

Rethinking Academic Excellence: Toward a Sustainable and Collaborative Model

Young Academy Leiden – *Position Paper*

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Summary

“Academic excellence” has become a key concept for evaluating academic merit. We have three main concerns regarding how excellence currently tends to be interpreted in academia, namely 1) the current assessment of excellence in terms of quantity rather than quality of output, 2) the so-called “superstar model” that favours those who obtain large grants, and 3) the narrow interpretation of academic excellence as individual performance, rather than team work. We outline several recommendations for Leiden University to address these problems:

- Encourage a shift from quantity to quality: supervisors and Institute boards should take care to evaluate excellence primarily through quality rather than quantity.
- Breaking with the narrow equation of academic excellence with acquiring research grants: promotion decisions and university communication should focus on substantive scientific contributions rather than grant awards.
- Academic excellence should be sustainable and therefore also measured through the process of knowledge creation, including academic citizenship: during performance and development interviews supervisors should pay attention to team efforts, academic citizenship, and sustainability.

Background

“Academic excellence” is a contentious term in the current debates on the future of the Dutch higher education sector. In the 2019 position paper [Room for Everyone’s Talent](#), Dutch academic organizations plead for a new system of recognition and rewards at Dutch universities and research institutes. They proposed to promote excellence along diverse academic pathways, including not only research, but also teaching, leadership, societal impact, and, for university medical centres, patient care. This discussion on recognition and rewards, which is also the subject of the recent position paper [Academia in Motion](#) of Leiden University’s Recognition & Rewards Steering group, is an important step toward rethinking academic excellence, a key term for our university that has had Freedom to Excel as its strategic ambition for the past years.

Points of Concern

Young Academy Leiden (YAL) has three main concerns with how excellence currently tends to be interpreted in academia. First, the quality of academic work is too narrowly measured by individual output (e.g. the number of publications, or grants and awards), while largely ignoring the quality of the process of academic work (e.g. collaboration; curriculum development; academic integrity; transparency and accountability; and sustainability of the process). This emphasis on the quantity of output has resulted in an overly competitive system that poses risks to the health of academic environments, leading to high rates of stress and burnout, especially among young academics who are in the process of building their academic careers. Moreover, it may result in academics splitting their work in the maximum amount of papers possible whereas the quality would be greater if they were combined. Finally, narrowly focussing on output is not conducive to the slower, curiosity-driven science that is so crucial to fostering scientific progress – as rightly pointed out by the [slow science](#) movement. For example, Nobel Prize Laureate Peter Higgs [expressed severe doubts](#) that ground-breaking work like the identification of the Higgs boson would be possible in today's research climate focused on quantity: "I wouldn't be productive enough for today's academic system."

Second, it seems like universities do no longer simply aspire to deliver *high quality* teaching and research, but define 'excellence' in terms of 'exceptional quality'. This has resulted in the so-called "superstar model", which YAL [rejects](#). In the present situation, a small group of scholars obtains a large share of the available research funding. A considerable proportion of [luck is involved](#) in obtaining grants under such highly competitive circumstances, but this luck then [predicts being able to obtain future grants](#) (the rich get richer). At the same time, a large group of junior scholars, particularly those on temporary contracts such as postdocs and PhDs, are dependent on the funds brought in by the "superstars". Furthermore, obtaining such funding is valued increasingly as an end in itself, or a means to obtain even more funding, rather than a means to carry out good research and contribute to scientific progress. This is not a sustainable model for academic research funding.

A similar, equally worrisome development is now taking place in teaching, where the ability to acquire funding such as "teaching innovation grants" is increasingly used as a parameter for demonstrating "teaching excellence". Concerned by this trend towards the "monetization" of academic performance, YAL underwrites [the criticisms of De Jonge Akademie](#) on the proposed new 2.5 million Euro prize for teaching that would be awarded to only a few individuals or a small group.

Third, while we recognize the continued importance of valuing individual merit, we contend that the current use of the term academic excellence has been too narrowly applied to *individual* research (and to a lesser extent teaching) performance. As an example, Leiden University's [2020 Hall of fame](#) is overly focused on individual prizes, awards, grants and other recognitions. When research is a team effort, this needs to be more appropriately recognized.

Recommendations

Striving for excellence means striving for high quality. Researchers should be trusted with having the best view on how best to produce high-quality work that is most suited to their skills and projects in their field(s) of expertise. Therefore, we recommend that:

- Institutes and supervisors put the main emphasis of evaluating research excellence on the quality of contributions to the respective field(s), instead of on the quantity of research output. We recognize that this requires careful implementation, to avoid favoritism based on arbitrary and vague performance criteria.
- supervisors and Institutes set reasonable, if any, expectations with regards to the number of expected publications, and instead prioritize quality of research.

To foster sustainable excellence, we should break with the current tendency of narrowly equating academic excellence with successfully acquiring research funding. Academic excellence should instead relate to knowledge creation and, where appropriate, dissemination. Therefore:

- Faculties, Institutes and individual researchers should treat grants less as achievements in themselves, and more as a means to enable scientific contributions. We furthermore recognize that national-level changes to research funding would be required to truly enable us to shift away from a focus on obtaining grant money as a primary objective.
- Faculty boards should ensure that promotions are based on substantive contributions to research and teaching, rather than mainly on obtaining grants.
- Leiden University's communication officers should take care that internal communications within the university focus less on newly awarded grants and more on contributions in research and teaching - with or without grants.

Academic excellence should not only be measured in terms of individual output and impact but also in terms of the process of knowledge creation, including collegiality, good [academic citizenship](#) as well as the sustainability of this process concerning the researchers involved. Excellence can only be achieved through sustainable measures, including a better teaching-research balance, as also [advocated by YAL](#), and a healthy work-life balance. Therefore:

- during performance and development interviews, supervisors should ask faculty to reflect on and describe how they have facilitated the research of others, and pay due attention to any work done within (interdisciplinary) research and teaching teams. Institute boards and supervisors should assure that recognition of team efforts does not turn into recognition restricted to the Principal Investigator of the relevant projects.
- during performance and development interviews, supervisors should ask faculty to reflect on whether the process of their research is sustainable: could one continue working in this way for many years without problems? Institutes should ensure that supervisors are equipped and informed about these new ways of evaluating research, teaching and outreach.

We recognize that these changes cannot be done in isolation and will require changes both nationally and internationally. Leiden University should aim to lead by example and be a force for positive innovation in this discussion.