

Shrinking from within: Academic freedom in the era of Excellence

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Anything to report?

As we are used to doing, we will use, for this presentation, concrete and experienced situations as a starting point for our analyses and our positions.

Today, at ULB, as in probably all universities in the country, it makes sense to say that apart from our “duties” towards the institution (in terms of teaching loads for example, discipline or ethics), we are completely “free” to organise our work. There is no one behind our shoulders who dictates the content of our teachings or the pedagogical methods we use, or who imposes our research topics on us.

The testimony of some colleagues who say that they feel completely free to deal with the subjects they want, both now and in the past, might seem reassuring and support the idea that, in terms of academic freedom, there is indeed nothing to report in our latitudes.

And yet....

However, it is not without interest to wonder in which world our academic freedom is exercised today, or what the conditions for its exercise are today, in an academic world that now has only one word in its mouth: Excellence!

However, behind the notion of Excellence (in its application to the field of teaching and research) lies an ideology that claims to measure and compare the quality of our work and activities on the basis of quantitative or productivity indicators, in order to establish and select the best performances. Its corollary is **the evaluation of everything, everyone and every day**. It is a new and effective way of no longer giving any importance to the content of our research and teaching, or the meaning we give them.

Once Excellence has been defined in this way, it must be noted at the same time:

1° that Excellence is everywhere, and not only at the university;

2° and that, at the same time, academic freedom remains brandished as a cardinal value of our Belgian universities.

However, more than appears, the ideology of Excellence and the practices it entails hinder academic freedom through narrowing: academic freedom is shrinking from within. That is what we want to argue here.

Indirect control devices

While direct control mechanisms (“strong” or “visible”) are indeed almost non-existent, the effects of indirect control mechanisms, which operate mainly through the capture of our time and the imposition of exogenous imperatives on our businesses, and which have taken a disproportionate place over the past 15 years, should not be underestimated. Among other things:

✓ The **administrative tasks and bureaucratic aspects of our work** have been considerably inflated, through a permanent process of reforms linked precisely to the implementation of quantification mechanisms for evaluation and the competition between universities, and even between departments within universities, in a now “internationalised” market.

* for teaching: course sheets, support for more and more students in relation to the number of teachers, more and more individualised programmes, administrative follow-up of students in international mobility, etc.;

* for research: encoding our publications on platforms used to make them visible, administrative management of inter-university collaborations, etc.;

Because it is necessary both to open ourselves to the international market and to be able to standardise all our data to facilitate the measurement of our quality and that of our students. These measures, in turn, are already or will soon be used as funding criteria. In other words, the swelling of our administrative tasks serves to standardize our ways of doing things (teaching, evaluating, publishing, etc.) and to make us producers of indicators that are then used to put us in competition with each other.

✓ The **number of evaluations to which we are required to submit and the number of reports we are required to produce has increased significantly**, either by institutional obligation (reports for AEQES, reports of permanent researchers from the FNRS for their evaluation, continuous evaluation of doctoral students and assistants, evaluation of our performance to open or retain positions and resources within universities themselves), or by the evaluation of our teaching.

✓ The **new modalities for allocating research budgets, based on competition to ensure scientific excellence, generate inequalities not only in terms of budget but also in terms of time**. The competitive tendering of academic institutions means that they must respond to calls for projects from public or even private donors, considered prestigious (symbolic injunction to respond to European projects, ERCs, Marie Curie scholarships, etc.; all institutions whose leitmotifs are visibility, attractiveness and excellence). Participating in these extremely competitive calls raises three forms of temporal charges that paradoxically burden the temporality of the research. First, participating in these calls costs a lot of time, especially in coordination and administration tasks, with partners who are sometimes obliged to do so. In many cases, this time is then lost when the project is not selected. Secondly, their financial management, mandatory reporting, the filling in of time sheets, the many coordination meetings between the many partners, etc., take us away from the research itself and are very time-consuming. Thirdly, the most prestigious of these funds allow those who obtain them to free up time for research, leaving the university's teaching and management tasks to those who have not been able to obtain such resources. This system of recognition of

“excellence” thus paradoxically recognizes that researchers' time is too busy to do good research, to do it freely, and that to do so, it must be freed from all the other tasks that burden the mass of those who do not excel according to these criteria.

✓ The **permanent injunction to training**: training in the selection of doctoral candidates, training in the supervision of doctoral candidates, training in media communication, training in the administrative management of contracts, training in social networks, etc.

