

Excellence as a Container Term: Being brilliant as an Ordinary Person

This article inspires with some ideas about what is meant to be “excellence” in scientific everyday-life. For the last decades many studies have tried to unravel the consequences of the New Governance of Science. Since the 1970s questions of governance, self-control and uncontrollability have been dominant topics in university research. Since the “entrepreneurial university” (Clark 1998, Foss & Gibson 2015, Kleimann 2016) was announced at the end of the 1990s, it has become questionable how far business instruments can properly meet universities’ tasks (Bogumil et al 2013, 2009). Nonetheless this kind of public management was often portrayed as without alternative because of the corresponding need to shrinking budgets. But the literature about (critical) accounting research and quantification is growing in different theoretical communities (Crouch 2015, Mennicken & Vollmer 2007, Heintz 2003, Power & Miller 2013, Power et al 2003, Weingart 2015).

Instead of describing and analysing these tools the focus here is on how people communicate and position themselves according to being classified as ‘high’ or ‘low performers’ and being measured and compared in public. The empirical results presented here were taken from a research project about the measurement of “performance” by indicators (like publications and third-party-funds) for the purpose of competitively distributing budget which is only a little part of this new governance.

The following chapter will give a short glimpse on the research design (chapter 1). The most common patterns of justifying ‘good’ performance will be presented and illustrated by some statements in our interviews (chapter 2). Dipping a little deeper into the use of the three identified justification patterns, it can be revealed how the discourse of “excellence” functions as a container term (chapter 3), which makes it possible to position ordinary people as excellent and the other way around.

1. Universities in a Recognition Gap

For the last ten years the German Federal Ministry of Education financed a huge bundle of studies about the so called new governance of science. The research funding line “Leistungsbewertung in der Wissenschaft” [Performance Measurement in Science] (BMBF 2013) obviously reacted to the growing doubts about the defined rationale effects of this new governance articulated in the global higher-education research. In a kind of paradox sense, the research funding was meant to identify the ‘real’ effects of many kinds of New Public Management tools.

The general focus of our contribution to the governance problem within the research project “Universities in a Recognition Gap” (“Hochschulen in der Anerkennungsfall”)¹ is on how the governance of measuring academic performance is translated into the peoples’ self-perception and their claims for recognition. Our general motivation for this research project was to point out the new governance challenges – despite the extreme cost regulating and cutting effects – in forcing to incorporate a new reputational order that turns out to set recognition traps because old and new reputational orders are co-existing. Within the scope of our study we conducted case studies in eight universities from 2013 until 2016, which were not more than middle class universities. This is important to note as in Germany there is a prominent “excellence-initiative” where only high class universities can apply to promote top-level research of some universities (DFG 2013). For the other more or less 300 universities performance management is prescribed via the indicator performance management, which differs from federal state and type of university. So the research question was how people concerned by these indicator measurements in ordinary universities handle this performance management. How do they communicate “excellence” when they are supposed to be only common researchers, scientists or administrative stuff?

To answer this question, we interviewed all kinds of actors in the eight case study universities like professors, researchers, teachers, administrators, controllers, financial officers, quality managers, presidents, vice-chancellors as well as students with an interview guideline (that can be found in the appendix). Around 60 interviews about the formalized indicator system delivered a huge corpus of interview transcripts that showed how people position themselves to “excellence”. Mostly the interviews were interpreted by content analysis but partly they were analysed with objective hermeneutics.

2. Patterns of Justifying Scientific Performance

In the following dominant patterns of judging and justifying excellent or at least good scientific performance are illustrated – no matter if people criticize or adjust to these competitive tools. Before, some basic theoretical thoughts from “sociology of critical capacities” (Boltansky & Thévenot 1999) might be helpful as they provide an approach to analysing justification work.

2.1 Analysing Justification Work: The Sociology of Critical Capacities

¹ The design of the research project (Hochschulen in der Anerkennungsfall [Universities in a recognition gap]) was a qualitative case study within seven German universities. Beside document analysis and participative observation interviews were conducted as guided interviews with experts and narrative interviews with teachers, researchers as well as administrative personnel. The material was interpreted mainly through content analysis and in parts documentary method and through objective hermeneutics. The project was financed from the German Federal Ministry of Education (BMBF), funding line “Leistungsbewertung in der Wissenschaft” [performance measurement in science].

