

Mainstream and the Death of University Culture. Or how the Rush for Innovation Threatens Creativity

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Summary:

The present paper wants to touch upon a number of paradoxes that undermine university culture. Although universities claim to be the breeding ground for creativity and hence aspire to set new paradigms, in reality they increasingly comply with the existing conventions. These are almost exclusively defined by market conditions, which strive for maximum profit at a minimum cost. Even worse: the global validity of this economic paradigm imposes a sort of mainstream thinking on universities, which threatens university culture in itself...

To illustrate the case I would like to draw on the present obsession with 'innovation and creativity' as defined by the Lisbon Goals and the way they affect university culture. If you define 'creativity' as the ability to walk outside the trodden paths, establish relationships between hitherto unrelated fields of knowledge and see how they affect the environment, it closely resembles the 'universitas' idea underlying university culture. As such, creativity *is* a cultural attitude, which *can* lead to innovations, i.e. marketable new ideas.

Unfortunately universities tend to put the cart before the horse. Following the (measurable and hence financially rewarding) goals of the European and national authorities universities try to increase their student enrolment, particularly in sciences, technology and engineering. There is no proof, however, that this will lead to an increase in innovation beyond what can be expected statistically. The alternative way - recruit only the 'best', i.e. most creative students, is off limits for most higher education institutions (HEI). Moreover every successful attempt to generate revenue, be it through student recruitment, research funding or other, is immediately adopted by all HEI's, which in turn makes them mainstream again.

By pursuing short-term financial gain HEI's not only undermine their coveted 'autonomy', but also relinquish their 'universitas' or 'culture of creativity' to mainstream thinking and copying. However, it is in the universities own best interest that they foster creativity, not only to strike new sources of revenue or affirm their institutional independence, but also to contribute to the innovation and creativity debate itself. By suggesting and implementing ways to inspire the 'culture of creativity' in students and scholars, HEI's will be more effective in generating innovative ideas than by merely sticking to mainstream thinking.