

# Neoliberalisation, Fast Policy Transfer and the Management of Labour Market Services

## Abstract

Neoliberalism has been a core concern for IPE for several decades, but is often ill-defined. Research offering greater definitional clarity stresses the role of contingent and local level factors in diverse processes of neoliberalisation. This paper contributes to that literature, addressing a surprising gap in critical IPE knowledge; the management practices by which pressures to activate the unemployed and to make them more competitive, are implemented. The paper suggests that performance management, is significant as both a depoliticising policy coordination mechanism and a highly politicised policy implementation practice. The paper invokes a scalar-relational approach which sees the pressure to innovate and compete at lower scales as driven by the political economy of competitiveness at the system scale. The paper reports on research undertaken within the empirical frame of EU meta-governance, showing how performance management is part of lower-scale attempts to adapt to system-scale pressures. It is neoliberalising in both form and content. It concludes by showing that while performance management may be a significant component of neoliberalisation there is scope for engagement and contestation motivated by egalitarian ideals. Critical IPE scholars interested in contesting neoliberalisation should therefore engage with the political economy of management practice as well as policy design.

## Acknowledgements

## Introduction

As several papers (Knafo; Eagleton-Pierce) in this Special Issue argue, performance management is one of the central technologies of managerialism. This paper focusses on the use of performance management in the management and implementation of Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) in prior debates on the borders of IPE, critical geography, public policy and administration. These debates are particularly associated with the process of neoliberalisation (Peck *et al.*, 2012), the political economy of scale (Charnock, 2010; Macartney & Shields, 2011), depoliticisation and fast policy transfer (Peck & Theodore, 2015). Developing the accounts of neoliberalisation through inter-scalar fast policy transfer in the work of Peck and others, the paper addresses a gap in current IPE research on the role of management practices in implementing neoliberalisation; labour market policies designed to induce increased competition for paid employment in the formal labour market. Despite the fact that ALMPs have been widely promoted by key international organisations, and taken up by national governments, they have not been a major focus for scholars of IPE. Neither managerialism generally (Eagleton-Pierce and Knafo; Sharma and Soederberg, this issue), or in the specific context of ALMPs have featured strongly in the IPE literature, despite their relevance to core IPE debates.

Understanding management practices are crucial to deepening our knowledge of processes of multi-scalar neoliberalisation and have a bearing on the social and political economy outcomes of these processes. The concept of 'Fast Policy' in the work of Peck and collaborators might

be augmented by a corollary notion of ‘Fast Management’, which also has important inter-scalar and trans-scalar dynamics. The first novel contribution of the paper is to address several important research questions in the context of neoliberalisation, such as: (1) how do common management practices contribute to processes of neo-liberalisation?; (2) What are the mechanisms by which these management practices are transferred between and within fluid inter-scalar structures?; (3) What are the political economy implications of public management and policy implementation techniques? The paper addresses a gap in IPE research by starting to answer these questions in the particular context of the management and implementation of ALMP.

This is significant to critical IPE because ALMPs have a substantial influence on the relationship between labour supply and demand in particular segments of the skills and income distribution. In this sense, management practices have significant scope to affect core concerns for political economists such as the distribution of support and discipline in the implementation of welfare policy, which in turn influences who offers labour to the market and in what conditions. These management practices therefore affect the balance of power between capital and labour, and the ways that policy implementation generates or mitigates ‘social harm’. Further, understanding the way management practices do this is of relevance to exploration of the relation between micro-scale behaviours in the everyday reproduction of capitalist social relations, and structural pressures at the scale of the global economy.

An additional reason that management techniques are significant for IPE, flows directly from the assertion that neoliberalisation is a multi-scalar process. This opens up the local scale of policy implementation as an important site of contested, imperfect and contradiction-laden political economy. The paper adds to Peck *et al.*’s discussion of the scalar relations of neoliberalisation with insights from other literatures in public management and social policy which emphasise the scope for frontline and ‘street level’ managers to reproduce, but also contest and subvert, neoliberalising policy reforms, through their management practices. This discussion helps to better understand the role and consciousness of agents of neoliberalisation at the scale of policy implementation, rather than just policy making. It suggests that critical IPE scholarship engage directly with management practice as well as big-picture issues of structure and policy design. It helps to better understand the ways that structural processes in the international political economy, such as the drive for competitiveness, are reproduced through more micro-scale processes.

The paper unfolds in six sections. The first locates the discussion in the specific IPE literature on neoliberalisation, scale and Fast Policy transfer, drawing mainly on the work of Peck, Brenner and Theodore. The second makes the case that management techniques and technologies which implement ALMPs should be seen as an important aspect of multi-scalar neoliberalisation. The third, documents some of the ways in which these management technologies are being spread through horizontal ‘fast management’ within and between scales; involving, for instance, transnational engagement between supra-state and sub-state institutions. These management technologies help drive reform agendas between scales. The fourth section documents the role that performance management plays in driving reform between scales. The fifth documents the commonly neoliberalising content of performance management targets and indicators in relation to ALMPs. The final section concludes and

tentatively suggests critical IPE should see management and managerial processes as sites for contesting neoliberalisation.