The sociology of justification (Boltansky & Thévenot 1999) demonstrates that the key aspect of social sciences is to grasp how relations of equivalence succeed or fail when people try to translate them to other contexts. Boltanski & Thévenot achieved attention for their contribution to get closer to critique in making justifications readable as affirmation and neglect of different regimes of orders. When people justify or criticize they choose a “regime” for a specific situation. So the very option of conflict and protest is grounded in the existence and concurrence of different regimes of justification that can be chosen. These regimes of equivalence can be of any nature, e.g. an employee claiming equal treatment in paying wages or, to the contrary, demands compensation in case of disadvantages. Important is, that relations of equivalence are addressed to sustain or question social order.

The permanent need for bridging diverse expectations can be more or less aware and therefore it is not a real decision how people behave in contexts of diverse expectations: whether obtaining or changing conventions or at least putting them into question. So people inherently choose (and sometimes find themselves forced to use) a possible set of “regimes” of equivalence. While trying to make sense of the shifting through “make-believing” people catch themselves justifying a system he criticizes. In following his justification and self-reflection we can observe peoples’ irritation about the normality of being measured and ranked.

We can benefit from this very elementary thought² to make justifications for strong or weak scientific performances readable when people affirm and neglect equivalences. When people justify or criticize they choose a “regime” for a specific situation, they switch between different regimes and their value systems in arguing that specific situations do not apply for a value system or vice versa. Within these hidden orientations (of what is compared and in which aspects) we can surmise relations of equivalence addressed by the interviewees.

2.2 Economy, Democracy, Innovation: Patterns of Justifying Scientific Performance

Around 60 peoples’ narrations about performance management and behaving to it were generated in interviews, recorded and transcribed. As only one aspect of the research focus on recognition gaps justification patterns could be identified in searching for dominant relations of equivalences or differences, various normative orientations and value-based justifications. Three patterns of justification were the most dominant:

Economy

² In general, sociology and psychology are full of hints for people’s dissociation in situations of conflict or discontent to maintain social order (i.e. Leithäuser & Volmerg 1988, Simmel 1917). In critical theory the term “dual socialisation” (Becker-Schmidt 2008) has been established to illustrate how the constitution of subject happens, namely as balancing multiple, often contradictory relations of power (like economic structures and gender hierarchy).

The next two examples follow cost-benefit- and/ or market rules-considerations. Faculty Manager Steve³ argues with external market pressure that forces universities to pass on this pressure: “Competition is outside, so we have to take it inside by measuring performance by the four indicators”. This way of linking internal and external orientations makes a clue especially for the detractors of university as academic ivory tower. It is the need of adapting external expectations of budgeting that is held to be impossible to ignore. Moreover in this view a good university has to adopt external demands. This more or less ‘market law and order’-logic has been heard often, but for now and here it serves as a useful distinction for the next example of using economic reasons for making sense of the alternativeness of quantified performance management.

A very different justification of market rules stems from Vice-President Amanda, who is reliant on “business data” to steer a social system whose employees does not consider themselves as organisational members, like in the university sector: “How can we survive as a middle range university with a completely insufficient funding and a jungle of money pots with different hook and eyes? [...] I need indicators to manage that survival and I have to promote this as an organisational strategy”. Amanda justifies the quantification of performances as a kind of protection shield to manage a university under conditions of reducing costs.

A third and last example of handling the increasing market perspective is delivered by Professor Till who wasn’t interested at all in performance data before, but who is now concerned about all his colleagues in being focused on that: “I never knew that I am the ‘third-party-king’, since some of my colleagues told me that I am the one who is pumping the most external funds into university”. So no matter if and how people feel comfort with market justifications of measuring good performance, we can observe varieties of making this perspective fit. Even personalities not setting value on these indicators will not only be informed about the relevance of this data but also about their new significance in social relations and its equivalences.

As Steve argues from the point of becoming realist to the external world, Amanda needs performance data for management (and survival) purposes and Till starts to see himself in the perspective of a caregiver or provider for the university.

