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Jams, Loops and Downward Spirals in the Academic System

Patricia Pisters

The current protests by students and staff of the University of Amsterdam and other universities in the Netherlands are a sign of very deep structural problems in the academic system. Rather than just a local problem about language departments or the position of humanities (well beyond the University of Amsterdam or universities in the Netherlands), these actions have to do with an accumulation of national and international developments in the way the university is structured, organized and funded. New public management seeks to quantify and optimize results. But in doing so, it is creating instead at least two types of undesired dynamics: a glass ceiling that separates teaching from research, and staggering amounts of uncredited bureaucratic work that is slowly but surely replacing the ‘core business’ of academic labor all together. The situation has adopted increasingly Kafkaesque proportions over the last two decades. The academic ship is about to hit the shore, and we need to tack it now, in order to remain afloat and ensure future sailing. Aside from a wide variety of specific problems that need to be resolved locally, it might be useful to illustrate the effects of the accumulation of measures that the average scholar faces in daily practice today.

Academics – ranging from assistant professors to full professors – are assigned two main tasks: education and research. These days, however, there is less and less time for actual research and the investment in education. How did this happen? With regards to research time, scientists today spend up to 30% of their time just searching for funding for prospective research, as Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* recently found in a survey among 500 academics. This reveals that a lot of time is spent on formulating and organizing research projects within the requirements for pre-established frameworks of national and international competition programs. In itself, this is already a rat race that is worthy of discussion; only less than 20% of all applications make it through each round of evaluation, the other 80% can keep on trying without guarantee of better chances next time. What remains to be taken into account, however, is that all these proposals also need to be assessed by the academic community itself; mostly through large, heterogeneously composed, time-consuming committees where not all the members have the necessary disciplinary knowledge to cover the full range of topics and fields. Each proposal then includes at least two or three external referees; these too are the academics themselves who anonymously give their verdict on submitted proposals in blind peer-reviewing processes. The whole cycle of reviewing, references and assessment, in turn, is then checked again. Again it is the academics themselves – though, of course, in other committees – who take on the brunt of the work. Because this system of research funding through competitive project applications is an international and transnational phenomenon, requests for references, reviews and commissions

arrive daily from many corners of the world. In addition, publishers require referees for proposals, articles and manuscripts. It is impossible to meet all such requests, but it is important work. Academics readily offer their help and advice in these activities, as well as other services to the profession that include, among others, mock interviews, pitch preparation and the sharing of experiences, to help colleagues attain a better chance in competition. And so, with the time it takes to write proposals, one must add at least another 10% and 20% needed to keep the whole system running and in line with quality standards. Awarded projects, then, require a lot of management and administration. The percentage of research time in a university appointment varies, but it never exceeds 50% of a full appointment (not including PhD supervision); one doesn't need to make a complex calculation to understand how precious little time is left to do the actual research or writing. Meanwhile, many universities have appointed additional supporting staff to draft budgets and provide administrative aid; but they too can barely handle the flow of applications. An average budgeting task requires two hours. An average grant-writing takes twenty days.

The chances of having a project awarded are small, but once it is selected, the chances that the next project will be successful increase exponentially. Funded research time allows an academic to 'buy oneself out' of teaching, and to have the time to write a subsequent effective application. And it is at this point that a watershed between research and teaching staff emerges. Staff members with a grant and a permanent job (which, in itself, is becoming increasingly rare) have to be replaced in their teaching duties, usually, by young postdocs or academics who are still working on their PhDs. This staff is hired on temporary teaching contracts without research time, and they are therefore ushered into an entirely different spiral. For many teaching tasks, the standard hours paid per seminar or other education forms have decreased steadily over time, and so an increasing amount of classes have to be given to reach a living wage. At many universities, teaching contracts above 0,7fte are deemed excessive and unworkable, and are therefore not offered, simply because a higher teaching workload would never fit into a 24/7 workweek. Payments are low, and so many young aspiring academics still take these smaller contracts even though they are overburdening themselves. A young academic in this situation is asked to consider him or herself lucky to have the opportunity to remain in the academic field, but sees little opportunity to develop a thought or observation that might actually result into the writing of an article or a research proposal. Their ability to obtain funding or to be shortlisted for a competitive research program is thwarted due to the lack of publications. Neither does this system acknowledge their teaching evaluations or overall academic qualities, which reduces even further their possibilities of advancing within academia. PhDs and postdocs that enter the system as interims get caught up in a loop of teaching forever because one temporary teaching assignment only ever leads to another temporary teaching assignment.

For actual teaching, there is also less and less time. In addition to the cutbacks in paid teaching hours, which already makes teaching dangerously overloaded, the last two decades have provided an explosive increase in bureaucracy, administration and control mechanisms: the multiplication

of tests, course manuals, key and examination files, second and third readers, and handing in standardized forms within a range of categories that all have to be filled out manually, take an enormous amount of time and energy. A long day of intense teaching is followed by an evening of correcting tests, papers and assignments, and the subsequent administration work; first for your own students, then for those of your colleagues. Let's add it up: if you, as a teacher, have to perform a second assessment for a group of 30 students for a colleague, on a final assignment (I'm not even talking about the Master thesis), and you spend 15 minutes per assignment (which is obviously not enough to properly provide a profound assessment or any useful feedback, but just enough to check the control points with some decency), it is clear that just the completion of that additional form takes the equivalent of a full working day. By working weekends and evenings, a teacher may perhaps have one day a week (or, more likely, a half day and an evening) to prepare the content of lectures and classes. What is most distressing, though, is that this system sustains not only a permanent distrust of teachers, but that students too are flooded with tests, rules and regulations that get in the way of real learning and the encouragement of independent thinking. Alongside this, in spite of all the feedback forms, record-keeping and standardized contact hours, students still feel that they are unheard and unseen by their overworked teachers, both as individuals and as students who desire to learn and understand the content of a field in greater depth. These are the contradictions that the current system of constant checks and balances within the university creates. The ultimate goal of this system is, invariably, to prepare for the external audit committee that comes along every few years or so, to assess and control every degree program and each department according to perennially changing rules and standards. Any potential 'risk' needs to be covered by a new measurement or regulation. Students are provided with less and less time or space to reflect on their process, or to make mistakes along the way; learning now means attaining instant excellence without any room for mistakes, changes of perspective, or a sense of development. And, unfortunately, for students who *are* excellent to begin with - and there are many who are - this system doesn't offer enough challenges or personal engagement. Students and teachers feel increasingly like stressed, hunted preys.

Add to this the ever-shrinking group of tenured staff, when they are not busy securing research grants or have taken on heavy management posts. This group is now burdened by more and more administrative tasks in coordinating personnel and programs, including negotiating ever shrinking budgets for paid or teaching hours every step of the way. Moreover, re-organizations resulting from top-down imposed changes in, for instance, semester format or the restructuring of programs, demand endless meetings and constant 'creative' editing and adjustment. Many teams manage to join forces and muddle through such reorganizations, but their arrangements only last until the next round of reorganization a year later. Similarly, the annual game of 'musical chairs', from arranging replacements, new contracts and applications rounds to dismissals and dealing with disappointments, present another level of arduous procedures and negative energy. And with regards to research, besides the laborious review processes mentioned above, the current publish-or-perish model results in academics who *read* much less than they publish; there simply isn't

enough time. The golden open-access publishing model, which is based on the extremely legitimate idea that research publications need to be public, has developed into a system where the author (i.e. the researcher, writer, editor, peer-reviewer) also has ensure that their grants includes these so-called Article Processing Costs (APCs), or else foot the bill from his or her own pocket (APCs vary between €500 to €5000). The ramifications of this system could lead research into a downward spiral: no 'golden' open access means less readers (quoted), which means a lower impact factor (by citation index, or similar measure), which means a lower ranking in competitions, leading to a smaller chance to attain grants, and so on.

All this, however, does not mean that we should return to a system where there is no sense of accountability or one that demands uncontrollable costs. Over the years, sensible corrections have been made to a system that was untenably expensive and often unproductive. There are great advantages in looking for funding through thematically-oriented projects and collaborations on a national or international level. Recalibrations, adjustments, the (interdisciplinary) exchange of ideas with colleagues, and the learning of best practices in education, teaching and pedagogy are all healthy developments. But the system of profit-driven control and efficiency has manifested itself now to be inhuman and unsustainable. It even takes on dangerous proportions, when research that can only be done within certain frameworks, such as a specific national discourse, or top-down programming, as is increasingly the case. It is important to create better working conditions and labor contracts. Parts of the research budget must be released to allow independent research, smaller-scale projects and special dissertations, so that university research schools themselves can be, partially, at the helm again. In such a richly varied research environment, unexpected connections, unpredictable discoveries and potentially invaluable observations and insights can arise. Within the field of education, it is necessary to put the focus back on content, driven by the curiosity and enthusiasm of students and teachers, and to leave behind the illusion of quality control through constant testing and monitoring. It's a good thing to have diversity of levels: to have adequate, good and excellent students work together. On all fronts, it is necessary to turn the page on a system of distrust and on the fear of isolated cases of underachievement and bad exceptions that currently imposes too many rules. A return to trust and common sense would permit us to correct mistakes as we move along. This would finally allow us to engage once more with the absolutely essential tasks of high quality teaching and research.

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