## **Neo-Liberalisation through Multi-Scalar Fast Policy Transfer and the Management of Social Harm**

‘Neoliberalism’ is a common focus in IPE research (and the wider social sciences) and usually deployed as part of a negative value judgement about the social effects of economic, social and political reform (Venugopal, 2015). Beyond this, it is a term which is frequently undefined, ambiguous or elaborated at a very high level of abstraction (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). A range of authors have sought to bring greater specificity (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Gamble, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Overbeek & van der Pijl, 1993). Among those, Brenner, Peck and Theodore have perhaps gone furthest and define neoliberalisation (as distinct from neoliberalism) as a “politically guided intensification of market rule and commodification” (2010, p. 184) which is also ‘variegated’ in that it is “a historically specific, unevenly developed, hybrid, patterned tendency of market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring” (Peck *et al.*, 2012, p. 169). As such, neoliberalisation does not result in simple political economy convergence (though patterns of convergence are clearly present) but common tendencies are implemented in path-dependent, contingent, national and local processes which are subject to struggle and contestation. Peck *et al.* point to both ‘roll-back’ and ‘roll-out’ strategies which are sometimes destructive and sometimes creative and reconstructive of new institutional forms and policy programmes. Common to both is the attempt to respond to competition at the system-scale by generating place-based *competitiveness* at lower scales. This understanding of neoliberalisation is useful for the current paper because of the focus on scale and scalar-relations, and the emphasis on policy transfer.

A focus on the global political economy of scale draws attention to the ways in which one scale – that of world market integration – is becoming ‘ecologically dominant’ (Jessop, 2012, p. 202); predetermining problems and processes at other scales. Thus, the systemic property of competitiveness at the world market scale drives the imperative of competition to lower scales, with important feedback effects. Prescriptions for how to facilitate competitiveness at lower scales (for e.g. macro-regions, nation-states, regions, cities, firms, households and individuals and so on) are both a product and an ideology of this ecological dominance, helping to mystify the need to compete as an inevitable outcome of inexorable processes. As actors at all scales respond to the imperative to compete, they further reinforce and strengthen that imperative for other actors and at other scales (Nunn, 2015; Nunn & Beeckmans, 2015; Nunn & White, 2017). The imperative to compete then should not be read as a simple top-down pressure but one which is reproduced by the interplay of structure and even very small scale agency. Furthermore, the imperatives of these global scale pressures are frequently anticipated and promoted subjectively by lower scale reformers, even ahead of material pressures which might necessitate this (Hay & Rosamond, 2002; Tsarouhas & Ladi, 2013).

Management technologies have a key role to play in the coordination of economic, political and social agency between scales, as ‘inter-scalar rule regimes’ and in the mutually-reinforcing pressures moving between structure and small scale agency. Performance management, benchmarking, quality standards and the like are central to efforts to maintain control between

scales in large corporate structures. They augment ‘depoliticisation’ (Burnham, 2001; Flinders & Buller, 2006); making system scale characteristics such as the imperative to compete appear to be natural. Policy makers and public managers attempting to cope with the challenges presented by these characteristics inevitably see lower scales as sites of adaptation to global scale pressures and the use of depoliticising management technologies helps to insulate these scalar relations from everyday political questioning.

However, in a system where competitiveness is a wired-in characteristic, many efforts to adapt to the system at lower scales (such as states, regions, cities, neighbourhoods, and ultimately households and individuals) must inevitably fail. But as Peck and Theodore note (2001, p. 432), neoliberalising reforms often ‘fail forward’; the generalised characteristic of competitiveness mandates that the route out of failure is to further embed and internalise competitiveness. Failure is inevitable both because of the simple reality that not every place can win simultaneously, but also because winning and losing creates complex effects. Failure creates poverty and inequality among the losers, harming people and places and their capacity to compete in the future. At the individual and household scale, even winners increasingly find themselves in subjective insecurity as they worry about their future chances of success (Berardi, 2009; Schneider, 2018). Moreover, neoliberalising reforms often create the need for other measures to offset their damaging social effects, further complicating the environment in which local innovations take place. These other measures might entail disciplining, subduing and containing surplus populations unable to play their part in individualised competitiveness (Wacquant, 2009).

The imperative to compete, and the reality of frequent failure, mean that lower level policy makers and implementers must continuously look for innovations in their attempts to adapt to these systemic characteristics and to cope with and manage the uncertainty they confront. The adoption of managerial solutions helps to offer lower scale policy managers guidance in how to do this. Lower-scale innovations deemed as successful are frequently elevated through inter-scalar linkages, up-scaled or transferred across scales as exemplar projects to be copied and iteratively innovated upon. National, middle and local level managers are often drawn into transnational expert networks by international organisations wanting to promote policy learning, across and between scales (Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 172). Networks involving sub-state bureaucracies, quasi-autonomous delivery bodies, private providers of public services and international organisations become an important means of transferring practice often without the involvement of state scale politicians; adding to the depoliticising dynamic. Policy experts, consultants, ‘policy pedlars’ (Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 170) and international organisations take on a key role in the transfer of policy models between and across scales, as Seabrooke and Sending ([this volume](#)) demonstrate. This is one reason why Peck and collaborators eschew rationalist political science interpretations of policy transfer to identify instead the socially constructed processes which underpin ‘fast policy’ development (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. xxiv–xxvii, 18-30). International organisations and transnational expert networks act as vectors for the transfer of favoured policy ideas, technocratic solutions and implementation processes (Van der Pijl, 1998, p. 162). Once again though, this is not simple convergence around universal policies and programmes, but endless policy and programme adaptation at subordinate scales from the national to the very local. Through this, even low-level managers take on additional roles as translators and innovators in policy and programme delivery to meet local contexts and to overcome policy failure. They are incentivised to engage with innovative

delivery patterns through management processes that incite competition in their roles, the need to renew short-term contracts and pay. This is 'fast' in the sense that policy ideas change and are iterated rapidly in preference to long-term, stable and 'big picture' policy programmes. The preference for fast over 'slow' policy creates a further inbuilt pressure for more Fast Policy. State retrenchment sees the withdrawal of longer-term policies and welfare rights, creating a replacement demand for time limited and more piecemeal interventions, with a frequently experimental character. 'Speed-up' is not just an economic imperative among competing firms, but also a key feature of neoliberalising governance forms and policy development.

