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An Historical Parenthesis?



Edited by Guy Neave, Kjell Blücker,
and Thorsten Nybom



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THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
AN HISTORICAL PARENTHESIS

Essays in Honor of
Professor Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Stig Strömholm,
former Vice Chancellor of
Uppsala University,
former Chairman of The Bank of Sweden
Tercentenary Foundation

Edited by
KJELL BLÜCKERT,
GUY NEAVE
AND
THORSTEN NYBOM

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THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

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SERIES INTRODUCTION TO ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Little in higher education has not undergone radical change in the course of the past quarter century though one thing remains constant. This constant is the general consensus of governments, international organizations and intergovernmental agencies, as well as rapidly coalescing continent-wide trading blocs that the success of their particular agendas and the vision they entertain of the world as they believe it ought to be, passes through education in general and higher education very specifically.

Higher Education has become the central instrument for boosting national efficiency. It is seen as a sensitive and indispensable pointer to the place of individual nations in the global economy. Its ability to constantly adapt is anxiously scrutinized, weighed in the balance and that with increasing frequency and rigor. Never have so many agencies and interests, both public and private, been engaged in ascertaining and interpreting the trends, feats, shortcomings, and performance of higher education as they are today. And rarely have the consequences of their judgment been so influential upon the way interests within the Nation, be they public or private, perceive higher education itself. Indeed, across different nations, such bodies play a crucial a role in determining the support higher education may expect from public opinion.

At the very least, higher education is seen either as maintaining the place the nation thinks it ought to have in the burgeoning Knowledge Society or Knowledge Economy. Or, on a less optimistic note, as confirming the fears that some anticipate of “national slippage” from a once-confident place in the sun to a less enviable one in that constantly changing strife involved in the “delivery of educational services” and the “attractiveness” of a country’s higher education system at home and abroad.

Higher education is a highly dynamic system. And such dynamism is easily represented. The number of higher education establishments worldwide grows yearly. And while not all are of university level, still the “density” of the higher education infrastructure worldwide has grown remarkably in the past decade. In 1993, the world stock of university-level institutions of higher education stood in the region of 4,000. Ten years on, the corresponding figure has doubled to 8,100—a dramatic pointer to higher education’s place in the wider process of globalization.

As the pace of internationalization speeds up, as systems of higher education are drawn more deeply into the swirling transnational traffic of ideas, applications,

training, personnel, students and experience, so the series *Issues in Higher Education* brings the best of timely, relevant and focused scholarship from around the world to address matters of central concern to both specialist and the general public, to university leadership, administration, teachers, practitioners and students.

Issues in Higher Education is resolutely committed to advancing the comparative dimension in the study of higher education. In the twenty or more domains that contribute to this field, the “comparative aspect” has sometimes been seen as a “second string” to the domestic, national debate. This is no longer so. In a world of international knowledge flows, comparison is an indispensable, constantly renegotiated and fundamental building bloc in the positioning of the nation’s schools and universities. From insights derived from comparative analysis, they may be better equipped to flourish in a changing world. Policy is not simply about how we fare alone. More than ever, today, it also demands we know how others fare as well; how they respond to what we do; what they in their turn are doing and why. Comparison is the essence of competition. Without it, competition would be a lame duck. Comparative analysis and the scholarship of comparing across different systems of higher education allow us to see how far our intents are matched by our feats on the international academic marketplace.

Issues in Higher Education actively encourages original scholarship building on and out from the international and comparative perspectives. Particular preference will be given to studies of a given topic compared across a minimum of two national higher education systems.

Guy Neave

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PREFACE

The European Research University—A Historical Parenthesis? When discussing this theme for the farewell seminar to Professor Stig Strömholm—former chairman of The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation—we did not know that the European Commission had at the same time planned to launch a debate on how to turn European universities into a “world class reference.” On the February 5, 2003, the two Commissioners, Philippe Busquin and Viviane Reding invited all interested main actors to join in a discussion on key issues related to a healthy university system.

On this occasion, Viviane Reding, the Commissioner for Education and Culture, said: “We have to maintain excellence in our universities, and avoid their being relegated to the second division. If we do not think now about how to support universities for the future, tomorrow it will be too late.” At the same time, her colleague, the Commissioner for European Research, Philippe Busquin stated: “If we want to be a leading player in the global knowledge-based society, Europe has to nurture its universities [. . .] Universities are centres of research and education and poles of regional economic development at the same time. Investing in universities is one of the best investments we can make for our future.”

Across the world, particularly in Europe and definitely in Sweden, universities are facing an imperative need to adapt and adjust to a whole series of profound changes in contemporary society. The European Union document injected a series of questions into the debate on the conditions under which universities will be able efficiently to play their role. For nearly two centuries, European universities have modeled themselves after the ideal of a university envisaged by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his reform of the German university, which positioned research at the heart of university activity and made it the basis of teaching. Today the trend is far away from this ideal model and moves toward an increasing differentiation.

