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Wither the Social Sciences? On Excellence, Rankings, and other Trifles

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INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIAL VALUE OF RANKINGS & ASSESSMENTS

During my fieldwork at Chinese private schools, I frequently encountered the following situation: after introducing myself with my name card, my interlocutor (usually the school principal) would run out of the room, only to return a few minutes later wearing a smile: 'I just looked up your university– it's among the first one hundred.' After this happy discovery, our conversation would continue smoothly. From my Chinese conversation partner's point of view, I had gained face.

Interestingly, those same people rarely knew about PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). PISA's cross-national comparisons of student performance have triggered heated debates about the pros and cons of educational systems and policies elsewhere.[1] This was particularly the case in Sweden, where the release of the PISA findings in December 2013 led to calls for reform and change[2] – or, conversely, to questioning PISA's basic assumptions[3] or the statistical procedures applied.[4] During my field stay in China in December 2013, when Swedish newspapers were full of debates about the downfall of the country's school system, even educational researchers in China would either not know about PISA, or simply not care about it. When I expressed my astonishment at this, they would just shrug their shoulders and say: 'Well, what did you expect of Chinese students? Of course they are good at passing tests.' It was then their turn to be astonished when I told them that many in Europe were impressed by the Chinese results[5] and were discussing possible changes regarding their national educational systems. 'But those are just tests, and have nothing to do with good education. You shouldn't make your system Chinese', they would counter.

I found this puzzling: why would they believe in university rankings, but not in student assessment tests? Apparently, higher education rankings had a much higher value in their eyes than the allegedly positive news about

China's school system. They found that their 'excellent' school system obviously did not lead to 'excellence' in academia; most high-performing middle school students did not develop into internationally recognized academics. Student performance assessments and university rankings seemed to be based on two different sets of rules.

But what does all of this have to do with the main title of my chapter, the social sciences? I argue in this chapter that it is essential for the social sciences to provide explanations and possibly also critical reflections as to how, why and to what end rankings and assessments are imbued with social (and other) values in different contexts. For too long we have deliberately avoided scrutinizing the very mechanisms that have been framing and often also constraining our ways of 'doing social science' (including teaching and research). Therefore it is important to include in our research agenda the things that determine the present and future of our academic disciplines.

THE UNIVERSITY AND THE PUBLIC: TALES FROM THE PAST?

Lund University's current international webpage very clearly indicates its aspiration to be a world class university: the information "Ranked as a top 100 University" is prominently placed at the center of the website. Three pillars frequently recur as the university's essentials on various websites, in its welcome letters, etc.: *teaching*, *research*, and *innovation*. One might of course wonder whether research doesn't by definition include innovation, if we are to follow Merriam-Webster's definition of 'innovation' as "the introduction of something new",[6] or following Costello and Prohaska, as "doing something different."[7] What would be the point of doing research if it weren't about something novel, and if we didn't try to do things differently? It is probably not too far-fetched to suspect that the official University-speak has adjusted to the language of the 'knowledge society', in which 'innovation' is the key ingredient: no policy paper on the 'knowledge society' should fail to include a reference to 'innovation'. Adding 'innovation' to the university's profile is also shifting focus towards the potential economic utility and exploitation of new ideas – ideas that can be fed into incubators and then turned into profitable products.

These questions aside, there are other, arguably more serious implications deriving from the propagated trinity of teaching, research, and

innovation, and these are: who is included in this trinity, and who is not? And where is the public?