All this has significant political economy outcomes; again at multiple scales. At the scale of the national economy the way in which management processes operate can help to form what institutionalist theorists call *complementarities* (Jackson & Deeg, 2008) between households, firms and institutions, in relation to labour supply/demand; pay bargaining; skills and technology development. Such complementarities shape the relative productivities and competitiveness of national economies; helping to distribute costs and benefits between states, within the world capitalist system. At a lower scale, within the national economy, the effect of these management practices on shaping the discipline applied to individual jobseekers helps to shape the costs and benefits arising from the relative successes or failures of individuals, households and communities to sell their labour power. Critical IPE scholars tend to focus on the role of neoliberalisation in generating negative outcomes for labour relative to capital. Criminologists have coined the term 'social harm' (Hillyard & Tombs, 2007; Pemberton, 2016) to think about the relative distribution of harm from structural economic, social and political processes. The imposition of the discipline to compete, the costs of failures to do so and differential exposure to state discipline as a result of this, might all be thought of as social harm in the form of the poverty, ill health, lower life expectancies and criminalisation that result for those who disproportionately face the costs of competition and failure. The experience of public services may clearly mitigate or reinforce the social harm resulting from the unequal and exploitative relation between capital and labour. Management processes have a great deal of influence over whether public services, like employment services, mitigate or reinforce social harm.

This understanding of neoliberalisation, scalar-relations, 'fast policy' transfer, repeated failure and the generation or mitigation of social harm has three implications for the discussion here which are underemphasised in the work of Peck, Brenner, Theodore *et al.*. First, management techniques are used to coordinate policy making between scales. Second, management practices as well as policies travel. Third, management techniques in policy *implementation* take on central importance to the messy and contradiction-laden realities of neoliberalisation 'on the ground'. The importance of 'making policy work' and managing the risk of failure in complex environments has long been recognised in the public management literature on street level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980; Brodtkin 2011) and frontline policy 'subversion' (Barnes & Prior, 2009; Dobson, 2015). Policy implementation must confront the messy realities of social struggles over policy outcomes as both frontline staff and service 'beneficiaries' come up against important contradictions of neoliberalising reform. For example, the reality for many jobseekers is a lack of suitable employment or a mismatch between individual skills and capacities (often depleted by the experience of poverty and prior social harm) and the availability of work. In this context, in some places and time periods, frontline staff have subverted policy goals. Performance management is one means of attempting central control

to offset these tendencies.

This has curious implications for understanding depoliticisation and agency. Depoliticisation both blurs the lines between policy making and management, and inverts their relation. In many ways, depoliticisation enshrines neoliberalisation as policy objective, rendering policy *making* as a managerial process. At the same time, policy *implementation* becomes replete with politicised challenges associated with the legitimisation of, and overcoming opposition (passive and active) to, the decidedly in-egalitarian political economy content of neoliberalising policy. It often focusses on the task of ‘contingent coping’ (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018). with the lower level inconsistencies and problems that are thrown up, but always in ways that are constrained by system-level imperatives.

## **Neo-Liberalising Management Practices in Active Labour Market Policy**

ALMPs were central to early IPE critiques of neoliberalisation, often under the label of ‘workfare’. For instance, Jessop’s (1993, 1995) formulation of the shift from Keynesian Welfare to a Schumpeterian Workfare state emphasised the “subordination of social policy to the demands of labour market flexibility and structural competitiveness”. Cerny (1997) emphasised the transition from a welfare to ‘competition state’ in which public policy became less about protecting citizens from market discipline and more about exposing them to it. Workfare has also remained a central theme in Peck’s elaboration of the messy processes of neoliberalisation. In the generalised context of competitiveness, ‘activation’ drives the systemic character of competitiveness to lower scales, with households and individuals being the ultimate scale of coping with competition and the risks of failure (Peck, 2002, p. 343). This critique of workfare remains central to the critical social policy literature (Grover, 2012; Piggott & Grover, 2009; e.g. Slater, 2012).

ALMPs have certainly followed a ‘Fast Policy’ trajectory of being spread through promotion by international organisations (e.g. the OECD, EC) and leading neoliberal states such as the UK, despite the relatively mixed evidence of their effectiveness overall and regarding different types of ALMP (Filges *et al.* 2015). For instance, key international organisations tend to support the notion that ALMPs which focus more on pressure to activate the unemployed (so called ‘services and sanctions’ approaches) (Martin and Grubb, 2001; Martin, 2015) are more effective than those involving more substantive training, regardless of evidence that this calculation results from short-term measurement horizons (Blasco & Rosholm, 2010; Lechner *et al.*, 2011). Despite all this, ALMPs have not received sustained attention in the more mainstream IPE literature since the early 2000s. While Peck *et al.* focussed on ALMPs in their initial studies of fast policy and neoliberalisation, their focus has moved on since and did not focus on detailed aspects of ALMP implementation. Further, a quick search of the *RIPE* archive is illustrative in that it reveals virtually no papers that focus explicitly on ‘Active Labour<sup>1</sup> Market Policy’ or ‘Workfare’, with the possible exception of Mahon (2011) and, more tenuously, Le Baron (2010). Mahon’s paper offers a useful discussion of the role of the OECD

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<sup>1</sup> The search utilised both the American and British spelling of Labor, also the acronym ‘ALMP’ and ‘workfare’ and ‘work-fare’ were both used.

in promoting ALMPs overtime and the role of internal differences between different departments about the particular framing and types of ALMP that should be promoted. LeBaron's paper is an excellent contribution to debates on social reproduction, but does not offer detailed insights into ALMPs specifically. Similar searches of other major IPE journals reveal a similar gap in the specifically IPE literature.