✓ The **injunction to "make our work visible" has become essential**: we are being urged to publish a lot, quickly and therefore badly, preferably in English and in international journals that rankings based on quantitative and economic indicators will have classified "A" rather than "B". In short, you must publish to be counted, therefore, to count, rather than to be read. We should be active on social networks. In addition, to remain credible, research centres are obliged to provide visible proof of their scientific activity by organising seminars, colloquia and prestigious invitations, the organisation and holding of which takes up a considerable amount of time for researchers and teachers, especially among the youngest. However, the scientific value of these activities remains generally modest or even disappointing.

✓ The **injunction to copy, or even multiply, the offer of our courses based on social fashions or economic trends**, especially at master level, has the effect of standardising open training in universities and abandoning students' basic training (Bachelor's degrees). It is also this logic that prevails when creating profiled chairs based on benchmarking, and that is to the detriment of the diversity of teacher profiles.

✓ The **injunction to permanent academic productivity generates an indirect but palpable formatting of thought and its forms of expression**: to publish a lot, one must conform to the common ways of writing and thinking (those conveyed by the dominant journals). This formatting then saves time to publish even more. The training courses offered to thesis promoters disseminate standardised tools to avoid delays in the production of theses, whose formats themselves are increasingly standardised, gradually eliminating the possibility of freedom of expression formats. The same trends can be observed in education.

As we can see, these new requirements linked to the spread of the ideology of Excellence have tangible consequences on the “free” use of our time and our “freedom of action”.

But what is left of autonomous and unfragmented time in the university today? What is left of the long research time that in turn feeds the teaching? The administrative constraint coupled with the injunction to Excellence have been the tools for capturing our schedule, a tool of indirect coercion, which has considerably reduced the scope of our possibilities to think, and therefore also to criticize.

The atomization of the possibility of critical thinking

For, if (academic) freedom can be defined in different ways, based on notions such as autonomy or self-management, it can also be defined as the *possibility* of developing fundamental critical thinking. However, everything that has just been said about the "World of Excellence" simply leads to reducing to almost nothing the time available and necessary for the deployment of critical thinking.

Moreover, the combination of the university's increasing dependence on external funding and the quest for excellence generate fractures within the university personnel, insidiously

drawing a line between the "stars" (those who have moved on to excellence and can now claim this label), and the "losers" who have remained on the bench (often the bench of their teaching, the bench of local projects that they develop with modest partners and anchored in the territories). This demarcation between the "winners" and the "losers" of Excellence, or between the "champions" and the "lame ducks", generates an implicit moral constraint, a kind of obligatory solidarity with the winners, since the latter, testifying to the value of the institution, become more difficult to criticise. But how many invisible little hands does it take for a brilliant champion?

This "star system" is based on and part of a strengthening of the pyramidal aspect of university populations. The pressures undergone and consented to by those who have reached the top of the pyramid (who are named, therefore) are thus transferred to the university's growing number of precarious students who are thus led to work in a relationship of subordination to their promoters. Because "Excellence" is well adapted to the exploitation of the work of others, especially if it is statutorily and structurally weaker. Under these conditions, when you are at the bottom of the pyramid, it becomes even more difficult to maintain time for autonomous thinking.

Thus, little by little, by narrowing our autonomous time, by submitting to criteria of exogenous meaning that are foreign to our questions, by obligatory solidarity with winners, and by self-censorship, our academic freedom, i.e. our ability to deploy critical, autonomous thinking, seeking to get to the bottom of things, rather than knowledge indexed to the concerns of the institutions that grant funding, is itself becoming increasingly narrow.

In other words, we have less and less time and means to be the authors of the questions that concern us, to exercise our "rebel subjectivities". Less and less time and means to develop a power of imagination, a resistant subjectivity. Our desire to "tell the truth" (Foucault), which is for many of us the reason for choosing this profession, is laminated by a productivity whose meaning, use and interest escape us. We have fewer and fewer ways to break out of the nails, to identify, study and propose other ways of doing things or being, transversal and dissident, singular and shared ways of opposing sovereign powers.

As pragmatic questions for a discussion: who, in this room, will take the liberty of not reading their emails for two consecutive days? Two days to think, analyse, step back and write freely? Who in this room has never preferred not to submit to the administrative requirements to allow themselves a day of research without feeling guilty?
