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The excellent institution

Svensson, Peter; Spoelstra, Sverre; Pedersen, Michael; Schreven, Stephanie

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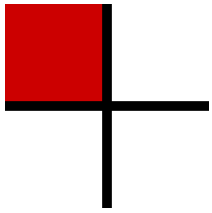
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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



The excellent institution*

Peter Svensson, Sverre Spoelstra, Michael Pedersen and Stephanie Schreven

‘What institution was ever so wisely planned that no disadvantage could arise therefrom?’
(Spinoza, 2002 [1670]: 569)

Institution

We often understand institutions as some kind of durable structure that transcends human lives and their intentions. Defined in more technical terms: ‘institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 54). The habits that constitute institutions remain, while the actors that perform these habits come and go. Institutions transcend individual endeavours as well as time and generations.

An institution may also be characterized by walls that separate the inside from the outside. Inside the walls one may find habits of virtue, reason, and organization. Beyond its walls you may step into an unsettling world of irrationality, chaos, and evil. As André Spicer argues in his contribution to this issue, this formless and unattractive outside, what he calls ‘extitution’, is created by the institution in order to legitimize itself. The walls of the institution protect its inhabitants from the dangers of the outside world, but at the price of immobility of body and mind. Institutionalization is therefore not merely a wall that separates the inside from the outside; it also guides the way we think and act.

The university is perhaps the modern institution par excellence, and its walls are crumbling fast. For Kant (1992 [1798]), the university (or at least the faculty of philosophy within the university) was the institution that manages to protect itself from other (reason-threatening) institutions, like religion and the state. But this protection against hostile institutions, for better and worse, is rapidly disappearing. Kant’s question has become reversed. The question is no longer how universities can protect themselves from unwanted intruders, like the state or the market. The protecting walls surrounding universities are now seen as barriers to developing forms of useful expertise that fit the demands of the knowledge economy. ‘Excellence’, the main qualifier of academic

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activity today, has little to do with old academic ideals of reason or *Bildung*. As Bill Readings shows in his book *The University in Ruins* (1996), ‘excellence’ refers to a self-referential system that has posited its own success as its primary goal. So now the question is: ‘How can we break down the walls of the university – so that the market and society can freely enter?’.

Researchers are increasingly valued for their capacity to attract grants, and the logic here is twofold: 1) if industry (or the industry-minded state) is willing to sponsor research, it must be ‘relevant’ and 2) attracting money from the outside is good for the university itself, which is increasingly supposed to act as a business. Copenhagen Business School has captured this trend in a marketing slogan: it is now (supposedly) the place ‘Where university means business’ (CBS, 2010). This marketization of academic knowledge is no doubt a dangerous development, but as Ingrid Hoofd argues (in this issue), nostalgia for Kant’s protected sphere, which she finds in activist-research projects like *Edu-factory* that strongly oppose the marketization of academia, is not a viable alternative. To use Readings’ (1996) phrase, we are destined to dwell within ‘the ruins of the university’, and had better make the best of it.

Today, one does not need to search long for so-called excellent universities: any accreditation system will provide you with a list of universities that are excellent in research and teaching. They are not excellent in terms of pursuing a particular educational model, in producing a particular new theory, in asking particular questions, in advancing a particular politics, or in creating alternative forms of organization; they are ‘simply’ excellent, no questions asked (other than questions around the number of highly-ranked journal publications, the nature of student feedback, and the number of successful professors).

It would be a mistake to characterize the university of excellence as an ‘open institution’ that is all about ‘facilitation, boundary crossing and dialogue’ (Spicer, in this issue) or as a ‘nomad institution’, which is concerned with speed, mobility and connections (Hoofd, in this issue). The university of excellence does establish a break with traditional ideals of the university, but it does not create an unambiguously open environment instead. As we shall argue, manifestations of excellence in publishing tend to leave little room for boundary crossing between disciplines, and it is quite averse to creative connections that authors may pursue. This should perhaps not surprise us if we remind ourselves of the ‘original’ concept of excellence. The point of Peters and Waterman’s business classic *In Search of Excellence* (1982), which popularized excellence as a management concept, was quite opposite to the creation of openness:

the gurus of Excellence charge management with the responsibility for building and strengthening cultures wherein a sense of self-determination and security is itself systematically constructed: strong corporate cultures are commended for their provision of a framework of discipline ‘in which practical autonomy takes place routinely’ (Peters and Waterman, 1982, p. 322). (Willmott, 1992: 61)