Innovation

The next cluster of interview sequences illustrates the second pattern of justifying what is relevant scientific performance: it is the production of new knowledge and/ or structures. Young researcher Anna respects excellent scientists as a kind of Sisyphean personality: “Good scientist are people that do not care about loss and wasted time because they love their subject”. For her, the point of reference is to discover new approaches, no matter what costs or failure that would risk, which is a kind of anti-economic argument. Excellence is proven by a competence to establish networks of charismatic specialist, so Professor Jil argues: “You can detect brilliant scientists because they have become a part of huge networks connecting disciplines

³ All interviewees are anonymised and all citations are originally in German and have been translated.

and then cross their borders” (Professor Jil). His point of reference is a strong and well-deserved position in the community. But this serves only as a means for the purpose of innovation. A third example for justifying excellence as a power of innovation or at least for doing it otherwise is teacher Phil: “High performers are those who know their craft but also stayed courageous enough to do it differently at least sometimes”. Deviation from the norm seems to be a strong power of innovation not only in research but also in teaching.

So, the second pattern of justifying scientific performance can be identified as justification for innovation. While Anna describes the pursuit of innovativeness with a high amount of work, Professor Jil demonstrates innovativeness by connecting disciplines in a huge personal network. Professor Phil measures excellence of high performers in deviating from the norm, being creative in what sciences can be.

Democracy

Social, solidary and democratic relations are central for the last pattern of justifying excellent performance in science in the view of Frank and Conrad. Diversity and good working cooperation seem to be an important condition as well as product of excellent science. “While talking about best performances, we should not forget that lighthouses are made for the ships and not do be adored as tall buildings. Why do we care so less about ordinary ships?” In this quote Ex-President Frank calls the social relations of measuring (performance) into question and poses the system framework into the centre of all the tension of new public management. Another aspect of democracy, diversity, is protected by Controller Conrad who – by no means unusual for other interviewed controllers – said: “Our strength is our mission to provide a wide range of sciences. We would never close a discipline because of its ‘low’ performance data. This it what makes us competitive to others”.

While Frank refers to ordinary, basic research in ordinary universities, Conrad underlines the plurality of specifications as indicator for ‘good’ scientific performances. Democracy offers access and influence to all members of society and is very closely adopted in the interviews to the science system as a kind of sub-society.

2.3 Excusing Pressure, Explaining Differences, Fixing Defects: The Use of Justification Patterns

This quick walkthrough has illustrated three very rough patterns of positioning or justifying what is held for an important reference for science. The eight chosen examples illustrate the big varieties of argumentation within these patterns. Focussing on performance measurement and how it is governed brings us to the question, whether the justifications are used regularly for a specific purpose or aim. In general, we can state that the economic justification as a reference to cost-benefit-considerations or market rules is mostly used for explaining or excusing external or internal pressure. Innovative justifications very often function as an explanation for differences (like past and present, differences of quality, complexity or recognition).

Democratic justifications have a very broad set of impact directions, but frequently help to sustain when there is a lack of coherence in making sense of performance and its measurement.

By analysing how the three patterns are applied in the interviews different subjects or contexts appear, six subjects are identified as mostly relevant for the interviewees:

Academic life between

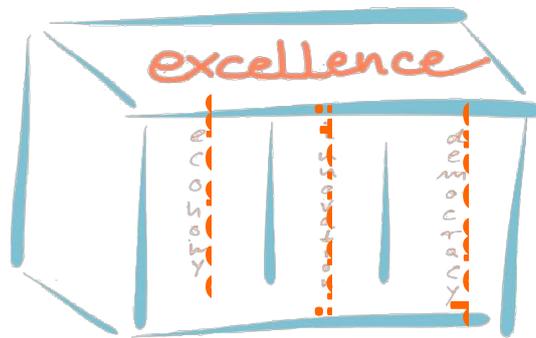
- Research and Teaching
- Science and Education
- Work and Private/ Political Life
- Internal and External Reputation
- Official and Inofficial Relevance
- Today and Tomorrow.

For instance: It is economic to invest less effort for teaching and although time investment to research sometimes feels wasteful and costly, it is very effective (paraphrase of interview sequence). Or: It is innovative for the research field to be interdisciplinary but dangerous for your career planning because in innovative fields jobs normally are installed when you retire.

The most interesting but at the same time most predictable observation is the mixing of different, partly antagonistic justifications.

Only one out of many examples for a paradoxical accident in mixing the patterns is the following statement of Conrad the Controller again. He describes his problems of the introduction of the new resource allocation model developed from the headquarter to the departments: "My controlling department staff goes into the faculty and claims to have a more rationale because democratic model of resource allocation. But in fact that meant to tell them to amputate their leg on their own only because that would be more rational for the other parts of the organisational body. Well, finally they were allowed to conceptualise the plan for budget cuts on their own as well, because it would be too time-consuming for our staff division."