In the full-fledged American research universities, basic research has remained a major area of interest. This makes them very attractive both to the society and for industry. Therefore, in this context, basic research is frequently conducted with its application in mind, but nevertheless without losing its fundamental inquisitive character. In Europe, universities tend to undertake directly applied research for the business sector, extending even to the provision of scientific services. If taken to excess, this could endanger the universities’ capacity to contribute to the progress of knowledge.

Even if the instigators of the EU memorandum seem aware of what constitutes the attractiveness of the American research university system, the paper is very vague on

how to expound a solid research university system in Europe. In the following essays, these important issues are addressed by scholars from various intellectual angles. There is indeed a need for a multifaceted discussion on how to remodel and reform European universities. The idea of the university was born in Europe. Let us hope that European universities still may be recognized as excellent and first-rate points of reference.

Professor Strömholm, to whom these essays are dedicated, has throughout the years passionately and perspicaciously partaken in this discussion. We now offer him these essays *pour le mérite*.

Dan Brändström

Professor and Managing Director
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PART I
OVERVIEW

CHAPTER 1

CREATIVE INTELLECTUAL DESTRUCTION
OR DESTRUCTIVE POLITICAL CREATIVITY?
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF
EUROPEAN “KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION”

Thorsten Nybom

Introduction

The process of institutional changes and epistemic drift in science and organized research we are witnessing today is, by no means or in any way, exceptional in the long and winding history of higher learning and science. On the contrary, this recurrent process of “creative destruction”—using Joseph Schumpeter’s famous characterization of the dynamic process that changes an economic and production system from within—has been a generic feature of the evolution of qualified “knowledge production” as an organized and institutionalized human activity during the last 500 years of Western history.¹

As in all major historical reorientations—and there can be no doubt that we are in the middle of one such—this particular one has been brought about by the confluence and synergy of several cultural and intellectual, as well as economic and political forces. These developments in science policy, research organization and higher education with its ensuing lack of orientation and a crumbling value system have also, at least partly, sometimes been described and discussed in very broad and general terms, as one of many indications of an ongoing global process of cultural and ideological uncertainty, after the demise of the Soviet Empire and the end of the Cold War.

I do, however, maintain that the rapid developments and fundamental changes in the last two decades in science policy, research funding, higher education policy, particularly in Western Europe but partly also in North America, have had their own specific dimensions and chronology which started in the mid and late 1960s. I also believe that this process of dissolution, which gained momentum in the early 1980s, will, eventually, have deep-seated and long-lasting cultural, societal and institutional consequences for the production of qualified knowledge in the coming decades (Ziman 2000; Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny et al. 2001).

Hence, these changes must be discussed and analyzed in their own right and as potentially seminal shifts in intellectual history—fully comparable with the “institutional revolutions” that characterized the two previous “turn-of-centuries” both with their centers of gravity in Berlin² (Nybom 2003; Ash 1999; Schwinges 2001).

Mainly referring to the developments in Continental Europe during the last 30 years I will try to argue that the cultural, intellectual, bureaucratic and political conditions under which science and qualified knowledge are produced have undergone dramatic changes. Even more significant, these changes have included practically all institutional, ideological and mental levels and dimensions.

A Plausible Question

On the central institutional level, regarding the higher education/university system which for roughly two centuries has played a crucial, not to say defining, role in European knowledge production, the plausible question is whether or not the European Research University *de facto* has ceased to exist—in everything but name and external form (Habermas 2003, pp. 78–103). Simultaneously, on the principal political level, partly due to conscious political decisions and partly due to uncontrollable and co-varying economic, demographic, cultural and similar processes, the national governments of Europe have abdicated from their traditional role of (economic and political) guardian angel to the universities (Fuessel et al. 1996).

The two “social contracts” between the central nation state and the university—the first laid the foundation of the modern research university and was signed in 1810 in Berlin; the second, formulated by Vannevar Bush, secured a research funding system based on academic excellence and was signed in 1945 in Washington D.C.—have been annulled by the European politicians and, at least not yet, been renegotiated or substituted (Reingold 1991, pp. 284–333). The relations between the national governments and the universities, in present day Europe, are characterized by mutual and deep distrust, which, in turn, have led to what adequately must be characterized as an accelerating process of institutional implosion and/or dissolution. Thus, the gloom of my thoughts and visions in this essay could, at least partly, be explained by my deeply felt personal fear that the fundamental precondition for a reasonable and prosperous development that Stig Strömholm is pointing to in his concluding remarks—a relation of mutual, even implicit, trust between politicians and Academia—has, to a very high degree, disappeared in the last 15 years.³

Paradoxically, this development—usually described by its most fervent proponents as “a process of deregulation and decentralization”—has almost everywhere been accompanied by a trend of sometimes massive politicization of higher education and research (Neave, chapter 6, this volume), which in some cases has led to a redefinition of the ultimate role and mission of higher education institutions. These are no longer considered to be responsible and invaluable academic and national cultural centers. They are rather primarily seen as instrumental means to hide unemployment among young people or, at best, to function as “development or innovation centers” in the national and even regional economic policy (Kogan et al. 2000). In addition, this process has been accompanied by an almost explosive growth of numerous evaluations and accountability schemes which has turned the traditional European

system of exclusive and strict “in-put” control into different types of “out-put” control where practically “everything that moves is measured.”

