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Academia Beyond Excellence

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Higher education draws its legitimation mainly from a self-image as an academic institution. Profound transformations within higher education since the middle of the 20th century, however, have not just changed the form, but also the idea of higher education. Massification has shaped research and teaching practices – and the self-concept of academia with it.

Research usually presents the massification of higher education as a diversification. The corresponding models – be they classified in horizontal and vertical dimensions (Teichler, 2008) or those of centre and periphery (Altbach, 2016) – all envisage a hierarchy, with “excellent” institutions of higher education at the top or at the centre. When scholars explore the academic character of higher education, they almost exclusively focus on this excellence and ask, for instance, how excellent universities maintain academic standards in face of the massification of higher education. But from an epistemological point of view, this exclusive focus on universities of excellence misses those changes in the academic self-conception that have occurred “beyond excellence”. Thus, it is crucial for research to shed light on smaller and peripheral colleges and universities beyond excellence, as these have been both the driving force and result of the transformation. Many of those institutions were initially established, or turned into, academic organizations in the last 50 years. They are legitimately called “academic” because they offer courses with formally academic bachelors’ and masters’ degrees. However, because of their lack of academic excellence, they do not try to commit themselves to preserve the academic tradition. Instead, they are encouraged to distinguish themselves by setting priorities beyond the traditional dimension of what is considered academic – through a higher, practical orientation and vocationalization of courses, or by developing a unique teaching profile.

When scholars study higher education beyond excellence, they usually focus on the rise of the knowledge society (e.g., Välimaa & Hofmann, 2008) or the shift in composition of the student body (e.g., Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Reisz & Stock, 2007) and the academic staff (Kreckel, 2011), instead of asking fundamental questions about how these transformations affect the academic self-image and, thus, research and teaching

practices. In the following discussion, I would like to argue that it is pivotal to ask how institutions of higher education beyond excellence (re-)produce the academic culture. Although not primarily focused on research, these institutions are, nevertheless, strongly involved in the transformation of the meaning of what is academic – possibly even more so than traditionally academic institutions. Since academics in all organizations of higher education constantly re-establish what is academic in their teaching and research, the shift in academic self-conception has a fundamental impact on the societal institution of higher education.

The transformation of the academic self-conception is strongly linked to the quantitative expansion of higher education. The number of academic degrees issued yearly has risen continuously – especially since the middle of the 20th century. More and more elite knowledge is produced in academic institutions and passed on to an ever-growing part of the following generation, which David Baker describes as the “schooled society” (Baker, 2014, p. 194). As a result, work becomes increasingly academic: the world of work adjusts to the transformation of the qualification structure, since positions are no longer defined with regard to rationalization of work activity, but also in response to a growing supply of qualified academics (Stock, 2017).

In educational policy, debate about the rising number of academic qualifications employs the term *academic drift* (or *Akademisierung* in German-speaking countries). One side regards the expansion of academic qualifications as crucial in view of changes in economic structures and the accompanying, stronger focus on knowledge in the world of work. On the other side, this trend is criticized (not only, but especially, in German-speaking countries, with their developed vocational education systems). According to the critics, the academic drift undermines vocational education, whose advantages consist primarily of occupational applications. Notwithstanding assessing the positive or negative aspects of massification in higher education, it seems more appropriate to examine the related transformation with regard to the change in meaning of that which is “academic” – its core societal legitimization. Rather than mourning this transformation and seeing it as a farewell to some “Golden Age of Academe” (Tight, 2010), it would be far more interesting

to initially describe the transformation of the academic self-concept.

Historically, the meaning of what is academic has changed in many ways. Above all, the rise of the research universities induced academic variations, although some forms of academic organization from the Late Middle Ages have remained surprisingly stable (Clark, 2006). The multilayered history of the academic character is characterized by a simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, as illustrated in detail by Rudolf Stichweh's exploration of the figure of "academic freedom" (Stichweh, 2016). The massification of higher education has supposedly led to further transformations of what is seen as academic.

The following two examples serve to illustrate how the academic self-conception is constantly being renegotiated in institutions of higher education beyond excellence. It is not surprising that these universities are less focused on the production of knowledge than they are on training students to handle knowledge. This shift of perspective towards knowledge management transforms the idea of what is academic.

My first example is the rise of the scholarship of teaching and learning during recent decades. Essentially, improving teaching and learning in universities is not a new invention. Even though thoughts on good teaching have a longer tradition, a specialized scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education was institutionally incorporated during the second half of the 20th century, and is closely connected with the massification and scientification of teaching and learning at all levels of education (Wildt, 2013). And yet, standards for teaching in higher education have risen over the last three decades (Hutchings, Huber & Ciccone, 2011). Formats for advanced studies in teaching and learning have been refined, and related certifications have become a standard in employment ads. Yet, research in this field remains small-scale and represents the intention to engage individual academics in improving their teaching (Tight, 2018).

The diversification of higher education has led universities beyond excellence to worry about establishing a profile – not least because of the pressure to distinguish themselves according to the role of an "entrepreneurial university" (Clarke, 1998). Since not all universities can be part of the academic elite, advisors plead for "excellent teaching" – not excellence in research – to be placed at the centre of such a profile (Borgwardt, 2013). Thus, even universities known for the excellence of their academic research have felt obliged to go along with emphasizing the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education. In effect, service departments for teaching and learning development are now an integral part of the

"third space" (Whitchurch, 2011) in universities. This didactic refinement in higher education reflects the shift in interest from questions of knowledge production towards knowledge management.

The rise of the scholarship of teaching and learning at universities can thus be seen to have resulted from massification and an accompanying, stronger vocational focus in higher education. In this respect, the expansion of higher education is ambiguous: on the one hand, companies in a knowledge society call for proficient managers of knowledge who know how to handle growing amounts of information and data. Academic degrees promise to certify such requirements. On the other hand, the expansion of the higher education sector leads to the establishment of courses that need to be both vocationally and scientifically orientated. The scholarship of teaching and learning faces this challenge whilst promoting rationalization – German-speaking critics would call this a *Verschulung*, perhaps translated best as "regimentation" – of academic teaching. In fact, this leads to the development of promising and innovative teaching concepts, especially in view of the ongoing discussion about linking teaching and research. The focus here, however, is not so much on academic research in teaching and learning in higher education, but rather on the results of their application. Advanced studies of teaching and learning in higher education are meant to enable those academics with no didactical training, to offer high quality teaching. Academics apply in their teaching what they have learnt in their advanced studies. The fundamental question is how this application affects the academic self-concept of higher education.

If it is true that the massification and accompanying vocationalization of higher education change the meaning of what is "academic", this is also an effect of the increasing professionalization of teaching. An optimistic view of the scholarship of teaching and learning would see it as a chance to deliberately – through rationalization – open spaces to explore teaching and learning in higher education in an academic way, but one that is, above all, geared towards vocational usability. From a pessimistic viewpoint, questions remain about the didactization of that which is academic: how, if at all, an academic approach might be taught. Whilst attempts at defining that which is academic include non-standardizable elements (e.g., Oevermann, 2005, p. 25), it remains to be seen how compatible this academic self-concept is with the professionalization of higher education teaching and learning, which is more or less aimed at rationalization. The resulting paradoxical challenge of rationalizing what is non-standardizable is, meanwhile, itself an academic problem.

This leads to my second example, which also deals with teaching in higher education beyond excellence. Institutions that fall behind the competition in terms of academic elite, present their courses as particularly occupational and geared towards the job market. Their curricula reflect this strong focus on practical application. At the same time, such institutions commit to a scientific orientation of their teaching, without which they could hardly award academic titles. There are differences in how universities deal with the expectation to remain scientific in the conception of their courses – and this has consequences for their academic self-concepts.

One key feature of the academic drift and the accompanying massification of higher education is that existing organizations for vocational training have become institutions of higher education. Their degrees and courses have gained an academic character, with a demand for scientific quality. A stronger focus on theory is meant to enable students to assess practical tasks from a distance, to adjust their own actions upon these reflections, and, furthermore, to be active agents in the management and transformation of knowledge. It is neither made explicit nor agreed on, however, what level of scientific quality is necessary in order to reach these goals in higher education teaching. This confusion essentially constitutes a verdict of “postsecondary education anarchy” (Altbach, 2017, p. 10) as a result of massification.

My own survey of students at a university of applied science in Switzerland led to the conclusion that even within one university, there can be very different opinions on the demands for scientific qualities that should be put on students’ work. On a purely formal level, the academic drift in vocational education has resulted in more reading

and writing being undertaken (Edwards & Miller, 2008, p. 130). However, when the scientific quality of student work is reduced to writing, to default text structures and bibliographic references, formal criteria become more important than assessment of content, and the academic character is modified by the institutional demands of the universities (de Lagasnerie, 2017). Determining the academic content of student work in order to quantify it according to explicit criteria, raises the question of whether the scientific quality of academic work can be rationalized at all.

The academic drift is reflected in formalization: every academic degree includes a final, written submission, which has to meet certain scientific criteria. But there is no clear and conclusive definition of what these criteria are. Students occasionally witness how awkwardly university lecturers deal with scientific requirements and related concepts of what is academic. This might be considered indicative of the need to improve teaching and learning in higher education. Still, the question of how the professionalization of teaching is transforming the self-concept of academia is a more fundamental one. As soon as higher education becomes focused on the management of knowledge rather than its production, this creates a shift in the central criteria for assessing academic character.

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