If ALMPs are relatively rarely explored in IPE, the management practices associated with them are even more of a silence (Peters, 2012). Again illustrative of this, is that a further search of the *RIPE* archive reveals no papers explicitly focussing on 'Performance Management'<sup>2</sup> or 'PESs', and while 'Public Management' returns a much larger number of papers (59), only a handful (e.g. Bevir, 2003; Peters, 2012) qualify when their abstracts and full text are reviewed. Even in social policy, there is only a small and emergent literature on this topic (e.g. Borghi & Van Berkel, 2007; Van Berkel & Borghi, 2008; Van Berkel, 2010; Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012; Weishaupt, 2010, 2011), and these studies tend not to fully elaborate the political economy implications of policy implementation. This lack of IPE coverage is surprising for several reasons. Performance management practices by which social policies such as ALMPs are steered and implemented, are themselves subject to transfer practices which echo 'fast policy' ('fast management', perhaps). Further, the ways that management practices shape the implementation of policy have significant political economy implications; they organise the delivery of (and often eligibility for) welfare transfer payments and structure the relationship between capital and labour, especially toward the bottom of the income distribution. They might also reveal the *real* as opposed to *rhetorical* objectives behind particular policies in terms of their content (i.e. the intention that what is measured will be what is done). Their adaptation in frontline service delivery might reveal the actual political economy *outcomes* of policy implementation; or put simply; 'who gets what' (Brodkin, 2011). In sum, management practice in the implementation of policy can influence the unequal structure of benefit and harm in capitalist societies; it is therefore an important aspect in domestic political economy. Because such management practices are transferred between and within states, they are also a significant element of the *international* political economy.

Eagleton-Pierce ([this volume](#)) argues that managerialism is an "adaptable set of 'social technologies' that are appropriated for a range of governing purposes". As several papers in this Special Issue ([Knafo; Eagleton Pierce](#)) suggest, performance management is a central element of the managerialist toolkit, often associated with the New Public Management (NPM) which is itself commonly regarded as a broader management doctrine for neoliberalisation (Nunn, 2010; Peters, 2012). Knafo ([this volume](#)) contests this view, suggesting that the application of the NPM was more about strengthening the position and control of top managers than representing a neoliberal preference for markets and efficiency. Yet, it is not clear that these are mutually exclusive ideas and the NPM can be interpreted as an attempt to maintain *centralised control*, at the same time as decentralising the *delivery and production* of public services, themselves directed toward neoliberal social ends. Indeed, one of the functions of performance management processes is an attempt to maintain central direction of these social ends, where frontline delivery of them must confront the messy and contradiction-laden reality

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<sup>2</sup> Remarkable given the proliferation of the term in literature more generally (Eagleton-Pierce, 2017:138).

of neoliberal reform on the ground. The NPM includes a preference for the separation of the state from the production of public goods and the delivery of public services *via* competitive market-based arrangements (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; OECD, 1994; Osborne & Gabler, 1992; Whitfield, 1992, 2001). Privatisation may be the ultimate stylised form, but the incitement of competition between and/or within public sector providers or ‘mixed markets’ of public and private providers is also a feature. Following this logic, the NPM also attempted to transfer management practices from the private to the public sector. The emergence of large corporate structures in the US in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century renewed the importance of controlling and motivating workers in large complex systems (Eagleton-Pierce, 2017; p137-141) and the separation of ownership and control (Berle and Means, 1932) led to practices of ‘Management by Objectives’ (Drucker, 1955) to coordinate internal supply chains and reliance on external suppliers and contractors. The NPM attempted to copy these practices in the public sector, enabling centralised decision making to retain control even in the context of the withdrawal of the state from direct provision of goods and services.

Performance management sits within the NPM not just as a distinct component, but as an ‘inter-linking practice’ (Nunn, 2010) which knits other parts of the ever evolving neoliberalising management toolkit together across scales in patterns of ‘delegated governance’ (Dommett & Flinders, 2015) where the central state attempts to retain control of decentralised service delivery networks. For example, outcome targets and measures can act as ‘rule regimes’ which shape and constrain practice in privatised, decentralised and arms-length producers of public services. Even within the state, this is an inter-scalar practice. Political authority at one scale can operate at others indirectly in a ‘steering but not rowing’ capacity *via* setting outcome or output targets and indicators to guide management practice at lower scales. National policy makers set targets and indicators which they hope will determine what local managers should achieve, but give them flexibility about precisely how they might do this in the interests of both general effectiveness but also often competition too (Brodkin, 2011). As we shall see, performance management is also cast at the transnational scale and acts to enforce neoliberalising transfers of management practice which, to borrow and paraphrase Carroll’s (2012) well put formulation, are organised ‘in, through and around the state’.

The NPM can also be associated with ‘depoliticisation’ (Burnham, 2001) as state managers retained control through setting high level objectives but thereafter, the provision of public services is presented as a largely technical and managerial process rather than as a politicised, economic and social one. Depoliticization helps to insulate central decision makers from critique about the experience of policy delivery. The actuality, of course, is somewhat different, as the case of ALMPs amply demonstrates. Services which influence who should get what from welfare transfers; and who should offer labour to the market, at what price and under what conditions are always highly political. As such, depoliticisation in practice is often a messy and contested process, as recent campaigns such as ‘Boycott Workfare’ readily attest.

