Editorial

The Business of University Research

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The activities that figure under the all-encompassing head of ‘Research’ are, historically, what distinguished the modern, Humboldtian university from its foregoers and ancestors. Research is also the central activity that many believe serves to identify, create and attract excellence to the world of scholarship, despite the fact that certain governments are seeking to draw a line between ‘research’ (the ‘real thing’) and scholarship (its Ersatz or pale substitute).

How long such optimism will continue to flourish is a different question. For if research is the heart of the world of erudition, it is also very much part of the business of cutting edge industry. In the short term, the ability to win contracts and stupendous sums for one’s university is nowadays considered to be the duty of all right-thinking members of the Academic Estate. There is, however, a limit to how far one is prepared to ‘labour and not to count the cost’ and very certainly so when conditions offered to do the same labour in industry tend to be more rewarding by far, although in a purely pecuniary sense. If conditions of service in academia are gnawed away and precariousness becomes the common lot, the temptation of conditions, at worst no worse but consoled by cash, threatens academia with being thrown on the scrap-heap of ‘non-sustainable activities’.

Dire Warnings

Warnings of what can happen and the consequences for a country’s economy, quite apart from its social stability and cohesion, that follow from academia’s eclipse — even temporary — are only too evident. Even for the uncaring, a little racking of brains reveals prospects unpleasant in the extreme. And for a moral tale well told, the caring have only to consult colleagues in Central and Eastern Europe, who will readily refresh their memories as will their Russian colleagues, or at least those of them for whom academia still remains a third job.

Yet, the view dies hard that such apocalyptic events happen only to others. Here again, however, this is not always so. And while some research systems may count the blessedness of their current condition, so beneficent a view would not be shared by their French colleagues. Rather the contrary. The current state of the research system in France if one believes the opinion of

10,000 research staff who stumped angrily around Paris in late January 2004, is — if not apocalyptic then at the very least — dramatic indeed in its penury.

The Knowledge Economy and Changes in the Mental Map of Research Systems

Even so, a country's viability in that new international order, which swirls around the Knowledge Economy, rests upon the functioning of its research system. But here too our mental map of research systems is itself changing. In the not too distant past, research, as opposed to research training or preparation, remained a university monopoly. Today, our mental map extends to other institutional forms and organizations, not always to be found solely within the groves of academe. Significantly, however, training for research and formal qualifications that certify that ability, still remain a monopoly of the higher education system — or a particular part of it.

Where research is located then, what is done and how well largely — some would say, wholly — determine where an individual establishment figures in the ever-changing snakes and ladders of academic standing, repute — and envy. How research is organized, how students are trained and prepared for a career in erudition and discovery is an area that has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Indeed, this attention quickened perceptibly from the late 1980s when European governments began radically to re-think how the research career and training should be overhauled in the light of the emerging 'Knowledge Economy' — that major change which involves the restructuring of industry, of occupations and skills around computers, communication and an expanded service economy.

Mobilizing Research Training Systems

Mobilizing higher education to deal with these new priorities, the girding up of national loins and laboratories, began with the French reform of doctoral studies in the late 1980s.¹ It spread to the UK the following decade and embraced both the Dutch and German systems of higher education around the same time.

The main thrust of overhauling research training systems in France, Britain, the Netherlands and Germany turned around creating variations upon a central model — the American Graduate School. Such developments, the rise of Ecoles Doctorales in France, Graduate Schools in the UK, Onderzoeksscholen in the Netherlands and Graduierten Kolleges in Germany represented a direct response to what many European authorities saw as an overwhelming triumph of American practices. These, if triumphant, also posed

a standing challenge and a competitive threat to Europe and very particularly if it were to assume what it considered to be its place in the Knowledge Economy.

Higher Education Policy Takes Issue

Against this backdrop, Higher Education Policy in this issue explores recent developments in a number of national research systems and that from a number of different perspectives. Marcel Herbst takes up one aspect that, whatever the changes and the taking on of new ways of conducting research, retains its essential importance: namely production and output. He uses this dimension to explore the differences between the output of European research systems and their counterpart in the United States. He raises a number of hypotheses that account for the latter's performance and relates it to certain organizational features in the American system. In doing so, he also links back to a previous issue of Higher Education Policy and more particularly to Martin Trow's article in the Spring issue last year.

Liefner, Schaetzel and Schroeder push the debate further and, in essence, suggest that among the reforms needed in German Higher Education are the introduction of the competitive ethic, operationalized and tied to the funding of universities. They examine a number of institutional case studies. They draw heavily from the United States example and from the only system in Western Europe where funding is directly related to performance — namely, the United Kingdom. By so doing they demonstrate the old adage, well known to Sociologists, that one learns more about social phenomena by studying the deviant cases.

With Malgorzata Dabrowa-Szeffler, we move Eastwards and focus on the problem of supply and demand of young researchers for the Polish research system. While Liefner and his colleagues focus on that most difficult of all things to change — namely, attitude and ethic Mme Dabrowa-Szeffler examines others forms of restriction — financial, legal and organisational. These, she argues, are no less of a straight-jacket. They affect research productivity by preventing the recruitment of young researchers.

Belay's account of the unfolding of agricultural research in Ethiopia, which he traces back over the previous half century or so, provides a fascinating development in a particular sector of a higher education system all too rarely covered in Western journals. Here too, however, it is possible to see certain generic themes arising — the effect of political instability upon the readiness of personnel specifically trained to meet one of the nation's elemental needs to remain in post. The dilemma this poses when having benefited from being trained abroad, the time to return home looms. From this angle, Belay merely extends explicitly the range of conditions that Dabrowa-Szeffler identifies less

with brain drain per se, so much as the inability of the home system of higher education to assimilate those it has trained.

Chiang shifts our attention yet again, to the United Kingdom and more particularly to changes in relations between students and supervisors in two subject areas. Interestingly, Chiang focuses on what may eventually turn out to be the downside of Britain's performance-related funding system. Namely, that the urge to produce is sometimes achieved at the expense of student supervision. Whether this suggestion extends beyond the disciplines Chiang examines remains to be seen.

Evans' article opens up very interesting avenues, which come from a University seeking to capitalize on its standing, the strength of its research to develop a business partnership with an enterprise engaged in biotechnology. As a case study of the ways coalitions, interests and alliances change and manoeuvre, it provides material in abundance for those studying the interplay between government, academia and enterprise. And no less so for the fact one of Europe's oldest universities was involved. Here indeed is a tale of research as business, although it also begs the question 'Who should be holding the long spoon?'

Finally, in the Forum section are two articles that develop themes that, if different, nevertheless intersect with the notion of Research as Business. Internationalization is one and Grant Harmon dissects Australia's progress down higher education's equivalent of the Yellow Brick Road. Breton & Lambert, on a similarly intersecting topic examine social relevance and collective action.

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