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Rationalizing the unreasonable: there are no good academics in the EU

Jan Blommaert, June 10th 2015

Attracting external funding has become, everywhere, one of the main priorities of academics, and writing funding application has consequently also become one of their main tasks. The idea is “competitiveness”: quality will be evident when academics, individually or in teams, acquire funding after a strict and rigorously exclusive peer-review process. In addition, specific sources of funding are specified as benchmarks, suggesting that they are the “most competitive” ones, and therefore also the best and most objective indicators of quality: think of the ESRC in the UK or (the focus of this text) the European framework program Horizon 2020. In every form of performance management – for individual academics seeking promotion or tenure, for research teams, departments and entire universities – success in such benchmark external funding acquisition is given immense positive attention. Universities, consequently, impose quota on their academic units – “you shall apply for at least five EU grants and obtain at least one this year!” – and turn it into a compulsory, even key activity of their staff. Professional grant writers and administrators are hired in academic departments or labs, and universities now employ EU-targeting lobbyists to “assist” and “facilitate” their bids for funding.

Well, my team just submitted a Horizon 2020 application last week, following a thematic call several months ago. In view of the application, we had set up an international consortium earlier on, did profound content preparation, and one of our team members spent hundreds of hours and several international trips worth several thousands of Euros preparing the application.

After submitting, we heard that a total of 147 applications had been received by the EU. And that the EU will eventually grant 2 – *two* – projects. In a rough calculation, this means that the chance of success in this funding line is 1,3%; it also means that 98,7% of the

applications – 145 of them, to be accurate – will be rejected. And here is the problem. It would be interesting to see the grand total of labor and resources invested in the 145 applications calculated in Euros. My guess is that many millions' worth of (usually) taxpayers' money will have been used – wasted – in this massive and mass grantwriting effort. Several hundreds of researchers will have been involved, each spending dozens if not hundreds of their salaried working hours on preparing the application, and hundreds of university administrators will have been involved as well, also spending salaried working hours on the applications. These millions of Euros have not been used in creative and innovative research – they weren't spent on doing fieldwork, experiments or tests, nor on writing papers and holding presentations in workshops and symposiums. They were spent on – nothing. For when a grant application is rejected, the time and energy investment spent on it evaporates, as if these hours of labor were never spent, and as if the academics who spent them had nothing else to do. Thus, while this Horizon 2020 funding line will disburse half a dozen millions of Euros to the two “winning” teams, it will have **cost** more millions to the EU academic community represented by the 145 others who were rejected. Money, thus, has been sucked out of an already fragile funding base for universities across the EU, in a vain attempt to “win” and “be competitive” – and therefore “good”.

The attempt is futile, because if the rejection rate is 98,7%, the message given by the EU is, in effect, that *almost all* of the academic units participating across the EU in the funding call are *not good enough*. It is nonsense to try and argue that on grounds of pure academic quality just 1,3% will qualify, for the number of grants to be awarded is known *before* the peer review procedure takes place. In that sense, the peer review done by the EU panels is simply useless, for it has no impact on the number of awards granted by the EU – tens of applicants will receive a letter soon stating that their project was evaluated as “excellent but not selected for funding”. The criteria determining the “selection for funding” are, needless to say, carefully guarded secrets, and *not* grounded in assessments of academic quality. The system of selection is, when all has been said and done, simply irrational and unreasonable. Still, and notwithstanding the previous remark, success or rejection is seen as an objective indicator of academic quality across the EU university system. By awarding just 1,3% of the applications, thus, a rather thoroughly absurd reality is shaped: almost 99% of the competing academics in the EU do not make the mark, and *just 1,3%* satisfies the EU benchmark. Now, we know that the 98,7% “losers” still *have* to compete in order to show that they are good enough; but when a selection bottleneck is that narrow, the effort, and the resources invested into it, are in effect simply wasted.

The paradox is clear: by going along with the stampede of competitive external funding acquisition, ***almost all universities across the EU will lose not just money, but extremely valuable research time for their staff.*** Little academic improvement will be achieved, and little progress in science, if doing actual research is replaced by writing grant proposals with an almost-zero chance of success. And as long as academics and academic units are told that success or failure in getting EU funding (with success rates such as the one mentioned here known in advance) is a criterium for determining their academic quality, gross injustice will be committed. People will be judged inadequate, mediocre or simply poor

academics because they failed to get the benchmark funding – awarded, as we saw, on grounds that have little to do with academic quality assessments of applications.

Heteronomy is the word that comes to mind here: academic practices and achievements are judged by means of non-academic standards, given a thin but hopelessly unconvincing veneer of “competitiveness”. And **universities seeking to acquire external funding will be depleting their internal funding** at extreme speed, the more they engage in this stampede for “competitiveness”.

I find this logic beyond comprehension. Those who rationalize the importance of acquiring benchmark external funding, are rationalizing an unreasonable and heteronomic system that produces tremendous numbers of “losers” and a tiny number of “winners”. The losers can be put under increasing pressure to show that they are competitive – increasingly risking their careers and spending funds better used on research and other intellectual activities.

To sum up: **if the number of grants to be awarded is established before the peer-review process, this kind of “competitive” benchmark funding is not competitive at all, and a benchmark for nothing at all** – least of all for academic quality. If, however, results in this weird game are maintained as serious and consequential criteria for assessing academic quality, then the conclusion is that there are no good academics in Europe – 99% of them will fail to get ratified as good enough. And these 99% will have to spend significant amounts of taxpayers’ money to eventually prove – what?

The entire thing really, seriously, begins to look and feel like buying lottery tickets or betting on horses: one spends money hoping to win some – and at moments of lucidity, one is aware of the fact that the net outcome will be loss, not gain. In the meantime, beautiful arias are sung about the extreme importance of research and innovation by the EU, by its member states, and by its universities. The question, of course, is how such a great cause is served by the present system of benchmark external funding acquisition. The money spent on it, I would say, would be better spent on ... research and innovation proper.