

Can Academic Excellence be Accredited?

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the possibility of the accreditation of academic excellence specifically in the South African higher education context. Several examples cited attempt to suggest possibilities of bestowing an unequivocal elucidation to academic achievement. It, however, appears difficult to compile a straightforward and clear-cut set of criteria that would provide a solution to this predicament. However, current-day methodologies allow positivistic planning, using quantitative measures, to qualify and quantify excellence within institutions, plans, projects and people.

1. The Inscrutable Way of the Scholar

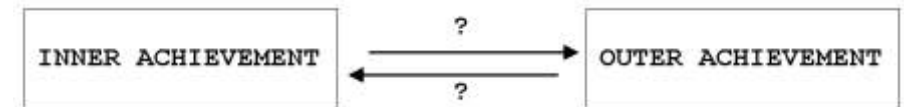
In French academic circles they tell the (legendary?) story of a certain quite brilliant professor who was also quite uncaring for the university establishment's rules on "How to Have a Successful Career?" But such was the quality of the seminars he gave, that even the strictest rule enforcers of university officialdom could no longer overlook his extraordinary - and sometimes downright weird - contributions to a variety of disciplines. At long last they honoured him with a considerable grant and the request that he set up his own institute. For some years this institute flourished. And then, just before his untimely death, the eccentric professor closed it down. He was reported as saying that he did not want to leave such solidified power and influence behind him. In due course, a sum of money nearly three times the amount of the first grant was awarded posthumously to the deceased. His widow used some of it to finance a limited printing of the one and only book-length manuscript the professor had ever worked on. This limited edition was made available to only a select few of the professor's students the enraged protests of two large publishing houses notwithstanding.

A newspaper reporter was told by university executives that the reason for the

second award was a really top flight academic achievement: a scholar who succeeded in turning his back on academic achievement for the sake of academic excellence ...

2. Quality and achievement

The usual way to accredit academic institutions is by means of measuring "quality and achievement". But one wonders whether the important differences between the latter two concepts are always taken into account in such measuring processes. It is standard practice in the academic field for quality to be acknowledged and honoured. Which is also what achievement is normally all about. But there will, alas, always be instances of quality being achieved in something, without this achievement being adequately acknowledged - even by interested and informed persons in the field. Thus without the "inner" achievement being realized in "outer" achievement. Of course the opposite also holds: "outer" achievement is not always indicative of real "inner" mastery in the field.



Observation: The one does not necessarily imply the other.

A focus on individual achievement is one of the main characteristics of our culture. But then achievement is understood as outward achievement. The attainment of success and prestige is not bad in itself. Cultural progress even (largely) depends on it. But aspiring to outward achievement as a goal in itself - a goal qualifying all other goals - leads to a distortion in inter-personal communication processes and even to alienated and neurotic behaviour. Also on the communal and institutional level, the achievement obsession has been shown to be involved in all kinds of social and cultural pathologies. An acute analysis of the achievement-oriented culture (from a semi-marxist point of view) can be found in the writings of the social philosopher Marcuse, especially his *Eros and Civilization: a Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1966).



Observation: The one feeds on the other

Yet the fact remains that academic achievement cries out to be acknowledged. This acknowledgment is mostly limited to outward achievement (which, in an ideal situation, reflects inner competence). Such acknowledgment is also, more often than not, closely tied to organizational structures. Again, this in itself is no problem. But organizational control is in many, many social institutions practiced as a value or an end in itself. In terms of academic institutions, this tends to create a situation where the instruments measuring academic competence are continually refined, modified, complexified - without however, an eye being kept on the peculiar properties of that particular thing which is going to be measured. Finer and finer control, in terms of procedures, rules, laws, information: this is the way of the bureaucratic society. And this society's penchant for control joins forces with its need for progressive achievement - to infiltrate the structures of higher education and the quest of academics to evaluate themselves.



Observation: The phenomenon of achievement flanked by two great cultural forces - the one stimulating it and the other controlling it through measurement and classification.

Apart from Marcuse's own detailed findings in this regard, a cursory but penetrating discussion in which bureaucracy is pinpointed as one of the major features of modernity, is given by the American sociologist Peter Berger (1979).

