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«Academic excellence» på norsk?

Critical genealogy of a gendered, imported concept

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Introduction

About this Chapter

What has gender balance work in academia contributed to, besides gender balance itself? Gender balance work has given a key contribution to the scholarly and collective reflection on inclusion and exclusion dynamics in academia in general. This includes the problematization of taken-for-granted professional ideals that demarcate the boundaries between the «haves» and the «have-nots». One such ideal is «academic excellence», with its exclusionary potential towards traditionally marginalized groups in academia, *including, but not limited to,* women. The most conceptually sophisticated critiques to «excellence», in Norway and elsewhere, have been put forward by scholars

whose focus was gender inequity (see among others O'Connor & Barnard, 2021; Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2011; Henningsen & Liestøl, 2013; Rasmussen, 2017); however, they are of *general* relevance to diversity in academia, and also to the overall functioning of academia as a central knowledge institution in society.

This chapter concerns itself with «academic excellence», a controversial concept that originated in English-speaking academic systems and was later imported into a number of continental European higher education systems, including the Norwegian one. After some introductory remarks on the history of the word «excellence», I offer a historical, conceptual critical genealogy of the origin and development of «*academic* excellence». My discussion is based on a systematic literature search that I will account for in my text; nonetheless, the reader should approach this chapter as a conceptual discussion rather than a literature review. Building on the conceptual genealogy I provide, I argue that «academic excellence» should best be understood as a form of *personal status attribution*. I call this new interpretation *academic excellence as status* theory, draw a parallel with the well-known *gender as status* theory, and highlight the tensions that can arise when personal status attributions are evoked to justify choices about the allocation of desired resources (such as research grants or professional opportunities).

Once upon a time, in a Kingdom (not so) far away. Origins of a loaded word

> **eksellense** m1 (fra latin «fortreffelighet»; jamfør *eksellere*) tidligere brukt i tiltale til og omtale av personer i enkelte høye stillinger
>
> *Deres eksellense*
>
> [Bokmålsordboka, Språkrådet]

A good starting point for a conceptual investigation is language: the words, their origin, and their (original and current) meaning. «Excellency» is a loaded word with a history, not only in the Norwegian language. It was coined for the German Kaiser and later exported; it became an honorific title for ministries, aristocrats and high-ranking military officers in most countries, including Scandinavian nations. For example, to this day, in Denmark,

their excellencies are the bishops and notables who are ranked at the top of the *rangfølgen*: the order in which persons are placed at the Royal Court on formal occasions, such as the allocation of table seats at state banquets. It may be a surprising fact that titles of honour created over three centuries ago are still in use today in Denmark, the self-proclaimed egalitarian society of the *janteloven* (Sandemose, 1933).

One may argue that nowadays honorifics have lost their original significance and are maintained as mere traditions, no longer conferring any actual political power; that may well be true. However, the mystique surrounding personal titles of honour has apparently retained its allure, and the symbolism of privilege and personal status attribution still holds some force of attraction over minds. If high-sounding titles of honour drew nothing more than indifference and irony, their bearers would quickly do away with them; but that happens only exceptionally.

As to Norway, the *bokmålsordboka* rightly states that *eksellense* is no longer in official use as an honorific. It was abolished in 1905, when the country gained independence from Sweden. Nonetheless, *eksellense* is still used in formal correspondence addressed to Norwegian bishops: it is apparently a hard-to-abandon tradition.

If one were to be a purist, Norwegian bokmål distinguishes between *eksellense* and *eksellens* (the latter from the verb *eksellere*, «to stand out and show skill»). However, interestingly, when discussing and problematising «academic excellence», the words *eksellense* and *eksellens* seem to be used interchangeably. Among the prominent scholars who use the word *eksellense* are Lycke, 2011; Henningsen & Liestøl, 2013; Tømte & Egeland, 2016; Blix & Mittner, 2018; Thun, 2018; Fjørtoft, 2020. That fact is in itself remarkable, and it speaks of the imaginaries of hierarchization, privilege and exclusion evoked by the «academic excellence» ideal.