The following discussion demonstrates the ways in which these management practices are themselves neoliberalising in the context of ALMP transfer and implementation. Performance management is drawn on in particular to illustrate this multi-scalar process. The discussion draws specifically on meta-governance processes associated with these performance management processes in the EU. The EU is selected for empirical focus for two reasons. First,

the processes operating within the EU mean that there is more descriptive empirical evidence available on management practices and their transfer within the EU. Second, and again because of these EU-wide processes, the EU is used extensively by non-EU states and international organisations as a source of learning for the transfer of management practices. As an example, the RED-SEALC network in Latin America, facilitated by the Inter-American Development Bank, often borrows from EU policy and practice learning in shaping advice to PES within Latin America. The EU is therefore a natural focus for the empirical discussion which follows.

## **‘Fast Management’ transfer?**

In the EU there are well established meta-governance structures for policy transfer between different states. One of the main strategies to emerge out of concerns about the lack of European competitiveness in the early 1990s, was the enduring European Employment Strategy, since rolled into the ill-feted Lisbon Strategy and subsequently the ‘European Semester’ (Nunn & Beeckmans, 2015). These multi-scalar meta-governance processes are clearly influenced by performance management approaches and encompass often decade-long grand objectives, followed by annual rounds of assessing the degree of EU and member-state competitiveness, articulating national strategies and reform plans, peer review and accountability to the European Commission and measurement of progress in key performance indicators. Within these practices are multiple and often overlapping mechanisms for management practice transfer through the Open Method of Coordination – a ‘soft-law’ approach relying on peer pressure and bureaucratic procedures like benchmarking and best practice exchange (Holman, 2004) to coordinate national policy making rather than the ‘hard-law’ approach of Regulations and Directives. One of these is the ‘Mutual Learning Programme’ for PESs (as established under article 149 of the Treaty for the European Union) which involves a series of formalised activities – usually facilitated by external consultants who organise the programme under contract for specified periods. For example, ICF Consulting<sup>3</sup> organised the programme between 2013-2016 and the programme is now split into two contracts with one being organised by ICF and the other by a German firm of consultants called ICON<sup>4</sup>.

The Mutual Learning Programme involves Peer Reviews, Learning Exchanges, Thematic Events, a Database of Labour Market Practices and Dissemination Seminars (for an overview see ICF, 2016). Peer Reviews are focussed tightly around a particular topic, and involve PES representatives and other experts giving presentations on different aspects of a particular policy or management practice. Participants are usually PES managers at national, regional and local level, with lower level managers engaged to give commentary on how they implement policy and practice. Individual ‘experts’ are engaged before and after the event by the main consultants who coordinate the programme, to provide research summarising different national approaches and commentary on successful ways of transferring ideas and practices (e.g. for

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<sup>3</sup> ICF is an international consultancy that has been growing over recent years through acquisitions and has offices in 67 countries and an annual revenue of over \$1.2bn. It has operated the Mutual Learning Programme and similar activities for the EC since 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Icon is based in Cologne with offices in Chile and Abu-Adhabi and an annual workstream of £18m in consultancy projects.

performance management see Nunn, 2013). Learning exchanges might follow a Peer Review and involve a delegation of managers from different countries visiting a specific PES to examine a particular approach in more detail. Thematic events involve a scheduled series of annual meetings (usually two days, held in Brussels) where all or most PES send delegates and other organisations are present, such as representatives of the Commission, OECD and the International Labor Organization.

These activities cut across and through scales, reaching deep inside the sub-state institutional apparatus of member states, often without involving national politicians. Typically, national representatives will be civil servants and managers in arms-length delivery organisations; many PES are either separate to the labour ministry (Manoudi, *et al.*, 2014). Where representatives of labour ministries are present, they tend to be officials rather than politicians. As such, these policy transfer forums reach around formal political decision making into the sub-state bureaucracy and policy implementation process. A recent survey (Weber, 2016) shows that between 2013-2016, there were 15 Peer Reviews in 12 countries and including 625 participants; 14 Learning Exchanges in 12 countries, including 208 participants; and 6 Thematic Events with 634 participants.

Outputs from these processes include different types of report and a database of good practices. Their subject matter is illustrative of a neoliberalising approach to public management. For example, a review of the 147 entries in the most recent database<sup>5</sup> reveals that activation and the targeting of particular groups within the unemployed are the most frequent topics, with the organisation of counselling next and Performance Management being the subject of around 10% of these reports. The Commission's own categorisation of reports from Mutual Learning Programme activities reveals that of the 112 reports in the 'PES Knowledge Centre' since 2014, 44 focus on individualisation of service delivery for activation, 30 focus on partnerships, 33 focus on particular target groups of jobseekers and 45 reports focus on performance management.<sup>6</sup> Echoing general tendencies to 'overload' knowledge production as a strategy of power within institutional systems, performance management is the subject of a dizzying number of repetitive studies, guides, toolkits and other papers (e.g. see Adamecz, 2013; Bjerre & Sidelmann, 2016; Heads of PES, 2013; Nunn, 2012, 2013; Scharle, 2013; Sumpton *et al.*, 2014; Weishaupt, 2016) designed to spread the practice in EU PES and influence the way it is operated, and the take up of particular features such as a focus on employment transitions, the speed of these transitions and sub-state institutional and cultures of competition.

