

The Parasitic University and the Academic Community

The 'Academic Community' is a strange and complex concept with many levels. It exists at the level of a research group, a faculty, a university, nationally and globally. What many people, who are not directly involved in the Academic Community at large, may not readily appreciate is that there is a whole network of organizations needed to support academic work.

For many disciplines there are national societies, that themselves may or may not be a member of a regional or global federation of societies. Often subdisciplines and interdisciplinary research topics have their own societies, that may join one or more federations at any level. The global federations themselves form bigger unions, sorted by common traits. These all come together in the ICSU (International Council of Scientific Unions), which is the trunk of the big tree (or actually a graph, if you are a pedantic computer scientist) of scientific societies.

Many of these societies, federations, and unions organise conferences and publish journals. For the journals they appoint editors in chief and recruit reviewers. For the conferences an organising committee and a conference site are selected and the local organisers are supported by the societies, and reviewers for the abstracts are recruited. Add to this the stand alone journals and the ad hoc conferences, plus, of course, the grant organisations and their review boards and a picture emerges of an ant-hill where a lot of academic staff is involved outside the view of the general public. Still, it amounts to a huge body of work that is done in a sort of self organising way. And it needs to be done or otherwise there are no conferences to meet your peers, no journals to publish in, and no grants to apply for. Almost all of this work is done voluntarily and no registration takes place who has done what, because it is and always was seen as honorary work that enhanced your status within the community. It is also a way to pay back for what others have done for you in an earlier stage of your carrier. But it is unquantifiable and 'thus' considered a waste of time and money in these modern times.

The Academic Community has been there for centuries and is still alive. Yet, things have slowly but dramatically changed over the last decades within the universities. Members of the board of universities are no longer recruited from that Academic Community. There is no longer an implicit requirement that you have credibility within the community by having participated in discussions on developments within your field as a whole, as opposed to the narrow sub-sub-speciality that was the subject of your thesis. Discussions that take place e.g. while organising a conference or developing a policy for the society's journal. Members of the board not even have to have been a member of the university they are appointed in, so they don't know the special strengths and weaknesses of research groups and individual professors. Worse, they can be appointed without any knowledge of the internal working of any university at all. Of course these board members do have other knowledge and experience, but what that is is seldom made explicit, nor how that makes up for not having been an active member of the Academic Community. Often these people are considered to have 'management skills', something to do with being able to take decisions on

incomplete data in an impersonal way, even if it affects the life of many people. Here, not having knowledge of the context is even considered an advantage. In this sense management is antithetical to the academic ideal of only formulating conclusions when you have collected enough data.

Not surprisingly at the same time when universities started appointing people with a business background into the boards they have started using marketing metaphors. Employing marketing strategies to position themselves better within the various lists. Introducing the market idea of maximizing your profit, increasing income and cutting down on expenses for the primary tasks of research and education. The only way you can do this in the Academic Community is by (ab)using the labour of those involved without contributing to it yourself. This is exactly what has happened in many universities. This process is aggravated by the fact that staff members are forced to do more work all the time. Often the obligatory work during the week now takes much more than a work week to complete. Resulting in an alarming rate of burn out, especially among those that feel responsible for their students, the research group and the Academic Community as a whole. People can handle stress for some time, but work stress has become chronic and any tragedy in the family may be enough to trip over the line.

And so the academic world became divided into the stupid, traditional universities that still think that everyone needs to have time to read in order to even be able to cite a paper, and the vast majority of modern, parasitic universities that force their staff to only write applications and papers, while discouraging or even forbidding staff to give back to the community. Staff that is often just on temporary positions and on the edge of burn out anyway. A detrimental side effect is that many societies have either vacancies for key positions or officers and board members that actually do not have time to perform their duties. That may not be very visible from the outside, but it hurts the Academic Community in it's core. If nothing is done, international academic life may come to a shrieking halt in the next decade, or, worse, being replaced by a swarm of managers using buzzwords while doing their waggle dance to indicate where the next source of innovation will be.