The centralised mechanism of constant visibility embedded in the performance management system and its analytics creates, regulates and sustains a collective organisational identity. From a critical human resource management perspective, self-regulation creates a false sense of freedom and consequently suppresses any form of dissent.

Power and ideology

Although PM analytics are widely considered stabilising and identity-making instruments, they also function as artifices of power and control. Claims of distributive and procedural justice are untenable because the processes of developing 'criteria categories' and 'weight ranges' in the performance contracting matrix (Table 1) reinforce power imbalances between executive, department heads and lecturers. When asked to comment on the performance evaluation process, one of the key informants and senior academics stated that:

Neither the faculty nor department heads have direct control over the entire process. Essentially, the matrix is an imposed template. Just like what happened during the introduction of Education 5.0, everything starts from the top (Ki3).

Ideologies are described as:

significations/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms and meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination (Fairclough, 1992, p. 87 in Finch-Lees, Mabey & Liefoghe, 2005, p. 191).

Within the CHRM perspective, scholars such as Townley (1994) and Simon (2005) cast the administrators of the system as key agents in promoting ideologies, which obfuscate the fundamentally exploitative nature of the employment relationship. HR techniques and practices exemplify the disciplinary modality of power, seeking to give order to the organisation of work, to resolve the indeterminacy of the contractual relationship, defining or constituting the individual as a subject (Townley, 1994). Through post-structuralism, the complicity of power relations in neutralising, naturalising and privileging hierarchy is foregrounded. The iconic value of the panopticon stems from processes of subjection and normalisation that arise through the internalisation of the gaze (Rathbone, 2022; Simon, 2005).

When conceived as a power/knowledge system, PM analytics not only contribute to the classification and participation of subjects but also can be understood as supplying much of the underpinning architecture for the inspection, inscription, comparison, judgement and correction of the subject at work (Barratt, 2003). The analytics and their specific forms, have both power and disciplinary effects. As Townley (1993, p. 526, cited in Ahonen & Tienari, 2015) argued, 'HRM systems serve to render organisations and their participants calculable arenas, offering, through a variety of technologies, the means by which activities and individuals become knowable and governable'. Therefore, PM analytics effectively serve as '*panoptical dispositifs*': surveillant assemblages or artifices. This corroborates Foucault's (1991, p. 201, cited in Rathbone, 2022, p. 2) argument that 'the effect of the panopticon was to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assured the automatic functioning of power.' Similar panoptic tendencies were also observed in a study by Seyama (2017) on performance management in public universities in South Africa.

The knowledge and processes of PMS and power dynamics are interrelated. The 'omnipticon' tendencies of peer-to-peer evaluations lend rationality to the lecturer assessment process (Ball, 2010) and masks power imbalances. Consistent with the Foucauldian characterisation, a performance contract is both a discourse and a system of constructed knowledge. PM analytics, as a code of power, communicatively regulates the attribution of causality for outcomes and communicates an asymmetrical relation steering a transmission of selections from the more powerful to the less powerful (Guzzini, 2013). Performance assessment and appraisal processes serve to objectify organisational members by constituting

them as objects of knowledge, providing ways in which they can be known, seen, calculated, discussed and thus governed (Finch-Lees et al., 2005).

Although PCs are regarded as symbols of power, this is not a permanent state, as symbols can be constantly renewed and shaken by applications that are more recent. Although the Education 5.0 framework on innovation and industrialisation reconfigured the performance rating matrix in public universities, there is no guarantee that it would continue to be regarded the same in future. The rallying power of performance management analytics can enhance the 'gaze', but the symbol still escapes its control. This is because some academics may not view the new assessment regime as a threat but also as an opportunity to upscale inter-university and industry collaborations through cutting-edge research and consultancy, and consequently enhancing their employability outside the university. This is in support of Guzzini's (2013) argument that the PC and its associated rites and outcomes were not only a constraint on the agents but also an instrument of empowerment. Therefore, this paper advances scholarship beyond dominant functionalist narratives of HR analytics.