Management researchers have debated the academic merits of Peters and Waterman's book for many years. They ask: 'was their argument scientifically rigorous if so many of the "excellent" Fortune 500 companies went bankrupt?' 'Maybe their method was flawed?' Of course the book wasn't a great example of reasoning or rigorous scientific method. Its prime objective was to inspire managers to build strong organizational cultures, not to help management science progress. However, this hasn't prevented the concept of excellence from conquering the university. Ironically, the concept that has received so much critique within management studies is now, in somewhat altered form, but not less empty, the basis on which the quality of management studies is measured.

Interestingly enough, precisely because of its vacuousness excellence can also create environments for critical scholars. While highly sceptical of the university of excellence, Readings (1996: 91) notes that some critical disciplines, such as gay and lesbian studies, also prosper by alluding to excellence. This also applies to critical management studies. Critical management scholars have been highly successful in publishing excellent articles, and many of them are amazingly productive. Some appear to write more than they read. This can even become a guideline within the excellent institution. Reading is then only relevant in producing a gap (or 'locating a gap', for the believers) that is later to be filled with a contribution. The hyper-productivity of critical management scholars, targeted at excellent journals, has turned critical management into an excellent institution, and many critically oriented scholars are employed because of this mastery in publishing excellent papers.

Publishing

The excellence of a university faculty, department, or research group is often measured in terms of the number of texts published in highly ranked journals. Making your thoughts public in prestigious journals with high impact factors is a way of transforming excellent work in-doors into manifest, auditable documents. Thinking, considering, pondering, outlining, drafting, reviewing, editing and commenting – arguably very important academic work tasks – mean very little if these activities are not rendered visible in published output.

Publishing has gone through a dramatic change the last two decades or so. Announcing one's whereabouts and mood swings on Facebook is generally not considered symptomatic of a pathological attention seeking personality disorder. The regular publication of what is on your mind, relationship status and geographical location has rather become one of the ways in which we are rendered identifiable and definable. Publishers of printed, edited diaries no longer solely control the distribution of inner thoughts and confessional tales. Your personal, yet public, blog is only three or four clicks away.

Not surprisingly, academic publishing too has gone through changes. The expansion of the university and higher education has brought with it a burgeoning growth of academic journals. New journals are launched on what seems to be a weekly basis. Some of these journals willingly play the game of excellence by all possible means, for example by climbing the journal rankings through excessive self-citation. Other journals, however, challenge the hegemony of older, more established counterparts by making space for research that struggles to find its way into the top-ranked journals. The latter can allow themselves to be untraditional since they have no history to defend, and to be less institutionalised since they have not yet become institutions in their own right. The birth of new journals also means that new blood can be infused into what at times appears to be a rather narrow and homogeneous editorial population.

Perhaps it is possible to claim that publishing has become more democratic; any voice with an internet connection is potentially publishable and there is always more than one way to get your message through. And if so, what we are witnessing today is something similar to what Geertjan de Vugt (in this issue) and Jacques Rancière (interviewed in this issue) suggest: that traditional hierarchies of authority have collapsed. Perhaps we are experiencing what De Vugt, in his note on Wikipedia, refers to as the development of ‘authocracy’ where ‘the author is nowhere, nowhere is authority’ and ‘the author is everywhere, everywhere is authority’ (De Vugt, in this issue). Established publishers and journals are facing increased competition from smaller publishers, new journals and open-access journals (such as *ephemera*, to mention an excellent example).

Publishing is also a particularly interesting example of an institution where the act of opening up for the public is being combined with an internally regulated evaluation and production process. More often than not, the review process is double-blind, fully open to the journal editor only. The identity of the reviewer will forever remain a secret to the author. Moreover, the review process is also usually closed to the third party, i.e. the public, the readers, the research community. Given this closure, the legitimacy of the institution of publishing is dependent upon public faith in a journal’s capacity to evaluate, secure and enhance the quality of published research.