These activities also have influence (Weishaupt, 2011). In the survey (Weber, 2016), 94% of respondents from across PES bureaucracies agreed that this activity provided information relevant for their work, nearly 80% thought that the events facilitated peer learning and exchange of good practice and 70% said that these activities had influenced their work or policy development. Even setting aside positivity bias in such exercises, this suggests that there is a degree of policy/practice transfer facilitated through these activities. Underlining this, over the last two decades there has been increasing use of performance management in European PES (Mosley *at al.*, 2001; Nunn, 2012) and combine with a range of other reinforcing management

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1206&langId=en>, accessed last on 4/2/2018.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1163&langId=en>, accessed last on 4/2/2018.

technologies such as the use of datawarehouses and management quality standards (Nunn, 2013, pp. 18 & Table 7, p49).

## **Performance management as inter-scalar rule regime**

Performance management is an important inter-scalar rule regime, extending from macro-regional meta-governance down to ensuring sub-state institutional – and even individual – competition to encourage activation. At the sub-state scale, performance management technologies are now widely used to lock-in competition within sub-state institutional structures such as PES. For example, Datawarehouses are increasingly used to develop comparative ‘benchmarking’ practices between sub-national units (e.g. regions, municipalities, offices and sometimes individual staff) to encourage competition over key indicators. The sophistication of this comparison and competition varies, but occasionally includes complex clustering to compare performance on like terms. For instance, in Switzerland a summary measure is derived from a weighted index of four indicators and interpreted *via* a complex econometric model that seeks to account for exogenous variables such as labour market conditions, seasonality, demographics and travel-to-work-area dynamics (Nunn, 2013 Box 3 and 4). In Germany, regions are placed into clusters for comparison of performance based on their labour market context. Benchmarking and sharing information between high and low performers is encouraged by the Commission, and a ‘toolkit’ for PES (Scharle, 2013) promotes sub-national benchmarking as a mechanism to improve performance. In addition, competition is in some cases driven down to the individual advisor level (e.g. Holland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Austria and Germany) and is occasionally also associated with financial incentives for individuals (e.g. Austria and Germany).

Macro-regional ‘fast management’ mechanisms also embed benchmarking at the supra-national scale. One of the current Mutual Learning Programme contracts has been used to resurrect a failed attempt at national ‘Benchmarking’ from the mid-2000s (Lehner *et al.*, 2005; OSB Consulting & Synthesis Forschung, 2007). The new contract – focussed on ‘*Benchlearning*’ involves an annual process of self-assessment against a series of measures and claims (European Network of PES, 2018) some of which are about management processes (e.g. ‘strategic performance management’) but some of which define the political economy content of these (e.g. ‘sustainable activation and management of transitions’). Criteria and numerical scoring are used to place PES in a range of performance categories ranging from ‘mature’, through ‘well developed’, ‘developing’ to ‘developable’ (Fertig, n.d.). The evidence underpinning each of these criteria and scoring criteria is mixed and in some cases superficial. The pressures induced are to comply with familiar reform agendas including to embed sub-national institutional competition and to encourage PES to use performance management to strengthen individual level competition through the use of financial incentives. Subsequent to self-assessment, PES are visited by a team of assessors who provide a commentary on the self-assessment. Assessors are typically external consultants working under a framework for the lead consultant on the *Benchlearning* contract, alongside officials from other countries. Comparative reports based on these are produced and discussed at thematic events, to encourage further peer pressure and each PES must produce ‘change reports’ based on their responses to external assessment and showing how they have implemented the recommendations made. National authorities can, and do, contest some of the findings and they can quite easily claim they have met recommendations with semantic alignment of existing

reforms (for e.g. see the discussion in (Scharle *et al.*, 2017)). However, the power of these initiatives to influence policy is not their immediate impact but their long-term shaping of the narrative and menu from which sub-state bureaucracies choose management practices to implement policy. It is the slow-drip which leads to convergence in management practices. In this sense, reform ideas may frequently fail to take hold, or do so superficially, but following the ‘fail forward’ logic, they are resurrected over and again.

## **The political economy content of Inter-Scalar ‘Fast Management’**

It is also important to note that these practices tend toward a particular political economy *content* (Bredgaard & Larsen, 2007). Analysis of the types of objectives encouraged through performance management can be particularly revealing for the types of outcomes that policy makers desire. Performance measures can focus on inputs (e.g. money, staff), activities (e.g. staff behaviours and processes), outputs (e.g. referral of jobseekers to particular types of ‘support’), intermediate outcomes (e.g. the transition of jobseekers from unemployment to employment) or final outcomes (e.g. the employment/unemployment rate, productivity measures and so on) (Nunn, 2012). Each have their merits and drawbacks with the measurement of activities and outputs being associated with a tighter focus on what PES do but at the same time being criticised for leading to ‘gaming’ by encouraging the ‘creaming’ of competitive jobseekers for (sometimes costly) interventions they do not need, while ‘parking’ those who might have a low likelihood of finding work but who would benefit from support (Bouckaert & Peters, 2002; Bruttel, 2005; Struyven & Steurs, 2005). One reason for continually returning to the theme of performance management in attempts to strengthen the implementation of ALMP is to repeatedly try to assert central control over frontline service delivery.

