

Keynote

Calculating Risk: International Organisations and the Construction of Governing Utopias

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The dominance of International Organisations (IOs) in the production of global metrics has become a key feature of the transformation of the transnational education policy field. However, surprisingly little is known about the ways in which global processes of quantification are reconfiguring education governance. Recent decades have seen fervent activity by IOs to build broad alliances for finding 'global solutions' to 'global crises'. Given the moral dimension that these new indices of educational progress have taken, as well as the enormous human and environmental cost of their failures, it is now imperative to examine the production of quantification for transnational education governance.

What are the properties of numbers that would suggest such a central role in governing? Numbers are characterized by qualities such as order; mobility; stability; combinability; and precision (Hansen and Porter 2012). Anthropologies of numbers suggest that 'our lives are increasingly governed by – and through – numbers, indicators, algorithms and audits and the ever-present concerns with the management of risk' (Shore and Wright 2015; 23). However, there is also –and perhaps primarily- need to focus on 'the people classified, the experts who classify, study and help them, the institutions within which the experts and their subjects interact, and through which authorities control' (Hacking 2007:295).

It is precisely the data experts that this lecture aims to focus on. We will examine what Latour called 'the few obligatory passage points' (1987; 245): in their movement, data go through successive reductions of complexity until they reach simplified enough state that can travel back 'from the field to the laboratory, from a distant land to the map-maker's table' (Hansen and Porter 2012; 412). IOs constitute such 'centres of calculation'. If we consider IOs central to the production of knowledge, we can infer that their interactions as the knowledge gatherers, controllers and distributors must have crucial governing impact.