The English language also makes a distinction between *excellency* (as in «his excellency the ambassador») and *excellence*, and it is the latter that is most often used with reference to academic life. Nonetheless, *excellency* is treated as a synonym for *excellence* in a handful of contributions that discuss assessment standards in higher education (Zimmermann, 2002; Öhrn et al., 2009; Rohilla & Sharma, 2012; Anowar et al., 2015). The question of the similarity between the two words (and its implications for the imaginaries evoked) typically goes unnoticed: it is hardly addressed in the literature;

occasionally, it is only hinted at with irony. I read with pleasure a paper by two critical organization studies scholars: «academic excellence» is used throughout the paper, but the paper is titled «Your Excellency» as an ironic reference to the fetishization of excellence among the academics interviewed in the study (Butler & Spoelstra, 2012).

It seems to me that the historical and lexical reflections made above point in one direction: traditionally, the «excellence» stamp is an *attribution of personal status* in hierarchically organized, predominantly conservative societal institutions. That does not seem to bear much relation to learning and scholarship. When was such jargon imported into the world of higher education, and why?

Tracing a critical genealogy of «*academic* excellence»

Research question

The early days of «academic excellence» still seem uncharted territory in the vast landscape of scholarly literature on the topic. More specifically, *when did the concept of «academic excellence» make its appearance in the scholarly community, and what was «academic excellence» taken to mean in the early phases of its usage?* The endeavour to answer these questions amounts essentially to tracing a critical genealogy of the concept of «academic excellence». I believe a historically informed answer to these questions can shed light on the nature of «academic excellence» as a concept and on some of the properties that are intrinsic to it, and ultimately give us a better understanding of the root causes of the issues it seems to systematically cause when operationalized into concrete policies. The emergence and historical trajectory of the *concept* of «academic excellence» are neglected topics in the scholarly literature, internationally. Strikingly, contributions originating from very different academic systems converge in their framing of «excellence» as an ideological by-product of recently introduced higher education governance models that treat academia as private enterprise. That understanding is so taken for granted in the scholarly literature that one would be tempted to regard it as *a hegemonic cross-national discourse* (Ramirez & Tiplic, 2014); it is however not supported by research on how exactly the *concept*

of «academic excellence» came about historically: the conceptual-historical dimension is erased from the narrative (for the Netherlands: Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2011; for Switzerland: Fassa & Kradolfer, 2013; for Germany and Austria: Binner & Weber, 2022; for the Czech Republic: Linková, 2017; for Ireland: O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016; for the UK: Rees, 2011; for Russia: Tsvetkova & Lomer, 2019; for Estonia: Aavik & Marling, 2022; for Iceland: Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2017; see also multi-nation studies such as Herschberg et al., 2016; White et al., 2011; Salmi, 2021).

Norway-based scholars who write on «academic excellence» usually assume that the concept did not originate locally: it is a foreign import, just like «excellency» (see among others Rasmussen, 2017). I believe that assumption to be correct, and I will adopt it throughout this chapter. There is at the present time much discussion on «policy transplants» born out of the international standardization imperative in multiple societal domains (Lodge, 2017). There is however less focus on the fact that often, policy transplants ultimately rely on what I shall call «conceptual transplants», and *imported concepts come with attached, historically sedimented interpretations*. It is not a *word* that is being imported: it is a *world*. Tracing a historically informed genealogy of the key concepts that policies rely on in the context in which they originated can reveal a great deal about their potential merits and shortcomings, and it can save us, at least in part, costly trial-and-error discovery processes. To paraphrase Dennett, there is no such thing as a concepts-free policy; there are only policies whose conceptual baggage is taken onboard without examination (Dennett, 1996).

Methods and analysis

For the purpose of answering the above research questions, I regard the scholarly literature (as retrieved through widely used search engines) as adequately representative of the debates and discourses that exist in the scholarly community at a given point in time.