Things have not always looked as they do today. In the past, the triple mandate of Lund University consisted of *teaching*, *research* and *outreach to the public* (in Swedish often called "tredje uppgift", the third mandate). Besides, older versions of Lund University's web presentations appear much more inclusive: in 2005 for example, in addition to Swedish, English and even Chinese, the university would be accessible in three different minority languages, thus catering to target groups that are usually under-represented at prestigious universities (see Figure 1).[8] Today, there is a worrying lack of concern discernible in the university's recruiting strategy to host a diverse student body that comes from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Students from the United States or China seem to be closer at hand than those from disadvantaged neighborhoods in Malmö. A little over three years ago a group of Chinese professors and lawyers wrote an open letter to their government, demanding more equal opportunities in Chinese higher education;[9] Chinese elite universities are increasingly urged to publish their statistics on the social and other characteristics of their student bodies. How good are *we* at making this transparent, and how far are *we*, as social scientists, working for a university where Swedish society is more equally represented? Or are we sacrificing these ideas in our hunt for academic excellence?
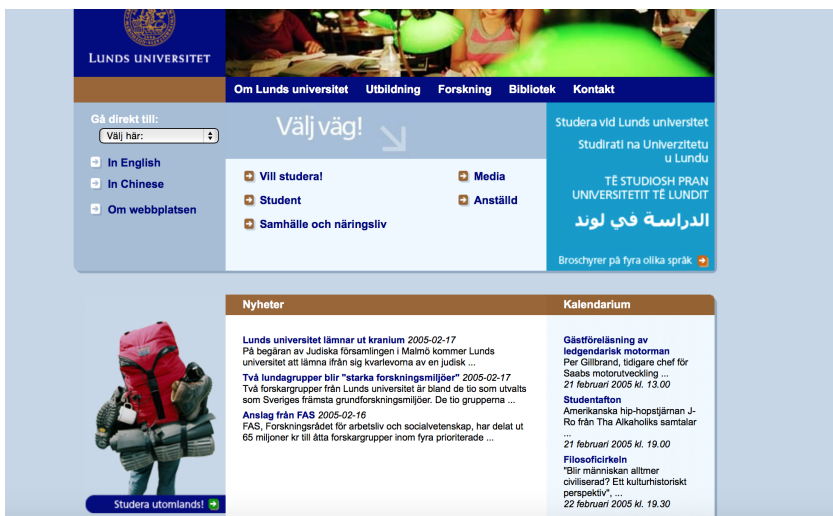

Figure 1: Lund University website from 2005

The present situation in Sweden points less to an equal and more to a bifurcated development within higher education. There is an increasing gap between research-oriented universities and other universities, which is further reinforced by the currently heavy dependence on external funding: external funding is usually allotted not for reasons of equality or solidarity, but in order to support a research environment that in most cases is already quite strong. Thus, strong universities will become even stronger, while the weaker institutions will lose ground. There may be good arguments in favor of such policies, but I believe it is our duty as social scientists to be more conscious of these developments and to anticipate their potential consequences, particularly with regard to the equivalency of degrees: is a degree from a strong research university worth the same as that from a lesser-known provincial university, not only in theory, but also in practice (when e.g. applying for academic positions and grants)? And if not, can a differential treatment be justified, or should we rather try to counteract these tendencies?[10]

Earlier, more inclusive web presentations concerned not only the student body but also the more general public. Older website versions had for example a place for questions or scientific puzzles that were put out for discussion by people outside the university, which would be published online and then answered by an academic expert. Paradoxically, while current technologies would be capable of spurring the interaction between academics and the public to a much higher extent than before, the university has in recent times tended to neglect its role in the public sphere. As Marginson argues, drawing on Habermas:

> "Universities have neglected the evolution of two-way flows and flat dialogue. But they have the technologies and discursive resources for conversations at a previously impossible scale. The Internet enables construction of the discursive forms of university community across multiple sites and with student populations of 30,000 and more. The larger 'Habermasian' goal is to deploy the communicative resources of the university to build forms of coordination based on discourse rather than money and hierarchies of power."[11]

As social scientists, we could do more to interact with the public, also in more communicative ways. What probably prevents us from doing so is not a lack of good will, but a lack of time, or rather: the fact that we are told to use our time in ways that do not encourage communication with a wider public.