In this interview sequence we find different references of justifying the new performance measurement: On the one hand performance indicators should be rationale aka democratic for the whole organisation as well as for the department (democratic pattern). But if this turns out to be economically adverse for the department (economic pattern), it should at least be influenced by people concerned (democratic pattern). Finally, the whole process should even fit to the time resources of Conrad's team. No matter how the interviewee would react when confronted with these overlapping, missing and opposing justifications: Analysing this justification work has highlighted an invisible border area between identity claims and social demands. An understanding of how performance measurement of universities is sustained, through a critique on a micro level of self-regulation, could help to understand not only the different patterns of justifying scientific performance, but furthermore to unravel excellence as fiction, as container term for everybody to be excellent.



Picture 1: Excellence as a Container term (own illustration)

Finally, everybody changes regimes of equivalence when trying to make sense of guidelines and to create organisational peace. So although this switching between different sets of values is normal, the crucial point here is that the former, flexible use and permanent realignment doesn't work that good anymore when people's performance is measured by standards. To conclude we can summarize that the formalisation and publication of individuals' performance through indicators can reduce individuals' flexibility to adopt to the so called new governance of performance. So the people concerned with performance measurement get in conflict when these shifts become formalized (fixed or frozen). The formalisation of reputational orders hinders individuals to compensate this form of control so they are forced to paraphrase their commitment to this way of measuring performance management with a kind of micro-resistance (Alvesson & Willmott 1998, 2003, Schwarz 2017).

The article aims to sensitize for modes of recognition that are seldom visible but effective for convincing governance tools that undergo at the same time heavy critiques: the shift between different modes of recognition makes a kind of consensus possible. In questioning what could be seen as the function of performance or even excellence measurement for social entities, now we maybe can guess that it provided a fiction of consensus (Hahn 1983) about whose performance counts more than the other – temporarily. Whether this value switching is only a trace of huffy ego or a sign of tangible needs for (mental) autonomy is a thought that needs further data and discussion.

3. Conclusion: Container terms provide Fictions of Consensus

So as helpful as formalized performance measurement might be for management purposes and its needs for automating the judgment of people's work, we ought to keep an eye on the master term "excellence", that has proven to function as a container term. Container term in this context means that different and partly antagonistic values get compatible in a way of coexisting through a switching of

values. In accommodating contradicting regimes of equivalence they provide a fiction of consensus that makes performance management by indicators work although most of the people do not accept this formalized and little differentiated mode of reputation at all. In shifting in-between the patterns almost everybody can more or less be rated as 'excellent', at least in some of the mentioned subjects or context. Making this explicit reveals how fragmented rationality claims are and raises the question whether social sciences have adequate categories for people struggling with excellence classifications.

To look inside this container term excellence is interesting because through its as far as identified content (e.g. economic, democratic and innovative justifications) we can decode different ideas of justice, like in our case: fair distribution, successful integration or necessary renewal. So finally, we could say it is more a *recognition gap* when people mix their values out of the different container partitions. They obviously develop a capacity in joining them in everyday life and find it natural to argue humanistic and economic or innovative and conservative. And the clue is that while shifting between these patterns, sometimes the conglomerate gets even more or less plausible – depending also from the listener and his or her questions (as an example for identity regulation in an interview see Schwarz 2017a). The crucial point in our view is that the justification work gets into condition where incoherent sets of values are the normal.

But what conclusions should be made and which advice should be given to the ministry as head of this new governance approach? In searching for a solution for the problem of a new governance that obviously does not work like expected, a kind of logical narrowness can be observed. The funding program of "Performance Management in Science" announced that the current "out-put-orientated governance regime" would need a better "quality control" because this regime would be too much "accompanied by critical debates based of more or less opinions, assumptions and interest-led statements". So the solution for making the new governance work without this ongoing accusations would be to produce more "empirically founded knowledge" – incidentally by those knowledge producers that were at the same time objects of this governance by performance indicators. We can see: Apparently even the financing ministry has developed doubts whether performance management is the right way of governing universities. But the ministry seems to be convinced that more knowledge is the way of handling this governance deficits and that it is not a question of the "regime" itself as part of the problem.