Discursive mechanisms

Mundane and familiar HR procedures such as job analysis and periodic performance appraisals have been framed for the part they play in formalising normative systems of classification, contributing to the hierarchising and serial ordering of the workforce and the articulation of the physical and temporal dimensions of work. Within normative structuralism, the performance management techniques and control analytics are attempts to harness the psyche of the employee to productive ends. Productivity and efficiency are widely considered sources of legitimacy for monitoring employees (Büyük & Keskin, 2012). Thus, 'Performance Contracting' overtly assumes a power balance between the university and academics and also suggests the university's commitment to the fulfilment of obligations such as critical resource mobilisation and provision of incentives. With respect to the perceived university support for the promotion of research, one senior academic bemoaned the situation;

To me, the research output figures are mere 'numbers' because the universities provide very little support for our publications. In fact, when funds are available, professors get more conference support than junior members (Ki4).

Both the function and processes of PC and the supporting 'Ordinance' matrix are discursive tools, presented as symbols of collective governance and staff empowerment while masking a monolithic social order. Their logics, structure and content are modified regularly at the behest of University executive management with the complicity of senior academics such as professors with specialised knowledge and expertise serving as 'gate-keepers' and 'guardians of status quo' (Dees & Starr, 1992, cited in Belizón & Kieran, 2022, p. 607). An early career academic (Ki5) observed:

Management continues to shift 'goalposts,' especially regarding tenure and promotion. A few years ago, one would become a professor without any PhD or high-index publication. Now they talk about Scopus-indexed journals, and the quantity required has been inflated

The idealised images of autonomy and self-management are implicated in the organisation of an increasingly disciplined, even totalitarian system of control. Performance measurement tools in a university are developed often through a multi-layered committee system such as Faculty Deans, Institutes and Departmental Boards, Appointment and Promotions. By setting their own performance targets in line with these tools, academics engage in the co-creation of organisational controls (Chown, 2020). It has been primarily through such subjectifying technologies of the self in the name of career growth, self-development, competency, involvement and empowerment practices that academics have become fabricated (du Gay, 1996). They engage in self-surveillance and control, which effectively make them regard the resultant hierarchy or abstract differentiations in the job environment as reasonable and legitimate.

In essence, this is close to Foucault's ideas regarding self-discipline as a consequence of the panoptic surveillance (Tække, 2011). Analytics are most effective when they become 'discursively embedded', i.e. naturalised, accepted as common sense and thus indeed hegemonic (Finch-Lees et al., 2005). As discourses, they portray an illusory world, a veritable 'fantasy' of the real (du Gay, 1991 cited in Keenoy, 1999). HR analytics are part of the legitimisation process. The process of involving various stakeholders via the committee system across university units, beginning with designing performance measurement criteria, target setting, periodic data reporting and evaluations, enhances both the socio-political and technological legitimacy (Belizón & Kierann, 2022).

People's emotional involvement in political rites is certainly a key source of their power (Kertzer, 1988, p. 179-180 cited in Guzzini, 2013, p. 34). The

potency of PC analytics, particularly for early career academics, rests on their ability to serve as an instrument for decision-making relating to tenures and promotions. Therefore, the experience of performance management analytics among university academics resonates with Lyotard's (1984) argument that the 'appearance of objectivity masks ideological positions and fosters illusions of consensus and certainty'.

Performance management analytics can also lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. Statistics such as talent potential indexes, often measured by research and innovation output such as the number of patents and copyrights registered, can be misleading. Based on such predictions, organisations allocate training resources targeting employees perceived as 'promising' and likely to add value in future (Giermindl et al., 2022). Such employees would normally outperform others, and this may mislead managers to draw conclusions based on such analytics. Despite this, analytics such as research outputs are not necessarily rhetorical but can signal individuals' devotion to their careers and willingness to create employability within and outside the organisation through self-initiated and self-sponsored research projects.

Assemblage of surveillance

The upsurge of analytics has witnessed the intensification and sophistication of systems of surveillance and control (Barrett, 2003). Workplace monitoring and motivating systems (cf. research output statistics) are frequently informed by a concern not merely with work intensification but also with the intensification of material and symbolic insecurity. For example, adherence to the heritage-based Education 5.0 model with its commoditising and instrumentalising tendencies is inadvertently a form of surveillance, and a potential threat to academic freedom. This paper argues that the model and its supporting performance analytics potentially serve as a form of censorship and surveillance against critical scholarship. Academic freedom allows for independent teaching, research, and scholarly expression, crucial to advancing expertise, critical thinking, and general knowledge (Altbach, 2001, p. 205, cited in Tanczer, McConville & Maynard, 2016, p. 346). Consequently, the PM analytics will contain research outputs largely reflecting either official policies or partisan public opinion. As earlier intimated in this paper, in essence, the Education 5.0 model is a kindred exemplar of 'epistemic violence', or a product of 'epistemological tyranny' (Kinchloe & Steinberg, 2008 cited in Stewart-Harawira, 2013, p. 46).