Politicized Science

Roughly during the same period research funding has undergone a period of massive bureaucratization and instrumentalization. This is primarily but certainly not only manifested by the constantly growing importance and direct and indirect impact of the so-called frame-work EU-Research Programs. It has also to a very high degree become a dominant trend in science policy and research funding at the national level. The “Policy for Science” that characterized the first three decades after World War II has gradually been abandoned for something that rightfully could be labeled “Politicized Science.” This has gradually led to a growing tendency in research funding to replace the traditional criterion of academic excellence by more nebulous criteria sometimes labelled “strategic,” sometimes “social and economic relevant,” sometimes “mode 2” research or “the production of socially robust knowledge” (see Scott and Gustavsson, chapters 10 and 13, in this volume; also Elzinga 2002). Subsequently, this has led to a system of research funding where politically controlled “ear-marking” and “strategic allocation of resources” have become the rule rather than the exception (Forman 2002).

Ultimately, this has gradually had lasting consequences for discipline formation and for other dimensions of the internal life of science including self-understanding and professional ethos among scientists and scholars (see Blomqvist et al. 1996; Bennich-Bjorkman 2004). Thus, it is not only relevant to talk about a gradual demise of the university but, at least in relative terms, of the decline of the disciplines, particularly in research policy planning. Even if the traditional disciplinary structure is still well anchored in academic life and prestige structures it has, nevertheless, gradually lost its favorable position in the research (policy) hierarchy. In a system where politically defined “socio-economic relevance” has gained the upper hand as the ultimate criterion of quality, discipline-based peer-reviewing and expertise are not only considered to be inadequate and even obsolete, but can also quite easily be dismissed as nothing but a means of illegitimate power abuse on the part of the scientific community (Forman 2002).

Usually, this development is explained as a more or less “natural” consequence of the allegedly ever widening gap between the internal evolution of science and the acute problems “in the real world” that science should be confronting. But this is only partly true. For instance, the enthusiasm over, and insistence on, “interdisciplinary approaches,” is not only dictated by an obvious lack of relevance in modern science, but has also turned into an ideological or political vehicle to undermine the traditional academic value system and autonomy. Eventually, this usually politically instigated instrumentalism has also led to a system where the frequent and usually externally driven demands of “reorganizations” of scientific work take place without consultation and often in total disregard of the intrinsic norms and values of scientific work. Those who have the power to define the “true” meaning of “social relevance” or “the innovative/commercial potential” neither accept nor believe that the organization of research must be in accordance with its own unique and inherent

rationale or fundamental structure, but believe instead that it can be freely redefined according to whatever “mission” the politicians/bureaucrats believe it should accomplish at any particular “political” moment.

Finally, in a broader historical perspective I would also be so bold as to argue that science, during the last three decades, or in the postmodern era, has lost—or perhaps better been deprived of—the central, nay crucial, role it has played in what was defined as Western *Culture* for almost six centuries. Modern science is no longer the Western World’s perhaps most unique *cultural* gift to mankind, instead it has become an intrinsic part of the political economy in a New Brave “Knowledge”(?) Society,” and, accordingly, treated with the same kind shortsighted instrumentalism as any other field of ordinary politics (Forman 2000).

Gap between Europe and the United States

The ominous development I have outlined above really started to accelerate in the early 1980s. From then on there has also been a constantly growing gap between the United States and Europe when it comes to the pursuit of excellence in scientific research. And, even more significant, this gap has turned into a gulf when we are talking about qualified research training and elite higher education—with a few possible exceptions. Hence, I am arguing that this process of dissolution is a fairly recent phenomenon, and it had actually very little to do with the relative loss of political power and economic strength in Europe after World War II. Up till 1985 the gap between American and European laureates remained fairly constant. After that the US-share started to grow at an ever-increasing pace (Gustavsson, chapter 13, this volume).

Considering the natural delay of causes and effects in research practice and research policy planning, there are good reasons to believe that something happened in European or American research policy planning in the 1970s. And it most certainly did! Starting in the late 1970s many European countries gradually and consciously replaced the existing Vannevar Bush model of science policy and research funding with a variation of more or less perverted versions of instrumentally oriented research-funding policies, which were supposed to secure and boost the immediate “social function of science.” This shift continues to have profound and lasting detrimental consequences for norms and values such as disciplinarity and peer-review, for institutional autonomy and eventually also for the level of intellectual creativity.

It is not only possible but also even instructive to divide this process of fundamental, structural and even cultural change into three distinct chronological phases of research policy, which has had lasting consequences on the life and well being of the European university⁴ (Nybom 1997; Krull in this volume; Leijonhuvud, in this volume; Benner 2001; Bennich-Björkman 2004).

The first, which could be labeled “the technocratic phase” started in the mid-1960s and lasted until the late 1970s. This development constituted no threat to the primacy of basic research and traditional academic values. Instead, it was seen as a complementary but supposedly more “socially relevant” form of knowledge production that was funded and administrated outside the traditional research sector, and seldom under the qualitative supervision of academic research. It could, perhaps a little simplistically, be regarded as an attempt to fulfill the old social democratic dream