After having identified justification patterns in interview sequences a last view from an aerial perspective can be taken, which contemplates the whole empirical data as a landscape or orchestra of values and justification of strong or weak performance that no "governance regime" (BMBF 2013) will ever master. Let's go value gap side-stepping.

4. Literature

- Becker-Schmidt, Regina (2008), Doppelte Vergesellschaftung von Frauen: Divergenzen und Brückenschläge zwischen Privat- und Erwerbsleben, VS Springer: Wiesbaden.
- BMBF, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) (2013), Leistungsbewertung in der Wissenschaft [Performance measurement in science], www.hochschulforschung-bmbf.de/de/1333.php (01-01-2017).
- Bogumil, J. et al (2009). Neue Steuerung von Hochschulen. Eine Zwischenbilanz, Berlin: edition sigma.
- Bogumil, J. et al (2013). Zwischen Selbstverwaltungs- und Managementmodell. In: Grande, E. et al (eds.): Neue Governance in der Wissenschaft. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Boltanski, L. & Thévenot, L. (1999). The Sociology of Critical Capacity. In: European Journal of Social Theory 2 (3): 359-377. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Boltanski, Luc; Thévenot, Laurent (1999), The Sociology of Critical Capacity, in: European Journal of Social Theory 2 (3): 359-377, Sage Publications: London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi.
- Clark, B. R. (1998), Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation, Oxford: Elsevier.
- Crouch, C. (2015). The Knowledge Corrupters. Hidden Consequences of the Financial Takeover of Public Life. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) (2013), Excellence Initiative at a Glance, http://www.dfg.de/download/pdf/dfg_im_profil/geschaeftsstelle/publikationen/exin_broschueren_en.pdf
- Foss, L. & Gibson, D. (2015). The Entrepreneurial University: Context and Institutional Change. Riot! Routledge Studies in Innovation, Organization and Technology: London and New York: Routledge.
- Grande, E. et al (eds.) (2013). Neue Governance in der Wissenschaft. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Hahn, A. (1983): Konsensfiktionen in Kleingruppen: dargestellt am Beispiel von jungen Ehen [Fictions of consensus in small groups: exemplified by young marriages]. In Friedhelm Neidhardt (editor): Gruppensoziologie [Sociology of groups]. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 210-232.
- Heintz, B. (2003). When is a Proof a Proof ? in: Social Studies of Science, 2003, 33/6, 929-943.
- Kleimann, B. (2016). Universitätsorganisation und präsidiale Leitung. Führungspraktiken in einer multiplen Hybridorganisation. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Leithäuser, Thomas u. Birgit Volmerg (1988): Psychoanalyse in der Sozialforschung [Psycho-analysis in social research]. Westdeutscher Verlag: Opladen.
- Mennicken, A. & Vollmer, H. (2007). Zahlenwerk: Kalkulation, Organisation und Gesellschaft, Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Power, M. (2013), Accounting, Organizing, and Economizing: Connecting Accounting Research and Organization Theory, The Academy of Management Annals Volume 7, Issue 1, 2013

Power, M., Laughlin, R. & Cooper, D. J. (2003). Accounting and Critical Theory. In: Alvesson, M & Willmott, H. (eds.). Studying Management Critically, Sage Publications, London.

Schwarz, C. (2017a), „Going Underground: Melting Resistance with Collaboration“, „Critique and Social Change“, Conference of the Research Committee „Political Sociology“ of the German Sociology Association, Special Issue on Critique and Social Change, Journal Historical Social Research (HSR).

Simmel, Georg. (1917), Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen [War and mental decisions], Reden und Aufsätze [speeches and articles], Duncker & Humblot, München/Leipzig 1917.

Weingart, P. (2015). Nostalgia for the world without numbers. In: Soziale Welt 66, 243-250.

Appendix: Interview guide for the justification of excellence

- ⊙ (after being asked to narrate their CV): Which of your accomplishments do you think were crucial for your occupational career? Which have not been noticed yet?
- ⊙ Do people compare each other here? How and when?
- ⊙ Is there something you are really proud of?
- ⊙ For what do people get envious sometimes?
- ⊙ Was there anything that really surprised you in the last years in university?
- ⊙ What would you recommend to a friend who wants to climb fast on the career ladder here?
- ⊙ Where would you like to work if not here?
- ⊙ What is important for you?