3. In Pursuit Of Excellence: The Pitfalls Of Positivist Planning

In many countries the need for a rationalization of universities is a matter of great concern. One of the ideas that educational planners have developed

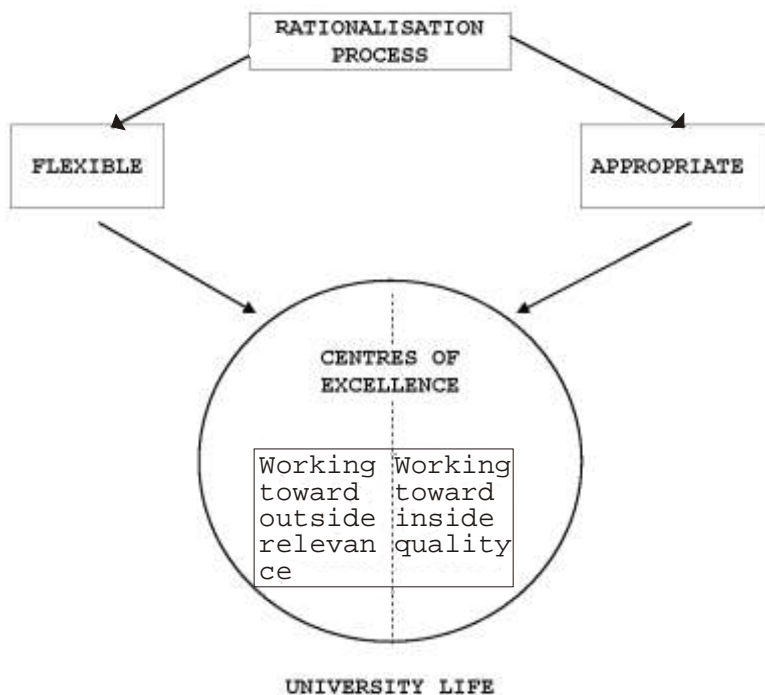
in an attempt to effectively deal with this issue, is that of so-called "centres of excellence". This means, basically, that universities are encouraged to develop departments or units or disciplines that can count as prestigious performers. Being rated "excellent" in this context, may be an important criterion for the retention of departments at a university. At the same time, identifying a centre of excellence for a certain discipline at a certain institution, would rationalize the closing down of (not so excellent) departments at other institutions.

It is to be welcomed that much of the literature on this subject stresses the fact that criteria for rationalization should be both appropriate in selection and flexible in application. A consequence of the first requirement would be that academic and not purely economic norms apply. An example that has sometimes been given of the second requirement is that establishments of some excellence that would have been axed on the grounds of being vastly uneconomic or attracting a negligible number of students, deserve a new lease on life if they are in some way important for the country and its practical needs of the moment.

Note however, that the examples given above, in reality contradict one another, the appropriateness-criterion featured in the first example has to rule against the flexibility-criterion featured in the second example. That is, either academic norms apply, which means that the only economic considerations allowed are those related to the interests of advanced theorizing; or non-academic norms apply, which means that the pursuit of theory may be subservient to the national economy or community development.

In the second case, the question of appropriate is clearly not of prime importance. This is rather like a husband saying to his wife that, although there is nothing wrong with their love for one another, he really would have been compelled to make her leave him on account of not being able to financially afford her were it not for the happy fact that her continued presence in the house is simply demanded by the local town council (for whom she does accounts on her husband's home computer).

The divisive effect of these contradicting norms is represented in the diagram below.



The problem above arises, of course, from having appropriateness linked to one norm (academic interests) and flexibility to another (economic interests); in stead of relating flexibility only to the way in which the ONE norm of academic interests is applied.

