Foucauldian analysis of student assessment as a technology of government in neoliberal universities

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In a neoliberal environment, universities are increasingly emphasising strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance and academic audits when organising educational processes and academic work (Olssen & Peters, 2005). As neoliberalism has affected the context in which universities function, Clegg and Smith (2010) note that teaching, learning and assessment are increasingly shaped via centrally set institutional strategies and managerialist practices. In many universities, student assessment can be viewed as part of technologies that attempt to influence not just academic practice but new forms of academic subjectivities.

This study explores the ways assessment is presented and organised in the discourses of policies, academics and students in the University of Glasgow and Tallinn University. The research addresses the questions:

- How are the assessment policies constructed in both universities?
- How do the assessment policies subjectify academics and students?
- How do academics and students negotiate and respond to assessment technologies?

This study is framed by Foucault's theories of subjectification and governmentality. For Foucault (1982) power relations shaping the subjectivities exist ‘in the whole network of social’. His theorisation of governmentality demonstrates that power is diffuse and constantly balancing between maximum and minimum, and rather minimum than maximum (Foucault, 2004). It would be therefore vital to explore if this freedom that makes individuals increasingly accept neoliberal reforms, also includes an opportunity for ‘the practices of the self’ (Foucault, 1984). Discourse analysis has been guided by Foucault’s (1969, 1970) and Fairclough's (1992, 2001) work, including data from policies, interviews with academics and focus groups with students.

By drawing on the policy analysis, this paper will demonstrate the ways the policy discourses can make assessment function as a technology of government that shapes academic work and academic subjectivities. I will also reflect on my experiences of working with a Foucauldian framework.
