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Research orientation without regrets

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this essay is to reflect upon the quest for "research orientation" that can be observed in many Continental European academic institutions these days. Building upon my own observations as well as the experiences of other accounting academics, I suggest that the quest for research orientation brings along both opportunities and threats for the academic communities in these countries. On one hand, it allows for an increased recognition of one's research efforts and often goes along with (pertinent segments of) the international community becoming more open and accessible to the individual researcher. On the other hand, however, the quest for research orientation seems to bring with it an increased homogenization in our understanding of what good research means and, thus, poses a threat for the diversity of our community. Based on these observations, I provide some ideas regarding the possibility of achieving a flourishing research culture *without regrets*, i.e., one that preserves values or activities that are arguably critical for the sustainable development of our discipline.

1. Introduction

This essay examines the quest for more 'research orientation' that can be observed in many academic institutions these days. It focuses in particular on the situation of academic institutions in Continental Europe. Research orientation can be defined as the degree of emphasis that an individual or organization puts on research as compared to other academic activities, like teaching, administrative work or an engagement with practice (Rudd, 1973). Implicit in the notion of research orientation is often not only a quantitative dimension (i.e. doing a lot of research), but also a qualitative one (i.e. carrying out 'good' research). While many academic institutions – especially the alleged 'élite' ones – would probably describe themselves as already highly research oriented, others are probably better characterized as being on their way 'to getting there'. At least, anecdotal evidence would suggest that a quest for research orientation is at the top of the agenda of many deans or department heads in Continental European institutions. In making efforts to narrow the perceived gap to the élite institutions, many of them consider adopting the 'best practices' from the English-speaking world, in terms of how research should be conducted and what should count as good research.

My focus in this essay is on the *ambivalence* of such initiatives. At first sight, a high degree of research orientation would appear to be a good thing, both from the perspective of individual academics and the wider society. After all, many academics choose an academic career because of their intrinsic interest in conducting research, and an increased focus on, and recognition of, their research efforts would thus seem to be an attractive option. Likewise, different stakeholders can benefit from more and better research being carried out, for example, in terms of a transfer of research results into organizational practice and education. Indeed, academics in Continental Europe who have experienced a move toward more research orientation would often report such positive effects. Yet, at the same time, there are also concerns that the quest for research

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orientation does not come without costs. As long as research orientation is a vague *ideal*, it allows for different interpretations. To be sure, even at this programmatic level, there may be concerns with too much emphasis on research orientation as opposed to the attention given to other academic activities, such as teaching or a dialog with practitioners. Yet, as long as the degree and form of research orientation are not made operational – through guidelines, policies, monitoring systems or other forms of *inscriptions* (Latour, 1987), – there is scope for flexible interpretation and handling on the level of practice. If, however, a particular understanding of research orientation gets institutionalized, then we may easily observe effects that turn the quest for research orientation into a more ambivalent endeavor. In particular, when research orientation gets equated with the realization of particular variants of research and when it marginalizes academic activities that can be considered valuable, it risks becoming a straitjacket for the development of a discipline.

The objective of my essay is to highlight this ambivalence in the quest for research orientation and to discuss the possibilities of achieving research orientation *without regrets*, i.e., without having to compromise other activities or principles deemed valuable. I thereby build upon my own observations as well as upon the experiences and concerns of a set of colleagues working in academic institutions across Continental Europe. Aside from informal exchanges at conferences and other occasions, I have also had a few more formal conversations with senior and junior academics who have worked in different universities or business schools in Europe, most of them in German-speaking countries. The observations that these academics share reflect important tendencies and concerns that I feel are important to be reported here.

Overall, I would hope that the reflections offered in this essay will contribute to enrich our understanding of the past, present and possible future of our academic discipline (e.g. Gendron, 2008; Hopwood, 2007, 2008; Humphrey and Lukka, 2011; Khalifa and Quattrone, 2008; Lee, 1995; Malmi and Granlund, 2009; Panozzo, 1997; Williams et al., 2006). To be sure, my intention here is not to offer definite answers to rather difficult questions, but to provide some tentative ideas regarding the possibility of achieving a flourishing research culture *without regrets*, i.e., while preserving values or activities that are arguably important for the sustainable development of our discipline.

2. Opportunities

It may perhaps seem obvious to some readers that the production of research is a key expectation from faculty members. Yet, this is not true to the same extent everywhere. Many universities and schools around the globe have only recently embarked on an explicit research orientation and the internationalization of their research efforts, putting more focus on producing research outputs (in English) that are publishable in (international) journals and that can be presented (in English) at conferences and workshops.[2] This is the case for many institutions in Continental European countries such as Germany, France, Italy or Spain. In these institutions, faculty members usually have high teaching loads and extensive administrative responsibilities. They are perhaps encouraged to do research, but incentive and promotion schemes often do not reflect a particular focus on producing high research quantity or quality. As a consequence, research is often not conducted as a key academic activity and there is a good proportion of faculty that remain 'research inactive'. This presents a challenge for those who have a strong interest in conducting research and who want to obtain resources and recognition for it. One of my interviewees described the situation in his university as follows:

> "Research is everything but a priority here. It is more of a 'private hobby'. The most important thing is that the teaching goes well (...). We discuss all kinds of issues among the professors, but never about talk about our research. When somebody has a good paper, this does not really matter (...). Myself, I feel that I am still in a stage where I would like to do research and achieve something with my research, and this is not easy in such an environment, as there are only few resources available and as the culture is not supportive of this".

Differences in research orientation can indeed be quite large across academic institutions, as an anecdote from one of my colleagues may illustrate. She and her co-author had submitted a paper to a peer-reviewed journal. While my colleague was happy about the submission, but also anxious about the outcome of the review process, her co-author celebrated the submission of the paper with the colleagues of her department. She was congratulated over cake and champagne for the fact of having submitted a paper to an academic journal. Apparently, this was something that did not happen very often in this institution and that was thus worth celebrating. I think this shows how different the starting points can be among different universities and schools as far as their research orientation and experience are concerned. It also exemplifies one important dimension of an increased research orientation, namely the step to 'go international', i.e., to engage with the international research discourse as it takes place in conferences or journals. My impression is that many academics have perceived such a step as a rather positive experience. Not only are they excited about the possibilities of connecting with the international research community; they are also glad when a new research culture is introduced in their home institutions through which their research efforts can be more strongly recognized.

[2] It seems that an increased research orientation is usually associated with a stronger internationalization of one's research activities, in the sense of attending international conferences, publishing in English-speaking journals, etc. I suppose that the reasons for the strength of this association are similar to those in other fields of society (e.g. business, sports, arts), where 'international' often becomes an indicator for quality and visibility. While this makes sense in many respects, there is at times a certain "fetishism of the international" taking place that would probably need a more careful problematization than what I can offer here (see Wedlin, 2011).

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