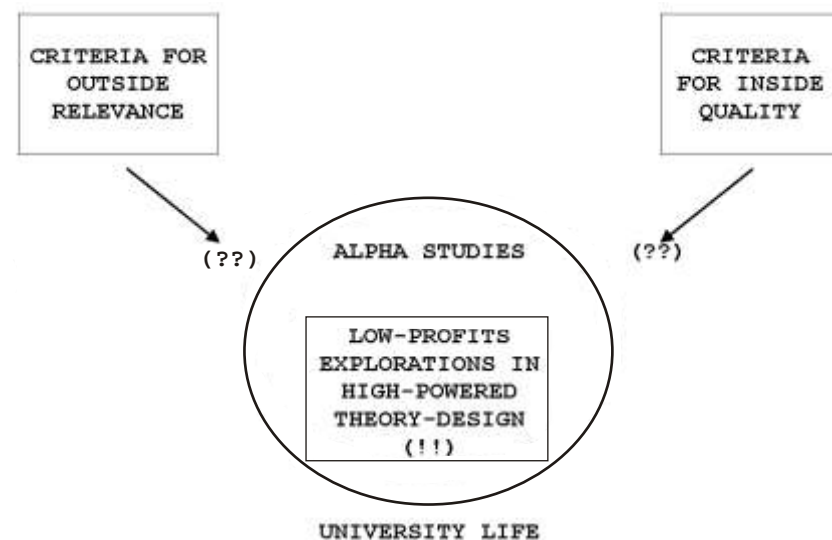
Notice also how the dual value systems, represented in the diagram above, make the university highly susceptible to outside infiltration by the cultural megapowers (technology, economy, politics), whose interests definitely do not lie in the pursuit of academic quality as such.

Let us ask ourselves what might be the operative criteria for declaring a certain department, "Alpha Studies", an excellent institution. This department could be commended for any one (or a combination) of the following prominent reasons:

- consistently serving the needs of country or community
- having a long list of major publications to its credit

- teaching a certain highly specialized course not commonly available elsewhere
- having on its staff a very highly acknowledged leader in the field
- having a very good record in student training (however this is to be measured scope or content of the course, high standards, etc.).

One can imagine a situation where Alpha Studies does not score high marks in any of the above categories. Yet in this very department, a body of knowledge might be in the making, which will have serious implications for the governing paradigms in this particular field. Perhaps this body of knowledge is being created by only a minority in the department. Perhaps it exists only in the form of disjointed conversations, or fleeting remarks in class, or some experimental papers circulating among colleagues. Nevertheless, we could have here a theory-in-the-making of extreme excellence, creating by its very existence a department of potentially the highest excellence while the university, for its part, might find "good reasons" to phase out the department. The chief reason being that some committee is of the opinion that the department fails to score satisfactorily in any of the usual commendation categories listed above. Even the application of those categories designed to measure inside quality according to the appropriate criterion of academic interests (compare again the guidelines listed above), might seem to indicate this department's lack of prestige. This story of apparent failure and hidden success is picture in the following diagram:



At this point, someone might object that surely there are still other means at the disposal of the assessment committee methods for more accurately measuring the true academic status of Alpha Studies? What about peer and student assessment? Or Alpha's self-assessment?

Students often have useful opinions about the strong and the weak points of their teachers. But they are not expert in the fields of knowledge that are being taught by their teachers. And they cannot be expected to pass judgment on any kind of research that their teachers are involved in. Yet it is this involvement-factor that is of crucial importance in pleading a case for or against Alpha Studies or its neighbouring departments.

Peers are of course experts in specific fields of knowledge. But even their judgment on what is going on in Alpha Studies, is still no guarantee of the absolutely reliable quality assessment that bureaucratically controlled achievement-rating programmes promise us.

Why is this so? Let us mention only two important factors in this regard. They are PARADIGM PREJUDICE and INNOVATIVE INTEREST. The first means that the evaluation of peers is influenced by the fact that the evaluator normally owns allegiance to a certain theory within that field of knowledge that Alpha Studies is concerned with. This theory might in fact clash with the theory that Alpha Studies is developing. The second factor means that the evaluation procedure to be administered by the peer group, is usually not overly appreciative of radical departures from trusted and proven theory practice. Unfortunately, such departures might be implied in the course that Alpha Studies feels it has to pursue. In different ways then, the homeground theories and values of the peer group itself might be threatened.

The following argument will serve the point. The example is taken from the evaluation in the history of language studies.

Chomsky, the leading linguist of our time, was at the start of his career involved in investigations of which he himself did not know if they even qualified as belonging to the field of linguistics proper. (One wonders what kind of self-assessment he would have been able to submit at this stage.) He could not even get his work published. Yet he was laying the groundwork for what was to become one of the most successful theories of our time - that of transformational grammar.

Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of our time, was also concerned with the phenomenon of language. But some of his peers were

doubtful whether his class activities at Cambridge could qualify as "doing philosophy". What also aggravated them was the fact that he steadfastly declined to get anything published and stood in contempt of every symbol of academic "success". Wittgenstein was judged by another great philosopher, Bertrand Russell (who was sympathetic to Wittgenstein's initial understanding of philosophical method) to have "grown tired of serious thinking..."

It is true that the examples cited above are quite extraordinary cases. But they do illustrate that it is exceedingly difficult, if not downright impossible, to compile a formal system of criteria that would give university officialdom an adequate insight into what is actually being "achieved" in the department of a university.

It is even difficult for the people in the department itself to have an adequate insight into what they are actually achieving (self-assessment) - especially if the criteria they are being subjected to, measure (what we have referred to in a previous issue as) "outer" achievement in contrast to "inner" achievement. Such measurement confuses excellence with prestige.

It is also obvious that encouraging or forcing students to study at some appointed "centre of excellence", presupposes a desire on their part to be educated in, or an acceptance of their being educated in, that particular theory which is held in high regard at this centre, and which serves as a framework for the discussion of other theories.

4. Positivist Planning

Positivism in philosophy and science is, roughly, the ideal of building theory on nothing but verifiable fact. Today this ideal has largely been given up. But positivism is alive and well in those institutions of society where plans are being drawn up to produce a controlled future - a future which will be organizationally, economically and technologically streamlined. Positivist planning does take account of the complexity of the facts. But positivist planning cannot accept the fact that "facts" only say what people believe them to say, that facts are coloured by all kinds of preconceptions, prejudices and power interests. In the modern management of institutions, positivistic planning makes provision for - among other things - the accurate indexing of performance. The relevant facts are recorded by means of graphs, charts, questionnaires etc., and transformed into useful data. On the basis of this data, informed decisions may be taken on the performance of plans, institutions, projects and people. The planner's assumption is that (complex) criteria can be designed to make such decisions fully rational.

The positivist hope for an uncontroversial judgment of excellence according to suitable performance criteria, should perhaps also be weighed against recent findings in the philosophy of science, regarding the evaluation of competing research programmes.

Lakatos, a distinguished theoretician in this field, found that it is implausible to search for a set of methodological criteria that will establish unambiguously which scientific research program is "successful" and which is to be regarded as a 'failure'. In fact, Lakatos shows, it is only when we look back on the history of such rival programmes, that we can acknowledge one as 'progressive' and the other as "degenerative". And even then, Lakatos says, one should not feel too safe in promoting the one over the other. The "unsuccessful" programme may have an intrinsic merit which will allow it to survive the bad dip it might have been taking for (quite) a while, and even to overtake and surpass its seemingly victorious competitor. Investing in an apparently unprestigious enterprise may still qualify as completely rational scientific behaviour.

The planning management tends to forget that the preconceptions, prejudices and power interests underlying the criteria-systems which they devise, effectively bar such systems from being models of organizational objectivity. It is so easy to overlook the fact that competence and ability and noteworthy accomplishment - and all the other factors that count for excellence in the pursuit of knowledge - are not really analyzable as manager-friendly data.

5. An Imperfect World

Nevertheless, after all is said and done, it seems unavoidable that sometimes, some kind of organizational and administrative judgment on disciplines, theories, faculties and universities will have to be passed. We can only hope that those passing the judgment will do so, not only as "objectively", but also as self-consciously and as hesitatingly as possible.

And, of course, mistakes are going to be made. For we live in an imperfect world of which university life is merely a part. But let us be aware that currently, with the quantum jumps that our prestige-driven and technologically-orientated society is taking into the future, the chances are above average that we are going to make many and costly and possibly even tragic mistakes. Still, the knowledge of this likelihood might in some way prevent some mistakes from being made - or perhaps only from being made too easily.

6. Literature consulted

Berger, P.L.
1979. *Facing up to the Modernity*. Penguin Books.

Marcuse, H.
1966. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston.