

Charter of de-excellence

by L'Atelier des Chercheurs (LAC) pour une désexcellence des universités

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Why “de-excellence”?

“Excellence” is now everywhere. In industry, food, sports, television and even in the privacy of our homes. It expresses the surpassing of oneself and others, the continuous increase in performance, success in a world that is said to be “in profound change”, where only the strongest would survive and prosper.

Recovered by neoliberal and managerial thinking since the 1980s, "Excellence" has an incantatory dimension that can make one smile. Indeed, there is a long way between the slogans of the managers and the reality that these slogans are supposed to describe or produce. But the smile quickly disappears when we measure the concrete effects of management based on “Excellence”: hyper-competition, devaluation of knowledge built on experience, continuous transformation of professional practices, precariousness, indifference to content, standardized and repeated evaluations, with, as corollaries, the risk of a loss of self-esteem, demotivation and an effective decrease in the quality of the work provided.

Affected later than other sectors, the academic world adopted the ideology of "Excellence" with the fervour of the new converts. In the wake of the Bologna Agreements, through which competition between European universities has been enshrined, it seemed crucial for each university to maintain its brand image, to transform its organisation into a war machine capable of absorbing the best credits, the best teacher-researchers, the largest number of students, and to strengthen its positioning on national and international scenes. In a context of shortage and crisis, the concern for rapid return on investment contributed to the systematization of indicator-based management in the fields of research and education.

But after more than a decade of uninterrupted reform, we are facing a deterioration, not an improvement, in our working environments. Of course, we have increased our communication skills.

Of course, we have started to produce these “Excellence Indicators” that guarantee a good positioning in evaluations and rankings. But such skills don’t say anything meaningful about the quality of our work. Even worse, they frequently mask a decline in quality: formatting of research fields and objects, multiplication of invalid results and frauds, lack of perspective and critical thinking, construction of a commercial relationship to learning, substitution of instrumental knowledge to knowledge and reflection, etc. Behind its cardboard décor paste, “Excellence” policy actually leads to a result exactly the opposite of what it claims to promote.

It is from these observation that the notion of “de-excellence” emerged. Far from encouraging laziness or mediocrity, it invites us to be concerned about the *actual quality* of our work, including both the nature of what we do and the satisfaction it provides us. Following this perspective inspired by artisanal work, quality is cultivated by reconciling act and meaning. Moreover, our call for “de-excellence” does not mean regretting some sort of academic “Golden Age” - which never existed - but rather opposing through our own practices the current misuse of universities.

Why a “charter of de-excellence”?

Many criticisms have been voiced within academia in recent years. In France and Belgium, in particular, independent movements have emerged to denounce the abuses of current practices in research and teaching and to call for both a slowdown - *Slow Science* - and a refocusing on values fostering quality: sharing, selflessness, honesty, pleasure. Several calls and petitions have been issued in this regard, which are supported by thousands of scientists around the world. Sharing most of their findings, we have also signed them and helped disseminating them.

However, it seems to us that raising awareness, discussing or signing a petition is not enough. Beyond denunciation, it is crucial to measure our share of responsibility in the adoption and development of the ideology of “Excellence”. We are all susceptible, at one time or another, to serve as the cog of the managerial machine. By accepting certain reforms, by complying with certain injunctions - especially those concerning the competition of individuals and evaluation policies - we somehow become the actors of our own destruction.

One way out of this trap is to transform ourselves by transforming the way we do things. In short: to put our values into practice, rather than calling – indefinitely? – for a change from political and academic leaders who now seem much more concerned about image than about substance. This is the purpose of this “Charter of De-excellence”. Resulting from a collective reflection that must be

continued and expanded, it aims above all to clean up our practices, by refusing to substitute the notion of “Excellence” to honest and well-done work. It also aims to contribute to a public, democratic and accessible university; another kind of university compared to the one we see being built at the moment.

How to use this charter?

This charter does not have to be signed and adopted as it stands. Nor is it about “counting” how many we are or adopting a new banner. This charter aims at fostering a critical appropriation of a series of proposals relating to teaching, research, administration and service to the public.

These proposals can be adjusted according to individual profiles, contexts and possibilities for action. Whether new managers like it or not, the academic world still includes multiple interstices in which forms of resistance develop. But this doesn’t mean we’re calling for professional suicide. This is why we first propose this charter to tenured members of academia, who have the largest room for manoeuvre.