What we are told to do and not to do is seldom contained in outspoken directives but is embodied in standards to which academia feels pressed to conform, by now worldwide. To create standards means to create units of comparability – this has been brought to the fore by the Bologna process in higher education and the reforms of study cycles and programs to ensure it. However, at a more general level, standards also constitute tools to govern academia and its population, the researchers/teachers. Governing by standardization has increasingly pervaded the European educational policy space and has largely shifted policy-making from politicians to experts. Rather than relying on "apparent political intervention",[12] "[s]oft governance" uses "a persuasive and attracting power which draws actors in, across a range of levels, places and spaces, to community engagement at micro and meso scales".[13] Thus, a "population of experts, practitioners and professionals", by way of "incentive acts",[14] makes us see academic research, performance, and excellence in certain ways, and we are encouraged to act accordingly.

Now one might argue that experts, practitioners and professionals are more knowledgeable and thus more qualified for decision-making than most politicians when it comes to governing research and teaching. Also, the diversification of actors could be interpreted positively as a democratization of governance in higher education. But is it more democratic? The fact that it is now various professional networks and non-state stakeholders rather than political actors that set and define standards also opens academia up to lobbyists and populists; and the exit of democratically legitimated representatives may actually also prove to be a drawback as far as transparency and accountability are concerned. Besides, standardization is difficult to implement if not linked to clearly measurable goals; thus, standardization has been based to a large extent on measurement – with far-reaching consequences.

QUANTIFICATION OF 'QUALITY' AND 'EXCELLENCE' – AND WHAT SOCIAL SCIENTISTS CAN DO ABOUT THIS

Until a little more than a decade ago, it was the vague term of 'reputation' that characterized the quality of an academic institution – something that the Times Ranking still aims to capture but is difficult to operationalize.[15] How hard it is to quantify something as evasive as reputation already becomes apparent at the individual level: if for example someone is cited

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frequently, does that necessarily mean that this person is acknowledged in the academic community? A closer look at citations can also reveal that someone who is particularly controversial or even judged to be of doubtful academic integrity can still be cited numerous times, precisely for these reasons. Thus, citation indices would also have to take into consideration whether an author is cited affirmatively or negatively.

Connected to this is the question of how the increased focus on the quantity of publications and citations changes the ways in which we are doing research and write academic papers. Recent studies on this question identify various tricks employed by academics in order to improve their image from a quantitative perspective. These tricks include for example forming multi-authorship cartels, where authors rotate in writing a paper each but then publish all papers as co-authored, thus increasing individual publication records; steering doctoral students towards one's own research field, in order to get access to more data and thus get out more publications; co-authorship with well-known senior researchers even if those do not contribute other than by putting their name on the paper; choosing 'hot' topics instead of those that one is interested in; citing editors of a journal to increase one's chance of being accepted; citing articles that the respective journal has published, in order to increase this journal's citations.[16] And the irony is: the more we publish, the shorter become the life cycles of our articles.[17]

So are we, as Butler and Spoelstra claim[18], steering towards a "managerial system of excellence"? The recent report on the "future of research" by the Swedish Research Council seems quite deliberately to confirm it – the introduction to the report states that it is above all "international impact" that defines 'academic excellence'. 'Impact' again is measured by way of international publications and citations, without any critical reflection whatsoever as to how meaningful such a measurement is.[19] We have learned from e.g. social network analysis that it is not always quantity – in this case, of ties – that leads to a breakthrough of ideas or suddenly increased social capital; rather, it is often when structural gaps are bridged, i.e., hitherto unconnected entities become connected, that power is gained.[20] Similarly, research in small niches may turn out to have much greater impact in the future than research in a well-recognized area – or it may not. The crux is: we cannot tell beforehand. Why a certain kind of research becomes 'innovative' at a certain moment in time, within a certain academic sub-community or even across communities, is extremely

difficult to anticipate; mostly this can be understood only in retrospect. (But even this retrospective explanation is a worthwhile undertaking and something that we, as social scientists, should do more often – if only to convince donors of the difficulty of predicting the future.) Therefore, the safest advice to funding agencies, university heads, and government ministries is to ensure that there is a great deal of diversity at an academic institution and to support cross-disciplinarity not only through words, but also in reality.