Across the EU there has been a convergence in the use of intermediate outcome indicators; principally labour market transitions from unemployment, sometimes into employment (specific intermediate outcomes), but sometimes simply from unemployment or welfare benefits to any other destination (Nunn, 2013, Table 2; Nunn *et al.*, 2010, pp.23–33). Where welfare benefits are in place for the unemployed, unspecific outcomes may be problematic in that they might encourage PES staff to pressure jobseekers to leave benefits without having employment, pushing them into the informal economy or extreme poverty. The film *I Daniel Blake* powerfully draws attention to the ways that these banal management processes might drive significant social harm. In the film, there are several scenes in which the main characters have interactions with employment services that discipline their behaviour in ways that are highly likely to have been driven by the effects of targets and rules on frontline staff behaviour.

At another level of analysis, the outcomes of such management pressures also underpin complementarities. Where they encourage all jobseekers to find just any work quickly, the result is different to where they encourage careful matching of jobseekers to jobs which utilise their skills. It is likely that the first job available to a jobseeker will be less well matched than one carefully looked for, and will therefore be of a lower skill content. Proponents claim rapid job entries are beneficial in that they reduce the fiscal drain of welfare transfers and individuals can then search for other jobs while in work. However, since labour is not always as mobile in practice as this suggests, it may also be that skills will be underutilised, higher skill vacancies

will more likely remain unfilled and less skilled labour will be crowded-out of the market. The results may be higher levels of unemployment/underemployment, impaired productivity and a lowered general skills/productivity equilibrium. As such, this may generate social harm through lower productivity and competitiveness and through the imposition of low paid, low quality and insecure work; all of which are known to lead to negative consequences for physical and mental health, relationships and wider wellbeing (Pemberton, Sutton, & Fahmy, 2013). It is notable that states with greater preference for activation (e.g. UK/US) tend to have lower skills/wage equilibria compared to those with more intensive training (e.g. Denmark/Sweden) in their ALMPs. Moreover, inasmuch as both households and employers are likely to respond to these changes there may be a dampening effect on skill development, utilisation and technology investments. By contrast, if PES were to look to ways of upskilling the labour power available to employers there may be incentive effects to increase the skills content of demand. Management practices which focus on speeding-up job transitions may also reinforce responsabilisation; placing a responsibility on jobseekers to accept work rapidly, contributing to the stigma of being in receipt of such ‘support’. Put simply, these management practices may influence the political economy *content* of complementarity and, through this, exaggerating or mitigating social harm.

All PES in the EU (for whom information is available), have headline indicators/targets which focus on transitions away from unemployment. For countries such as Denmark and Italy where more localised systems of targets and indicators are in place, transitions from unemployment are equally important and prominent among local practices. Reinforcing this point, since the 2008- crisis there has been a notable shift toward benefit duration indicators of various types (Nunn, 2012, p.19; 2013, p.16) which encourage frontline advisers to work more intensively with those they think they can help to move into work so as to reduce the duration of unemployment for specific groups of jobseekers, or overall. These duration measures are associated with greater creaming and parking (Grubb, 2004; Nunn, 2012, p. 11; Nunn *et al.*, 2012; OSB Consulting & Synthesis Forschung, 2007; Synthesis Forschung & OSB Consulting, 2004).<sup>7</sup> In theory it is possible to create baskets of targets and indicators designed to balance out such negative incentives, few PES utilise measures such as ‘skills gained’, ‘prevention of unemployment’, ‘quality of employment’ or other kinds of counter-weights to measures promoting immediate employment outcomes.

There is evidence that such measures encourage disciplinary outcomes for individuals and generate wider social harm. In the US, Fording *et al.* (2013) find that US TANF programme performance measures have increased sanctioning, that sanctioning is associated with negative long-term outcomes, and that they are more likely to be applied to African Americans than white welfare clients (Schram *et al.*, 2009). Brodtkin suggests that these effects may run ahead of policy intentions. She suggested even where there were provisions in policies for protecting the poor and vulnerable, staff frequently “limited access to benefits, provided inadequate or even useless work ‘supports’, ignored good cause exemptions, and delegitimated claims of

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<sup>7</sup> For a review of creaming and parking and other problems in the operation of PES PM, see (Nunn, 2012, p. 8). For a review of the various advantages and disadvantages of different types of measure see (Nunn, 2012, p. 13, Table 2).

individual need...” (2011:i271) as a function of administrative strategies to improve resource efficiency and increase measured performance.

In the UK, while there is no formal measure or target for sanctions, campaigners have often complained about this. This is because among the suite of (48+) ‘benchmarks’ that local managers *can* use to understand and manage staff, sanctions *are* present and also because occasionally local level managers invent their own administrative measures (Nunn & Devins, 2012). These are not national ‘targets’, but the data infrastructure is there for local level use, and informal messages about under-performance in the system might encourage their use as lower level managers respond to higher level pressure to improve performance on other targets. The introduction of these measures coincided with wider austerity and it is notable that the number of welfare sanctions rose substantially (Edmiston, 2017) and that there is variation over time and space in the use of sanctions. Taken together this suggests that localised management processes rather than national policy or jobseeker behaviour were the cause of rising sanctions (National Audit Office, 2016). Such sanctions cause substantial social harm; pushing people into lower paid work, poverty and leading to negative mental and physical health outcomes for those affected. Sanctions have also been associated in other studies with the rise in food bank use (Loopstra et al., 2015) and a range of other impacts such as destitution and homelessness (Watts et al., 2014). Research on the experience of poverty and dependence on welfare has repeatedly suggested interactions between PES staff and benefit claimants inside jobcentres is part of the wider process of stigmatisation (Pemberton, Sutton, & Fahmy, 2014) which adds to the social harm of poverty and failure to compete.