To note is its tendency to disqualify and marginalise other disciplines, particularly Humanities and Social Sciences, which are widely considered critical in addressing emerging global challenges such as corruption, drug abuse, human rights violations, migration and inter-state conflicts. The model can easily be accused of practising academic/epistemic ‘Othering’, a state of ‘disregarding, essentialising, or denuding other cultures or disciplines’ (Klein, 2016, cited in Andreucci & Zografos, 2021). It constitutes dynamics of exclusion and disempowerment, which engender inter-discipline conflict. Paradoxically, Education 5.0 claims to be heritage-based and anchored on the restoration of indigenous knowledge (IK), while at the same time discrediting IK driven disciplines such as arts and social sciences. The model’s overemphasis and preoccupation with the production of goods and services regardless of discipline tends to reduce academics to technical operatives and effectively ‘small traders’ in a country plagued by high levels of unemployment and de-industrialisation.

While PM analytics represent new forms of knowledge and communication in the organisation of work, they are not merely instruments of domination, but also potential resources for working-class struggle (Hassard & Cox, 2013). The process of creating and spreading control mechanisms within the organisation is rife with contestation and negotiation as employees can either comply or engage in some form of resistance (Chown, 2020). Thus, HR technologies may not just intensify surveillance but also individuals’ self-consciousness to develop alternative dramaturgical selves and survival strategies (Ball, 2022; Chown, 2020; Collinson, 2003). Individuals also develop a tendency to comply with the generally accepted ideology set forth by those in power instead of expressing their opinions and feelings (Sarigül, 2018). As a coping strategy to the perceived threat posed by the new reward and promotion requirements, academics design ways of manipulating the system. Early career academics are pushed into predatory practices such as being listed by colleagues as co-authors in multi-authored H-index journal publications in which they might not have contributed anything.

Self-discipline and self-surveillance have become central to management systems aiming to ‘empower’ staff and encouraging them to be enterprising, creative and innovative. Being no longer a hegemony of a small minority (executive) over the masses (ordinary academics), social control exercised through surveillance is slowly turning into a structure where all employees voluntarily watch each other. For decades, the majority of university academics

in Zimbabwe have remained in a state of what Guy Standing (2011) coined 'precariats' or 'saliariats in precarious existence', often without being conscious of it. This reflects one of the most disconcerting illustrations of panopticism. In essence, the overall beneficiary remains the university employer as academics complement the 'corporate' gaze through 'self-surveillance'. Thus, self-surveillance has become the bedrock of postmodern capitalism. One key aspect of the PC is autonomism, emphasising self-surveillance routines: 'self-activity' and 'self-reporting'.

As part of workplace surveillance infrastructure, HR datafication tools, particularly within the electronic version of performance contracting, not only produce measurable performance target outcomes but also particular cultures which regulate performance behaviours and personal characteristics more subtly (Ball, 2010, 2022). Therefore, HR analytics become apparatuses (dispositifs) of both discipline and security. Security allows discretion. However, for this to happen, there must be a balance between surveillance and the ills it seeks to prevent (Sprague, 2007). For example, academics who engage in rewarding and self-empowering consultancy assignments and part-time teaching outside university tend to be reluctant to declare such information during performance appraisal processes. Since workplace control is not one-way traffic, employees engage in multiple visibility practices: making themselves seen to be ontologically recognised as well as to expose their performance and limit the aspects of their person that are brought into gaze (Ball, 2022).

One dark side of HR analytics is that they can bring about an illusion of control and reductionism. According to Gal et al. (2017 cited in Giermindl et al., 2022, p. 420), analytics promote a false sense of objectivity and rationality, creating an illusion of control in that supervisors and ordinary academics might overestimate their ability to influence decisions over issues they actually have little or no control over. Academics have very limited control over the performance evaluation items contained in the assessment matrix (cf. Table 1). They do not directly determine both the number of students taught and consequently the revenues accrued from academic fees. One of the key informants stated that:

The figures have become meaningless. Lecturers neither control the number of students admitted into the programme nor revenues accrued from fees (Ki7).