To answer my first question: *when did the concept of «academic excellence» make its appearance in the scholarly community? [*when-*question],* I utilized Google Books' NGram Viewer. A search of NGram for «academic excellence» revealed that the expression appeared around 1950, and its usage started to grow in the 1960s. These findings are discussed in the next sec-

tions, but briefly mentioned here because they were incorporated into the methods I used for answering my other research questions.

To answer my second question: *what was «academic excellence» taken to mean in the early phases of its usage? [*what-*question],* I searched Google Scholar for «academic excellence», setting 1950 as the start date and 1995 as the end. That time interval was chosen based on the finding from my first research question. I ordered results by relevance and browsed the first 10 pages in Google Scholar, comprising a total of 100 entries: in essence, I limited my search to the most relevant publications. I read titles and abstracts of the papers retrieved, proceeded to a close reading of papers that extensively discussed «academic excellence», and then performed a thematic analysis.

Findings

As mentioned, NGram shows that the expression «academic excellence» appeared around 1950. However, its usage at the time was rather sporadic, and the vast majority of the papers retrieved on Scholar date from the 1960s onwards. Three main themes emerge in the papers: *(1) excellence as ranking individuals; (2) negotiating excellence; (3) diversity as the antagonist of excellence.*

Excellence as ranking individuals

As many as 76 out of the 100 papers in my sample, particularly the early ones, focused on *students' performance* rather than researchers' or professors' work. Here is one poignant quote: «Academic excellence»

> may be summed up briefly in the following formula: the best *boys* should go to the best schools and then on to the best jobs (McClelland, 1961, s. 711; my italics).

Some of the papers that focus on students' performance explicitly describe the imagined ideal student, and reflect on whether students who systematically fail to meet that ideal (minority students are given as the main example) can eventually «shape up»:

> Let us fantasize a bit about the characteristics we would like to see in our «ideal» student of mathematics: curious, logically precise, persistent … (Hudspeth, 1989, s. 13).

Lamentations that too many students who do not meet the ideal get to attend university, are also frequently found: the «great influx» is represented as a problem, as is the transformation of tertiary education establishments into «open-door institutions» (Roueche et al., 1985: 4). In sum, the papers retrieved show that that the concept of «academic excellence» was born out of a *benchmarking culture* in higher education institutions that are *elitist* in their conception and goals. It is taken for granted that the role of academic institutions ought to be that of ranking individuals based on some form of performance measurement, then allocating opportunities accordingly; and «excellence» is framed as necessarily for the few, never for the many.

Negotiating excellence

The usage of «academic excellence» to refer to the performance assessment of *scholars* who work in academia (as opposed to students' performance) appeared as early as the late 1960s. «Personnel performance evaluation motivates academic excellence», one university chancellor argued in 1969; and excellence consists of *exceeding all expectations* one may have of one's employees:

> How do you motivate a person concerning his institutional responsibilities to such an extent that he will *progress above and beyond what might «normally» (average) be expected*? (Maier, 1969, s. 75; my italics).

However, the usage of «academic excellence» with reference to scholars remained highly exceptional until the early 1980s. I found it in a total of 24 papers (out of my sample of 100); about half of these 24 papers are in fact brief editorials or accounts of local, single-institution experiences and projects, and date from the late 1980s onwards. «Excellence» in itself mostly continued to be treated as an unquestionably noble ideal to aspire to; however, the first explicit problematizations of the specific criteria used in «excellence» assessments also began to appear. Strikingly, many of the issues raised at the time are still topical today: for instance, the undervaluing of teaching compared to research grants and publications. The two quotes below are illustrative examples.

> [A]cademics are reported to be dissatisfied with the *undervaluing of teaching excellence* in promotion decisions (Moses, 1986, s. 135; my italics).

> The current *conventional wisdom* holds that academic excellence is measured by publications and grants (Lagowski, 1991, s. 181; my italics).

Some US-based scholars started to take notice of the perverse effects that the benchmarking culture in higher education can produce, and pointed them out: but again, without questioning the excellence ideal as such (Hoare, 1995; Trow, 1994):

> [E]ducational institutions, although they strive for excellence, do not always attain it, or else they present *cosmetic approaches* to make it appear they've attained it (Wolf, 1990, s. 1; my italics).