To ensure the existence of an academic community based on dialogue and solidarity between all its components, including students and staff, we hope that this charter will be appropriated by a large number of people and develop a life of its own, in the same way as free software, transformable by all.

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1. EDUCATION

For us, teaching is an essential mission of universities. It is not a commodity and must not be profitable.

Consequently, I undertake to:

- Promote a logic of knowledge in the organization of teaching, not one directed at “gaining” students
- Defend students’ free access to university
- Oppose attempts at managing educational fields subjected to fashion phenomena or enrolment numbers.
- Denounce discourses and developments that transform universities into strictly professionalizing institutions, promising the acquisition of directly operational skills.
- Refuse to treat students as “clients” or “consumers”:
 - by placing at the heart of teaching what makes research strong, enjoyable and rich in the construction of knowledge – for example, by multiplying the links between courses, seminars and practical work, or by developing educational mechanisms that enable knowledge to be built collectively;
 - by combating the infantilization of students in the learning process (due, among other things, to the standardization of contents and assignments), which contributes to maintain them in a “student” position rather than helping them becoming curious and critical adults;
 - by avoiding the use of formatted and standardized evaluation protocols.
- Maintain an intellectual requirement towards students, by explaining their obligations and responsibilities in terms of personal work, by explaining the objectives and requirements of the courses, by discussing with them the meaning and reasons for the organisation of the contents, by asking for their feedback on the lessons given... and by taking these into account.
- Promote, in my teaching, reflections allowing the acquisition and development of tools capable of ensuring that students have a better understanding of the world and a better grasp of its evolution.
- Refuse to draw up “competency frameworks” that do not have as main objectives the personal and intellectual development of students and teachers through the construction of knowledge (thinking), know-how (methods) and attitudes (values).
- Promote collective pedagogical reflections at the scale of sectors or departments, in order to overcome the glaring deficiencies of the standardized evaluations of our teaching activities.
- Ensure that centralised teaching aids and their possible technicality do not lead to an increased

standardisation of our teaching.

- Refuse to promote, to participate in, or to organize financially discriminatory training or internships.
- Refuse to recruit or promote teacher-researchers solely on the basis of research experience or an ability to raise funds. Pedagogical skills must be a priority.
- Value professional experience when recruiting only when it is likely to contribute to the university's teaching and research missions.
- Require any external or internal evaluation procedure of our teaching activities to explain its criteria and objectives, and to allow the expression of opinions based on other criteria.

2. RESEARCH

For us, research produces diverse and open knowledge. It is not a productivist and utilitarian activity. It is not intended for the manufacture of finished products.

Consequently, I undertake to:

- Consider research and teaching as inseparable, both in practice and in principle. Research is enriched by the knowledge that emerges within the educational system and teaching allows the transmission of knowledge and questions resulting from the research of our predecessors and contemporaries.
- Defend the free choice of research subjects, without any criteria of profitability.
- Reject the current evaluation and ranking logic that puts both researchers and research entities in competition and devalues collaborative work:
 - by giving absolutely no credit to international rankings, whose aims and methods must be tirelessly denounced;
 - by participating in or submitting to evaluations only on the condition that they promote the self-evaluation of research groups. This implies that the evaluation criteria have been discussed collectively and that they focus mainly on the content;
 - by refusing to import standardised evaluation grids;
 - by being accountable to society, without being dependent on social or private demand. We must defend the perspective of research that listens to the world, but is sufficiently autonomous not to have its agendas imposed on it.
- Comply with rules in the procedures for hiring or promoting teacher-researchers:
 - no recruitment methods that implicitly disadvantage "local/local" candidates;
 - no hegemony of quantitative criteria in the evaluation of scientific dossiers (rank in the promotion of studies, number of publications, impact factor, h index, citation index,...) and priority given to the judgment on the content of works ;
 - no use of the international post-doc as a selection criterion (in particular because it discriminates against the less wealthy and against women);
 - requirement for application forms or recommendation templates containing qualitative criteria and detailed and unformatted arguments (it is essential that the internet interfaces do not block when the boxes are not filled in and that they always allow text to be added!) ;
 - requirement to maintain scholarships accessible to candidates whose profiles deviate from the quantitative criteria and requirement that their eligibility criteria be maintained throughout the

selection procedure;

- no priority given to the host department in the selection criteria for individual files;
- no mobility that is not supported by financial programmes that match the cost of a stay abroad, including, where appropriate, for families.