The PC targets and scores do not fully represent the teaching and learning outcomes. A good case in point is the tendency to neglect work related / industrial learning tasks even though a greater part of the academic's time is

spent supervising and assessing students in the field. Similarly, the matrix tends to downplay the possible biases in the peer and student evaluations of lecturers. Although valuable, such analytics are insufficient to drive HRM since a clear understanding of ‘what causes what’ is also required (Huselid, 2015 cited in van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017, p.131).

Essentially, the weightings, quantity units, performance targets and ratings have very little predictive or prescriptive power. The analytics have been reduced to quantification rituals involving staff who would be ultimately held accountable for meeting the output controls (Mazmanian & Beckman, 2018 cited in Chown, 2020, p. 2). The PM analytics have effectively become part of a ‘surveillance assemblage’: a ‘multiplicity of heterogeneous objects, whose unity comes solely from the fact that these items function together, that they work together as a functional entity’ (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000 cited in Galič, Timan & Koops, 2017, p. 21).

Table 1: Sample Performance Matrix (sample extract 2022)

Criteria Category	Weight	Unit	Target for the contract period 2023	Achieved Target for 2023	Target for the Contract Period 2024
TEACHING					
Undergraduate students taught	0	no.	0	0	0
Undergraduate dissertations supervised	3	no.	12	20	30
Master’s students taught	5	no.	100	250	150
Master’s dissertations supervised	1.5	no.	6	12	12
Lecturer: student ratio	1	Ratio	1:25	1:50	1:25
FINANCE AND STEWARDSHIP					
Income from consultancy work	1	\$	\$1 000	0	0
Income from students’ fees	5	\$	\$60 000.00	\$100 000.00	\$100 000.00

Source: Author’s Compilation, 2024

Another danger of self-surveillance is that the analytics might follow a reductionist logic, which can lead to post-positivist postulations of cause-and-effect. It is even more tragic when both management and ordinary academics become unconscious of the reductionism built into analytics, particularly when

presented in their advanced forms. Once this reductionism is masked, people tend to perceive constructs, such as performance, as objective reality (Cowgill & Tucker, 2020, cited in Giermindl et al., 2022). This adds weight to Keenoy's (1999) characterisation of any HRM instrument and practice as a 'hologram': having a state of identity or 'entitiness' or 'facticity', coherence and meaning which cannot be seen. Thus, consumers of PM analytics potentially fall prey to what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead dubbed 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness' (Daly, 1987; Conger, 2016).

This leads into the debate between HR analytics as symbolic abstractions and as real signifiers of organisational reality. With respect to publication outputs, the post-positivist tendencies enclaving the PM analytics do not adequately capture real circumstances pertaining to the research process and outputs. The system does not recognise 'pending, forthcoming or work-under-review' pieces. The analytics ignore the whole research journey that the individual engages in, starting with the development of a research idea, conducting research, development of an article, to final publication. As part of the 'surveillance assemblage', the performance management tools are reduced to 'recording machines', since their task is to capture (information) flows and convert them into reproducible events (Galič et al., 2017). At the time of the study, the university's PM analytics represented an 'archiving' technology based on an inverted or 'edited' truth. High research output did not necessarily constitute a high level of employee engagement, as human behaviour was too complex to be easily quantifiable. While incentives for research publications may boost research outputs, they can also be fungible.

Academics could engage in research not for purposes of improving quality of teaching and contribution to knowledge but for accessing funding for international travel as part of income generation and 'education tourism'. The pressure to 'publish or perish' has become more intense, potentially forcing university academics to adopt unethical and deceptive behaviours such as falsifying records to show how their performance met output targets (Chown, 2020). This corroborates Rathbone's (2022) observation that people resist any form of coercion or oppression which tends to limit self-interest and liberty.