Rankings and measurements tend to develop their own dynamics and tell us astoundingly little about whether an academic institution produces knowledge that is beneficial for humankind, and whether it mediates this knowledge in a way that benefits the highest possible number of people. In that sense, the social sciences can serve as an important corrective, by locating and relativizing trends that divert attention away from the big and serious questions of society. These are, to name but a few, migration, sustainable lifestyles, and social equality. If we don't come to terms with these core issues, we might as well declare the bankruptcy of the social sciences as a whole.

It is apparent that such issues can only be meaningfully tackled *across* disciplines, rather than *within* them. Yet, most of the gatekeepers – deciding over grants, journal manuscripts, academic recruitment, etc. – are firmly established and grounded in a specific discipline. So how is cross- or even post-disciplinarity supposed to work in practice, given these circumstances? Of course, every one of us needs to reflect on our own behavior and values when peer-reviewing a work that lies in between disciplines. Are we open enough to appreciate alien or unorthodox ways of doing research? But at the structural/institutional level too, much more could be done to ensure that cross-/inter-/post-disciplinarity can take place. The Swedish Research Council remains somewhat undecided on the issue, stating that "good cross-disciplinary environments are clearly embedded in basic conceptual development within each individual discipline."[21] But isn't it exactly the *concepts* that become challenged in interdisciplinary work, while for example methods and research procedures may look much more alike across disciplines?[22]

It is paramount for us as social scientists to watch these developments very closely and prevent cross-disciplinarity from becoming yet another mantelpiece in the academic rhetorical register. New mantras come along with new ways to pray, and there is the danger that when reciting the

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interdisciplinary mantra, researchers will only superficially cross disciplinary boundaries in order to increase the chances of getting their research project funded. We have to think about ways of how to determine whether a piece of research is truly interdisciplinary, or simply a juxtaposition of researchers grounded in different disciplines.

CONCLUSION: MAKING A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC AND STRATEGIC ANALYSIS – AND BECOMING OUR OWN MASTERS

For a long time, scholars in my own field – comparative and international education – would look abroad to find solutions to their own country's educational problems, and then call this 'comparative research'. A prominent forerunner of this was Michael Sadler (1861-1943), a British historian and educationist, who was constantly looking for foreign examples that could help England to improve its own school system. Maybe because of their discipline's origin and history, comparative educationists today tend to be suspicious of cross-country comparisons that carry simple policy implications. Almost from the outset, they have already begun to differentiate between analysis for scientific reasons and analysis for strategic reasons. While the former looks at phenomena in systematic relation to the investigated phenomena's contexts, the latter *externalizes* to selected outside phenomena, but only in order to relate them back to one's own context. As Schriewer and Martinez explain,

> "externalizations to 'foreign examples' or to 'world situations' do not aim primarily at a social scientific analysis of cultural configurations; they instead involve the discursive interpretation of international phenomena for issues of educational policy or ideological legitimization."[23]

Put simply, to analyze by externalizing means to pick those things that are useful for pushing through one's own agenda. The educational world – such as national school and university systems – is full of externalizations. The differential reactions to academic rankings on the one side and the PISA results on the other on the part of the Chinese educationists as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter can be interpreted from an externalization perspective: while these Chinese researchers were eager to reform both higher and basic education, only the findings from academic rankings legitimized their intentions; PISA, on the other hand, confirmed a school system that in their eyes was in dire need of reform. Similarly,

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Finnish educationists had their own 'PISA shock' when they learned that the system they were so critical of was supposed to be among the best.[24] These frequent externalizations are not surprising, as education has been historically tied to the wellbeing and progress of a nation and its economy, so that perceived flaws – in comparison with other nations – can easily lead to a national crisis. It is therefore relatively easy to exploit this *angst* in order to make things change.