Diversity as the antagonist of excellence

When it comes to diversity (including gender diversity), currently established narratives of a built-in tension with «excellence» started to emerge in the 1960s. Back then, it was mainly diversity within the students' body that was in focus. The «best *boys*» quote above from 1961 is an apt illustration of the taken-for-granted attribution of potential primarily to members of the traditionally dominant group: an attitude that still persists, albeit in a more nuanced form (Herschberg et al., 2018). The diversity-versus-excellence narrative was extended to academic hiring and promotion. Contributions that stress the «compatibility» between diversity and excellence, framed as distinct and different goals, typically stress that the two stand in a hierarchy.

> [Our institution] is first and foremost a UNI-versity – not a DI-versity (Duderstadt, 1990, s. 3; sic).

In sum, the concept of «academic excellence» was introduced as a form of *personal status attribution*, and framed as the natural antagonist of the inclusion logics that underlie diversity initiatives. «Academic excellence» seems to be about hand-picking a small elite of top performers; the definition of «top performer» shifts, but the legitimacy and desirability of conceiving of higher

education in terms of an elite-selection mechanism is taken for granted, and the focus is on individuals, rather than institutions or interpersonal and group relations.

My findings are summarized in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 *A genealogy of the concept of «academic excellence»*

A genealogy of the concept of «academic excellence»
– It appears after WWII; its usage grows from the 1960s
– Initially used with reference to *students* only
– It focuses on ranking and selecting *individuals*, based on their (visible) performance
– Framed as being for the few, *never* for the many
– It stems from the benchmarking culture prevalent in elitist HE institutions
– From the late 1980s, increasingly used with reference to *scholars* who work in academia
– Early debate on excellence criteria for scholars resembles current debate (e.g. teaching vs. research)
– Consistently framed as the natural antagonist of diversity (for both students and scholars)

Discussion

Academic excellence before New Public Management?

The aspect that struck me the most among my findings is that the concept of «academic excellence» was alive and kicking well *before* the age of New Public Management (NPM). It was mostly used for students rather than for higher education professionals; however, some of its key properties that make it an object of controversy to this day were already discernible at the time – including the elitist frame of mind, the individualistic focus, the emphasis on ranking, the assumed tension with diversity. I shall illustrate.

Many contributors, in Norway and internationally, link the emergence of «academic excellence» to a shift in the governance model in the public sector (Lund, 2020; Regnö, 2017; Gunter et al., 2016; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). NPM is an approach to the running of public service organizations that grad-

ually emerged in the 1980s in the US and the UK. It was theorised in 1990 – remarkably, the theorization came *after* the model had already informed concrete policies – and later exported. It is based on the neoliberal ideology in that it seems to view the public sector with a degree of suspicion. Under NPM, cost-effectiveness is the key governance concern, and public institutions are assumed to be intrinsically prone to wasting resources. Cost-effectiveness can best be achieved, so NPM goes, by breaking down work into «projects» that ought to deliver measurable «outputs». This approach has affected higher education institutions, where financing is increasingly linked to temporary projects that are self-contained (even though they may build on earlier projects). Research grants are a fitting example here. The applicant formulates a research question, devises a methodology, commits to an output, receives financing and works to produce the output within the pre-set timeframe. Scholarly work thus gets organised around relatively small units of time (a few years) and content (a specific question and topic). It has been argued that this type of work pattern affects the way scholars *think* of the content of their work, encouraging short-term and instrumental thinking at the expense of long-term vision: in academia, «conceptualizations of time and work … are increasingly atomized» (Dollinger, 2020: 669). A new word has been coined to describe this development: «projectification». Another aspect of «projectification» is the casualization of academic labour, as more jobs are linked to temporary projects and the risk of the fluctuation in external financing is placed on the precariously employed scholars, rather than the institution.