Gendered subtexts

The organisation of work and assessment practices remains enclaved within male-female and masculinity-femininity dichotomies. Education 5.0's canons of 'innovation and industrialisation' and their sibling performance-tracking

metrics in the Tenure and Promotion regulations originate from a traditionally masculinist abstract intellectual domain that assumes a disembodied and universal worker. Concepts of innovation, patenting and production of services are a symbolic representation of 'technically competent' masculinity historically associated with traditional male-dominated industry and manufacturing fields. According to Acker (1990), the positing of gender-neutral and disembodied organisational structures and work relations is part of the larger strategy of control in industrial capitalist societies built upon a deeply embedded substructure of gender difference. Thus, the gender subtext of HR analytics and supporting assessment reports tends to portray universities as gender-neutral sites.

Demands of high-impact innovation-driven publications, albeit in the unfavourable macro-economic environment, tend to be prohibitive, especially to early-career female university researchers struggling to strike a healthy balance between tenure and promotion requirements and family life and child-care responsibilities. Such extra-organisational tasks distract women from devotion to their careers and organisations (Benschop and Meihuizen, 2002). Thus, for female lecturers to function at the top of male hierarchies requires them to render irrelevant everything that makes them women (Acker, 1990). The current PM analytics in universities hardly recognise competencies such as emotional intelligence, an aspect in which female academics have traditionally attained higher scores than males (Thory, 2012). From a strategic human capital development perspective, emotional intelligence scores can form the basis for programming individual learning and career development planning. Such data has not been optimally mobilised for the emancipation of women. A survey of Scopus-indexed journal publications by one selected faculty member over six months between 2022 and 2023 showed female lead authors constituting just over 20%. One female academic argued:

Many females occupy key leadership positions in the university, but remain marginalised in terms of research publications. When they do publish, they often appear as second or third authors to male colleagues (Ki6).

Further to this, female academics tend to be crowded into undervalued and feminised non-technical fields such as arts, humanities, management and social sciences, with very limited opportunities for innovation and industrialisation. In addition, Scopus- or Web of Science-indexed journals tended to have a more male-stream technical and natural science experimental orientation. In a university, with a policy of cash incentives for research outputs, this has invariably been skewed in favour of male authors. Therefore, the associated analytics reproduce

managerial values as tools to rationalise the organisational logic of hierarchies and to help in setting up a seemingly equitable compensation structure. Thus they are not neutral, depoliticised or ‘innocent’ representations (Benschop & Meihuizen, 2002; Barratt, 2003). This supports earlier observations elsewhere (Williams, 2000, cited in Foley and Cooper, 2021, p.4), which concluded that the assessment of academics has largely been based on a standardised template predicated on the characteristics of ‘ideal worker’ norms.

Conclusion

The paper examined the representation and appropriation of performance management analytics in a selected public university in Zimbabwe. It demonstrated that performance analytics operated as a “double-faced assemblage”: enabling behaviour modelling, organisational identity formation, and performance accountability on one hand, while intensifying surveillance, self-discipline, gendered inequalities, and epistemic exclusion on the other. The paper argued that although the experience of the performance management system represented an unsteady vacillation between different types of surveillance, no state of ‘watching’ remained permanent. The effectiveness of the different types of surveillance was dependent on the integration of the different HR metrics and analytics. The paper advances scholarship beyond dominant functionalist narratives of HR analytics

One of the major findings was that although performance management analytics acted as rational organisational performance drivers, they were also mobilised as instruments of both control and resistance. The power of data-driven performance management systems rested on their ability to act as co-created (post) panoptic assemblages and legitimisation artifices. Performance management analytics are essentially fungible; while they serve as effective performance tracking mechanisms for the benefit of the university, they can also empower the subaltern: the ordinary academic. Therefore, the analytics can work simultaneously for and against the interests of organisational agents in many ways. They are materialised as rational and predictive signifiers of university identity and performance, and at the same time serve as instruments of control and a potential resource for worker struggle.

This situates performance management analytics as neither purely functional nor purely oppressive, but as fungible socio-technical artefacts whose effects depend on power relations, discourse, and institutional context. Therefore, the complex intersection of non-conventional responses to the deployment of HR

analytics by both management and academics calls for more innovative and integrated approaches to studying the phenomenon. Further research by way of a longitudinal mixed-methods design using a larger sample beyond a single university can provide greater insights that can assist in the development of more relevant, acceptable and durable performance management systems in the higher education sector in Zimbabwe and beyond.

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