Coming back to the topic of academic rankings, and our own work and research environments, 'academic excellence' and 'international recognition' are particularly apt motors to change governance structures within higher education. Who does not want to be academically excellent and internationally recognized? However, it is an obligation for us as social scientists to scrutinize systematically and critically how terms such as 'excellence', 'quality', and 'impact' are defined; who profits from these particular definitions, and who does not; and whether there are alternative options for defining these terms. Can we include, in a definition of 'excellence', 'quality' and 'impact', issues such as diverse student bodies, accessibility, and integration into the community (however defined)? Can we expect a university to offer solutions to problems that are crucial for humankind? Can we expect it to be a place where research is done together and in new ways? And where researchers and teachers feel more like parts of an organism than like the inhabitants of a 'researcher hotel' that puts individual values on researchers based on citation indices? I think we need to answer 'yes' to all these questions in order to control the mechanisms that are controlling us – lest we become executors of the academic machine, rather than masters of ourselves.

Notes

1. For more information, see http://www.oecd.org/pisa/ (retrieved February 23, 2015).

2. Löfven, Stefan & Baylan, Ibrahim, 2013. "Så ska vi vända regeringens djupa misslyckande i skolan," *Dagens Nyheter*, December 4, 2013. http://www.dn.se/debatt/sa-ska-vi-vanda-regeringens-djupa-misslyckande-i-skolan/; Thente, Jonas, 2013. "De usla svenska läsresultaten tyder på ett totalt systemfel," *Dagens Nyheter*, December 2, 2013. http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/jonas-thente-de-usla-svenska-lasresultaten-tyder-pa-ett-totalt-systemfel/;

Jansson, Bo & Thullberg, Per, 2013. "Kommunerna har haft sin chans - staten måste ta över," *Dagens Nyheter*, December 9, 2013. http://www.dn.se/debatt/kommunerna-har-haft-sin-chans-staten-maste-ta-over/.

3. Brevinge, Nina, 2013. "Mellan tummen och pekfingret," *Fokus*, December 6, 2013. http://www.fokus.se/2013/12/mellan-tummen-och-pekfingret/.

4. See e.g. the discussion in Kreiner, Svend & Christensen, Karl Bang, 2014. "Analyses of Model Fit and Robustness. A New Look at the PISA Scaling Model Underlying Ranking of Countries According to Reading Literacy", *Psychometrika,* Vol 79, April 2014.

5. Or rather, Shanghainese results: only the results from Shanghai were published; see also the critique in Loveless, Tom, "PISA's China Problem Continues: A Response to Schleicher, Zhang, and Tucker," Brookings Institution, Brown Center on Education Policy. http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/01/08-shanghai-pisa-loveless.

6. See http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovation (retrieved February 23, 2015).

7. See Costello, T. & Prohaska, B., 2013. "Innovation [Definitions and Attributes of a Successful Innovation Program]," *IT Professional,* Vol 15, May/June 2013, p.64. In their more business-oriented article, Costello and Prohaska add that "innovation is usually risky, costly, and time consuming" (p. 64).

8. Moreover, going/studying abroad was illustrated by the picture of a backpacker and thus more associated with adventure than with brushing up one's CV in order to attain better credentials.

9. "Xuezhe huyu cujin gaodeng jiaoyu jihui gongping de gongkaixin [Open Letter of Scholars Appealing for Advancing Equal Opportunities in Higher Education]" in Dongping Yang (ed.) *Zhongguo Jiaoyu Fazhan Baogao (2012) [Annual Report on China's Education (2012)]*. Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe). Originally published on March 10, 2010.

10. These are valid questions despite the fact that it is far from obvious whether a university that is strong in research is also strong in teaching. There seems to be some evidence that more externally funded research projects may actually lead to a decline in teaching quality since staff are pre-occupied with conducting research and writing research proposals, rather than with teaching. See Dohmen, Dieter, 2015. "Anreize und Steuerung in Hochschulen - welche Rolle spielt die leistungsbezogene Mittelzuweisung?" in Sabine Naumann (ed.) *Wege zu einer höheren Wirksamkeit des Qualitätsmanagements. Tagungsband der 14. Jahrestagung des Arbeitskreises Evaluation und Qualitätssicherung der Berliner und Brandenburger Hochschulen am 23./24. September 2013 an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*. Berlin: Forschungsinstitut für Bildungs- und Sozialökonomie.

11. Marginson, Simon, 2006. "Putting 'Public' Back into the Public University," *Thesis Eleven,* Vol 84, February 2006, p. 53.