Benchmarking, auditing and ranking also grow in frequency, pervasiveness and importance because they are increasingly linked to rewards; these are often based on standardized quantitative parameters that have been criticized for not capturing the complexity and diversity of scholarly work (Kauppi, 2018). It is not only scholars and research groups that are being audited and ranked, but also departments, faculties, study programmes and entire academic institutions. Oligopolies arise: high ranking opens up opportunities leading to higher ranking and more opportunities, until the winner takes all. The natural consequence is a desire to be ranked high and an increase in strategic top-down steering also at the local level. The steering and the ranking do have a political nature; however, a central ideological tenet of NPM is that the management function differs from the political con-

trol function. The management guarantees cost-effectiveness: it coordinates and organizes, but does not make political decisions. At least on paper, this division of tasks seems rather straightforward for public agencies characterized by cumbersome bureaucracy and repetitive tasks such as the tax administration. Whether the distinction can plausibly hold for the governance of higher education institutions is another matter.

It is not difficult to see how «academic excellence» is functional to the NPM ideology: in its vagueness, «excellence» is a versatile instrument that can rapidly adapt to new and shifting top-down political priorities, while reaffirming the taken-for-grantedness of strong selection, steering and ranking as necessary key elements in higher education governance. By being «by definition a scarce good» (Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2011: 6), the «academic excellence» ideal reasserts that education management is very much about gatekeeping through ranking, (paradoxically) irrespective of whom or what is being ranked, or of the actual ranking criteria at a given point in time. It is a bottle that can be emptied and filled with a different drink each time; or a bow that can be unloaded and loaded again with new and different arrows.

But that is all «academic excellence» is – *functional* to NPM, not an ideological product of NPM. My findings do not show that «academic excellence» is the child of NPM; rather, that the marriage between NPM and «academic excellence» is a happy one – although perhaps a marriage of convenience. Most of the papers in my sample that understand «academic excellence» as referring to scholars (rather than students) date from the 1980s onwards, particularly the ones that shed light on negotiations and tensions about what exactly ought to count as «excellence». However, my results also show that the elitist mindset in higher education had been there for longer, along with the concept itself that was conveniently borrowed by NPM and (further) extended and normalized. In short, our (as diversity scholars) questioning of NPM in academia, while necessary and meritorious, may just *not be a radical enough stance*. The social and cultural roots of systematic exclusion and inequity in higher education run deeper (which also explains their resilience in the face of structured and ambitious gender equity initiatives). They are older and more permanent than any political ideology (such as NPM) that is used to justify exclusion in specific historical phases. While NPM certainly does not serve the cause of women, *historical* gender marginalization in academia is insufficiently accounted for in NPM-focused critiques; this holds

for exclusion both in terms of sheer numbers (Moratti 2020a; 2020b), and of exclusionary representations (such as stereotypes of women's abilities) (Moratti 2018; 2021). Managerialism in academia is a natural enemy of diversity, but there are others, older, more normalized and hence better concealed. The concept of «academic excellence», as the expression of a *status-centred, hierarchy-focused and exclusionary frame of mind*, pre-existed NPM. It is precisely the fixation with status that lies at the core of «excellence».

A theory of academic excellence as *status* – and gender as status

The above reflections bring us back to the historical considerations we made at the beginning of this chapter, about the origins of the word «excellence» and its meaning when it first appeared in the academic discourse. Traditionally, the «excellence» (and «excellency») stamp is an attribution of *personal status*, presupposing some form of elitist social ranking characterized by privilege and exclusion dynamics. When the word was imported into academia, the accent shifted to *performance* (rather than, for example, nobility or race) as the key factor legitimizing such personal status attributions and elitist intra-professional and social arrangements. That «academic excellence» is rooted in «excellence/y» is visible in its conception of higher education as a social ranking device for individuals and in the taken-for-granted ascription of potential primarily to members of the traditionally dominant group (the «best *boys*»). «Academic excellence» is, like «excellence/y», an attribution of *personal status*. Therein, I believe, lies the root of the problems that «academic excellence» has generated and continues to generate when used as an assessment standard or put forward as a professional ideal. I shall refer to my understanding of «academic excellence» as «excellence as status theory».