- Do not submit to the obsession of productivism in terms of publication, which implies:
 - to give no credit at all to the use of bibliometric indicators in career management or the selection of research projects;
 - to never try to know my own indicators (h index, citation index,...) or those of my colleagues (and even better, to create "*Impact-factor free zones*");
 - to draw the attention of young researchers to the dangers of an ideology of Excellence that gives priority to quantity and speed over content;
 - to encourage the publication of summary texts (articles, chapters, books) rather than *one idea, one paper* tactics aiming at extending CVs;
 - to refuse to co-sign a paper in which I have not been actively involved;
 - to encourage publication deadlines that are long enough to allow for quality writing;
 - to encourage the joint writing of works published under the signature of collectives;
 - not to confine to English for publication;
 - to take care not to sign publishing contracts that allow the commercial appropriation of my work;
 - to publish in Open Access journals as systematically as possible;
 - to continue to publish in local, regional, national and academic journals dedicated to the public dissemination of research results;
 - to promote the collective discussion of my research, both within and outside the academic community;
 - to continue writing texts that make the results of my research available to non-academic audiences (e. g. community journals);
 - to refuse to allow publication work to become an explicit or implicit pretext for neglecting or refusing investment in other sectors of academic activity.
- Combat the transformation of research units or laboratories into managerial cells:
 - by promoting collegial and democratic management (in particular by regularly renewing their leadership); and if this proves impossible, by creating other structures that allow it;
 - by requiring the recognition of interdisciplinary research structures within the university;

- by allowing different ways of connecting people to research units;
 - by not confining the sharing of our research to the limits imposed by institutional groups or networks ("I share with whom I want!");
 - by considering doctoral students as research partners in all circumstances, which presupposes a de-infantilisation of professional relationships and the cessation of incessant requests for "training guarantees";
 - by protecting the academic freedom of doctoral students in the conduct of their research;
 - by claiming that thesis registration fees be included in the thesis funding budget;
 - by clearly and honestly informing doctoral candidates or contract researcher about the career prospects within the university;
 - by undertaking, despite the precarious nature of working conditions and the pressure exerted on wages, to respect in all circumstances labour law and the integrity of people at work;
 - by refusing to exploit for personal purposes the research results resulting from the work of collaborators;
- Refuse to carry out management tasks that jeopardize my teaching and research activities (all types of reports, repeated evaluation processes, preparation of funding applications).
 - Consider the results of research funded (in whole or in part) by public authorities as well as those of society as a whole.
 - Require research contracts signed with private and public actors not to hinder the use and dissemination of my research results to all audiences.

3. ADMINISTRATION

For us, administration is an essential component of the university's operations. It is not the passive and malleable equipment of the institution's new managers.

Consequently, I undertake to:

- Require the appointment of sufficient statutory administrative staff, to whom fulfilling working conditions (salary, space, organisational autonomy, etc.) are guaranteed. This implies:
 - not to launch any new teaching and research initiatives without first ensuring that the administrative resources will allow them to be carried out;
 - to solicit and listen to the views of administrative staff;
 - to demand a greater weight for the administration in decision-making.
- Enhance and mobilize internal resources in terms of work organization and management, rather than resorting to external expertise and techniques (managerial, IT,...), inappropriate to the specificities of the university.
- Enable administrations to treat students on an equal footing, in real respect of the announced rules and without strategic consideration in relation to their profile (e. g. nationality).

4. SERVICES TO COMMUNITIES

For us, universities have a mission to serve the community. They are and must remain open and connected to social issues. However, this service should not be reduced to research that meets the immediate requirements of authorities or markets (including employment), nor to the provision of media and hollow expertise that merely responds to the logic of institutional or personal visibility.

Consequently, I undertake to:

- Defend the freedom of expression of University members on social issues, including when they involve criticism of the institution itself.
- Support the investment of university actors, knowledge and values in society (associations, movements, committed collectives, local scientific societies, etc.), with a view to mutual learning and collective emancipation.
- Respond favourably to requests from civil society for academic expertise.
- Create tools for contact and discussion between scholars and non-specialists, whether it is places, events, media outlets, modes of expression, etc.
- Refuse the call for visibility at all costs, in particular by declining media invitations if they impose temporal formats that are irreconcilable with complex explanations or if they do not give rise to a right of control over the content broadcast.

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