12. Lawn, Martin, 2011. "Standardizing the European Education Policy Space," *European Educational Research Journal,* Vol 10, June 2011, p. 260.

13. Ibid., pp. 259-260.

14. Brunsson, Nils & Jacobsson, Bengt (eds) 2000. *A World of Standards*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 13.

15. See http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/ (retrieved February 23, 2015). The first empirically grounded, systematic university ranking was done by Shanghai Jiaotong University, which continues to publish the so-called "Shanghai ranking" (see http://www.shanghairanking.com; retrieved February 23, 2015; see also Marginson, Simon, 2009. "Open Source Knowledge and University Rankings," *Thesis Eleven,* Vol 96, February 2009).

16. Butler, Nick & Spoelstra, Sverre, 2015. "The Dark Arts of Academia - and Why Journals Must Do More to Tackle the Problem," *The Conversation*, January 7, 2015. https://theconversation.com/the-dark-arts-of-academia-and-why-journals-must-do-more-to-tackle-the-problem-35796; Butler, Nick & Spoelstra, Sverre, 2014. "The Regime of Excellence and the Erosion of Ethos in Critical Management Studies," *British Journal of Management,* Vol 25, July 2014; Butler, Nick & Spoelstra, Sverre, 2012. "Your Excellency," *Organization,* Vol 19, November 2005.

17. Parolo, Pietro Della Briotta et al., 2015. "Attention Decay in Science," March 2015. http://arxiv.org/pdf/1503.01881v1.pdf.

18. Butler, Nick & Spoelstra, Sverre, 2015. "How the REF's Regime of Excellence Is Changing Research for the Worse," *The Conversation*, February 6, 2015. https://theconversation.com/how-the-refs-regime-of-excellence-is-changing-research-for-the-worse-37187.

19. See Vetenskapsrådet, 2015. "Forskningens Framtid! Ämnesöversikt 2014 Humaniora och Samhällsvetenskap". https://publikationer.vr.se/produkt/forskningens-framtid-amnesoversikt-2014-humaniora-och-samhallsvetenskap/, p. 9. At a later point, the authors talk about the need to refine and expand the measurement, by including e.g. also more Swedish journals, and they also stress the importance of collegial expert judgments as practiced within the Research Council when evaluating research proposals.

20. Burt, Ronald S., 1992. *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Compare also Granovetter's weak ties: Granovetter, Marc S., 1983. "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited," *Sociological Theory,* Vol 1, September 1983.

21. Vetenskapsrådet, 2015. "Forskningens Framtid! Ämnesöversikt 2014 Humaniora och Samhällsvetenskap ", p. 9.

22. The peculiar and unfortunate separation made by the Swedish Research Council between the educational sciences on the one side and the social and human

sciences on the other is even more difficult to understand against this background. Education, that is, human learning, is a deeply social activity that cannot be separated from its social, cultural, political, economic etc. context. It seems absurd to require educational researchers to go for *either* education *or* the social sciences when submitting a proposal.

23. Schriewer, Jürgen & Martinez, Carlos, 2004. "Constructions of Internationality in Education," in Gita Steiner-Khamsi (ed.) *The Global Politics of Educational Borrowing and Lending*. New York: Teachers College Press, p. 32. The same is true, they argue, for references to 'tradition': "Similarly, externalizations to 'tradition' are not directed at historicizing educational theory traditions or experiences, but rather react to the need to reinterpret and actualize these traditions' theoretical and/or normative potential in the face of urgent present-day concerns." (ibid.)

24. See Lundgren, Ulf P., 2011. "PISA as a Political Instrument: One History Behind the Formulating of the PISA Programme," in Miguel A. Pereyra (ed.) *PISA under Examination: Changing Knowledge*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. On utilizing the example of Finland in order to push for reforms in Japan, see for example Takayama, Keita, 2010. "Politics of Externalization in Reflexive Times: Reinventing Japanese Education Reform Discourses through 'Finnish PISA Success'". *Comparative Education Review,* Vol 54, February 2010.

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