## **Concluding remarks**

Performance management in the delivery of ALMPs, through PES has significant IPE implications. The design of performance management regimes reveal much about the political economy intentions behind policy design and delivery, and the way that performance management practice operates on the ground will have a substantial effect on the extent to which those policy intentions are met, exaggerated or frustrated. They help to decide who gets what from whatever welfare the state provides, and how obligations to engage in the formal labour market are constructed, including how these obligations might vary for different social groups. Despite this, enquiry into how ALMPs are delivered and managed, as opposed to broad brush stroke critiques of ‘workfare’, are surprisingly absent from IPE research. The paper begins to fill that gap.

To do so, it draws on critical accounts of the spread of neoliberalising policy ideas and models – or ‘Fast Policy’ from the work of Peck, Brenner, Theodore and others. In an attempt to facilitate competitiveness at spatial units below the world market scale (e.g. states, regions, cities, neighbourhoods, households, individuals) all sorts of policy makers, consultants and public managers try out a range of ‘off the peg’ policy models and develop them as they seek to make them fit the local context, overcome problems and deal with legitimacy problems. Because competition generates endemic failure, there is an endless search for new and iteratively developed policy solutions. Sympathetic to the formulation of these authors but adding considerable detail to the account in relation to managerial practices in the implementation of ALMPs, it is argued here that management practices follow similar

'mobilities' to policy ideas. This is 'Fast Management' and just like policy, the spread of particular practices is facilitated by instrumental international organisations and networks. Significantly though, much of the activity that spreads these practices is undertaken 'in, through and around' the political apparatus of the state and appears as a depoliticised technocratic process, often involving public managers and consultants operating at a variety of different scales. At the same time, the work that lower scale managers do in implementation becomes highly politicised as they negotiate the vagaries of competition and failure; contradiction laden environments and policy trade-offs.

The particular case of performance management in labour market policy is interesting because it encompasses both depoliticised multi-scalar policy making and governance, and these lower levels of highly politicised management and implementation. Complex and overlapping forms of meta-governance borrow key performance management techniques such as the use of plans and accountability structured around performance indicators; cyclical administrative monitoring; peer surveillance; mutual encouragement to coordinate policy making between the macro-regional scale and national or federal scales. This increasingly turns *policy making* into a depoliticised managerial process. At the same time, sub-nationally these same technologies are carried through to the scale(s) of implementation whether these be regional, local, municipal and so on. At these scales though, public managers responsible for 'making policy work' must try to *make people work* in the formal labour market. This is often a complex challenge, made more difficult by prior failures to compete which may create poverty, erode skills and confidence and generate a structural lack of opportunities. They may also mean that more rewarding opportunities are available outside of the formal labour market, in the grey or illicit economy. Lower scale managers confront these problems alongside resource constraints and the contradictory position of rapidly changing institutional environments and frequent removal of other supportive services. They must cope with this environment, using the measures available to them. Alongside their own personal, professional and political orientations, this will shape the way that they interpret and use performance management techniques, often altering the political economy content of policy at the frontline. Such coping and gaming is central to the ways that neoliberalisation leads to path dependent localised change because it confronts different 'inherited' socio-economic conditions on the ground. The way that managerial processes such as performance management are used in policy implementation may significantly amplify or mitigate social harm, and are central to struggles between higher and lower scale policy makers and managers. A focus on performance management in policy implementation can reveal the real rather than rhetorical objectives of policy, and the ways it is implemented can reveal whether these objectives are realised or not.

The way this operates in relation to ALMPs shows a continual tendency to strengthen pressures for jobseekers to actively seek work and to move into employment faster, with political economy implications resulting from weakened matching between labour supply and demand. The promotion of rapid employment transitions is one of the concrete mechanisms by which structural pressures to compete in the global political economy are translated *via* management practices to frontline public service staff and to individuals and households who are 'beneficiaries' of their services. Their responses to these managerial technologies – which are shaped by extant social and institutional conditions - generate the complex, path dependent and messy realities of neoliberalisation on the ground, both reinforcing and variegating the structural tendency toward competitiveness.

As the discussion above suggests, performance measures with a neoliberalising political economy content may strengthen the pressure for policy implementation to result in significant social harm (Fording, Schram, & Soss, 2013; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). However, the variation in practice within patterns of convergence, suggests a site where there is scope for critical engagement and impact. Studies in contexts outside of ALMP implementation find that local management and implementation might be a site of contestation and subversion of neoliberalising initiatives (Hargreaves et al., 2018; Barnes and Prior, 2009; Dobson, 2015). Managerialism may literally shape the management of social harm. Engaging with managerial techniques should therefore not just be a matter of observation and explanation for critical IPE scholars. Within the patterns of convergence suggested above, there is scope to influence the design and content of performance indicators so that they have more or less disciplinary content. Promoting more egalitarian policy objectives also requires control. Evidence suggests that part of what influences this is the nature of the actors involved. ‘Inclusive governance’ (Nunn, 2018) practices which seek to open up the often closed and superficially technocratic processes of lower scale setting, monitoring, management and revision of performance indicators, to consciously re-politicise them, may offer the opportunity to influence the political economy content of policy implementation. It is true that such moves may remain piecemeal and contingent. However, because of the open and co-evolutionary nature of inter-penetrating scalar relations, many reflective micro-scale routines of opposition and coping might themselves add up to challenging systemic processes of neoliberalisation. As such, it is essential that research in critical IPE devote greater attention to management practice and to the ways in which these techniques and technologies might be better understood, contested and utilised to challenge and divert the messy and contingent processes of neoliberalisation and social harm.

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