I believe the «excellence as status theory» is particularly fruitful if crossed with the «gender as status» theory (Ridgeway & Diekema, 1992). The latter is today one of the established frameworks in the study of gender imbalance in academia. «Gender» is not understood as an identity but rather as a *regime of social practices* that confer unequal social status. This reflects a widely shared social understanding, rooted in a long history of gender segregation. People gender-label one another automatically and typically unconsciously, and reflexively tend to ascribe higher-status features to (people who

are gender-labelled as) men. One such feature is competence, which plays a central role in academia where evidence of expertise is (at least to an extent) open to interpretation. For example, multiple large-scale word-embedding studies on the wording of recommendation letters for academic posts in the United States have shown that men, compared to women, are more likely to get described using agentic terms (such as «superb», «intelligent» and «future leader») and «standout» adjectives (such as «outstanding», «unique» and «exceptional»). Recommendation letters for women candidates tend to be shorter, to include more doubt raisers (such as «while [she] has not done a lot of bench type research …»), and less status-related terms. Compared to men, women tend to be described using more communal terms (such as «compassionate», «calm» and «delightful») (Trix & Psenka 2003; Schmader et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2019; Madera et al., 2009). The social characterization as being of lower status is already affecting individual women in academia, and it has affected them historically.

What happens when academic excellence is added to this mix? Let us cross the «excellence as status» and the «gender as status» theories, and examine their intersection. As a *personal status attribution*, excellence is *necessarily, and predictably,* exclusionary. That exclusion will *necessarily, and predictably,* disproportionally affect (people who are socially gender-labelled as) women: simply because women as a gender tend to be systematically attributed lower status. Put simply, academic excellence is a conceptual device for *reproducing* and *reinforcing through legitimization* all manner of existing status hierarchies in society (including, but not limited to, gender hierarchies) that linger in the back of our minds because we have absorbed them through socialization. Earlier literature has characterized academia as a prestige economy and recognized that academic disciplines (and even within-discipline sub-fields, such as medical specialties) stand in a gendered prestige hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1990; Henningsen & Liestøl, 2013; Tømte & Egeland, 2016); here I am taking a further step: I argue that excellence is the ideal conceptual device for the perpetuation of such hierarchies.

The «status paradox»

In addition to providing an explanatory framework for the present, the «excellence as status» theory can be used to make predictions about the

future. Various practical solutions have been put forward to contrast the (documented) gender-exclusionary effects of «academic excellence», typically by introducing a dichotomy between *the excellent* (variously defined) and *the socially useful* (again, variously defined) (Shavit & Silver, 2022; Bandola-Gill, 2019). Notable examples include the Horizon2020 Framework Programme, juxtaposing «doing excellent science» and «tackling societal challenges» (for a critical discussion, see Henningsen and Liestøl in this volume), and the shift in institutional goals in the NTNU Strategy Plan from 2009 to 2017: following the merger with two University Colleges, greater emphasis was placed on the «public good» and «relevance to society» (for a critical discussion, see Sørensen & Traweek, 2022), whereby «relevant» essentially means instrumental to specific non-scholarly goals set in advance by the policy-maker. The element of instrumentality carries a strong status connotation in itself. Some research and researchers are *for something and someone else*.

To my mind, the interesting element in this opposition are not the specific definitions of the «excellent» or the «useful for society» in policies, but *the very fact that the two are thought of as standing in an opposition that translates into a status hierarchy*. It is the taken-for-grantedness of that polarization that we ought to reflect on, and its gendered nature whereby women scholars (and entire fields where women are in the majority) tend to be clustered in the «socially useful» segment. In a commendable attempt to overcome gender marginalization, ingrained, gendered status dichotomies may be involuntarily reproduced: excellence versus diversity; prestigious versus useful; elite and not. I shall call this phenomenon the «status paradox». Whenever a division is introduced between two labels or clusters framed as not being of equal status, lower-status groups will likely find themselves in the lower-status cluster. We should be mindful of this mechanism lest we end up reproducing and reinforcing ingrained hierarchies with the noble intent of doing away with them.

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