In his note on open-process academic publishing, Toni Prug (in this issue) suggests that the review process should be opened up for the public. According to Prug this would result in an increased quality of submissions and published texts as well as an increased willingness among researchers to take intellectual risks. In the open, everything is observable and there are few places to hide. Bad performance will be punished, whereas high quality and serious work will be rewarded. Prug’s text has something to tell us about the transparency of the institution of publishing and it links back to a broader debate about the audit society. Audit, surveillance and transparency are strong motifs in both discourses of management and public governance. Has the time now come for transparency and an auditing culture in academia?

A very recent example of open reviewing, in line with Prug's ideas, is showcased by the humanities journal *Shakespeare Quarterly* (Cohen, 2010). For the forthcoming fall issue, four papers were posted online before they were accepted for publication. Registered people could then comment on the papers before the editors of the journal finally reviewed the texts. Given the large number of helpful comments posted on the website, the experiment seemed to be successful.

This development raises important questions regarding the relation between the inside and outside of the institution of publishing. Is open publishing a change for the better or is it something we should be cautious about? What happens to the university if it takes the idea of open publication and reviewing seriously; if it opens up the gates to the public and reveals the secrets of reviewing and editorial work?

From excellent to good enough

Even in the most open of open times, doors will be closed and entries will be denied, academic publishing being no exception. Within the long list of journals reside many institutionalised short-lists of approved, top-ranked and prestigious journals. The merit systems regulating much of academics' daily work and career planning promote some journals as more valuable than others. If, for instance, one works within the field of critical management studies, ten journals or so may be considered excellent. Individual academic careers are directly interlinked with these lists, which even in the most 'critical' research contexts are often treated as givens and thus beyond discussion and negotiation. Interestingly, in many institutional environments this list does not include most of the journals with a critical profile. We frequently hear from potential contributors that they would love to publish in *ephemera*, rather than in some highly ranked management journal, but that their institutional environment discourages them to do so. They frequently end up doing more traditional research instead that keeps the autotelic system of excellence running. In our view, 'excellence' is the name of a game that too often produces stuff that just isn't good enough.

The various lists of legitimate journals organising and governing a great extent of the academic work undertaken at universities are self-fulfilling. Adhering to these norm-systems by submitting your research to the listed journals can be a rewarding choice for the career-minded academic. After all, texts published in leading journals must say something about the authors behind the publications. Leading scholars publish in leading journals and leading journals only publish leading work. The circle is closed and so is the institution of publishing. The self-referentiality of academic excellence is here more evident than ever.

How, then, should we relate to the institution of publishing? The pragmatic answer would be to play along and, if we wish, slowly change it for the better from within.

Most likely this is a wise recommendation from a supervisor to a PhD-student, at least if the aim is to survive or perhaps even to pursue a successful career. But what if academics want something more than playing along and thereby contributing to the institutions that we, knowingly or not, are captured within? We believe that research is too important to submit to a blind process of excellence.

Over the years, *ephemera* has published many papers and even special issues dealing with the changing nature of the university (see especially issues 8.3 and 9.4) and we will continue to do so. This issue – an open issue, but with a remarkable thematic consistency – is another engagement with this broad problem, and it specifically explores new forms of academic institutionalization as well as attempts to escape from them. We are proud to say that none of the contributions to this issue are excellent – but they are, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's (1994: 82) words, 'Interesting, Remarkable or Important'. That's good enough for us.

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the editors

Peter Svensson is a member of the *ephemera* editorial collective.
E-mail: peter.svensson@fek.lu.se

Sverre Spoelstra is a member of the *ephemera* editorial collective.
E-mail: sverre.spoelstra@fek.lu.se

Michael Pedersen is a member of the *ephemera* editorial collective.
E-mail: mip.lpf@cbs.dk

Stephanie Schreven is an affiliate member of *ephemera*.
E-mail: stephanie_schreven@yahoo.com