

Elites, Priorities, Bureaucrats

The 20 years Polish science has now been under reform have mainly been characterized by a lack of continuity and consistency – as each successive ruling camp has gone back to the beginning again, maintaining permanent chaos and enacting a heap of opaque regulations. The package of controversial bills recently proposed will likewise not lay the necessary groundwork for fostering an elite corps of scientists in Poland, but rather the opposite. For example, scientific ranks and titles should represent something hard to attain, unlike what is now being envisaged. All in all, the system developed over the past 20 years is friendly to bureaucrats but unfriendly to good science. I have estimated that at least 3 million man-hours have been needlessly wasted in various debates about this package of reforms.

One of the naive bureaucratic slogans speaks of established “research priorities,” whereby Poland has copied from the West three priorities described as INFO, BIO, and NANO.

This means that a nano-specialist who stands no chances of achieving significant results may obtain funding that is inaccessible to researchers off the list of priorities. Such nonsense can be prevented: what needs to be prioritized is simply top-caliber research. Quality should be what counts, even in niche specializations, since only then can Polish research make an impact in the world. I am afraid that bureaucrats will soon declare it a priority to develop some kind of “Polish bicycle” or award the “Polish Nobel” to a guy who reinvented the light bulb in his attic.

Another important mechanism for fostering good science has also been botched: the selective promotion of the top research units. While it was a good move to introduce a ranking system for university departments and Academy institutes, that has not been followed up with decent funding for the best units. These departments and institutes represent Poland’s nascent scientific elite, but there have even been plans to eliminate the Academy institutes altogether! Rarely has a government striven to destroy its country’s own elite – comparison to China’s “cultural revolution” even suggests itself. The institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences currently employ only 4% of the country’s researchers, yet the quality of their work is several times above the national average. Despite being state institutions they do not fall under the state budget (like Poland’s public universities), instead having some sort of hybrid status, forced to fend for their own survival. That ends up defocusing their efforts, since they need to seize every opportunity to make money, and that is not conducive to long-term research programs. The Academy institutes need stabilization, which

among other things means that basic salaries should be guaranteed on the same level as at universities: a top professor cannot be earning what counts as an unemployment benefit in Europe’s more civilized portion.

There is yet another delicate issue that does not get discussed. The Academy institutes are just one side of the coin, the more modest, hardworking side fighting for survival. The other side is glittery, has its own budget, and enjoys privileges. This is the elected body of Academy members, who are mainly university staff members, predominantly retired. The interests of these two parts of the Academy do not always coincide. One may get the impression that the institutes are exploited by the body of members, frequently without much understanding.

I have served as the director of an Academy institute since 1991, aside from a short break. Even though this institute is classed in the top category and ranked number-one in

Poland within its group, this period has mainly been plagued with uncertain survival, constant instability, and time wasted on senseless activities imposed on us from above. After nearly 20 years of speaking out publicly on science-related issues in Poland I have sadly concluded that such opinions do not interest anyone, or are at most found irritating. My institute has managed to survive under a dozen prime ministers and ministers, three presidents, and a handful of Academy presidents and Division chairmen – but how long can such turmoil go on?

There are two powerful forces hampering reform. The first consists of politicians and bureaucrats affiliated with the Ministry of Science, who have no interest in real reform: if the mechanisms finally became simple, they might lose their jobs. The other is a majority of the research community itself. Since 80% of Polish papers are published in insignificant journals, we might conclude that 80% of Polish scientists should find themselves a different profession. But they will not easily give up the ideal conditions they enjoy: easy paths of promotion even up to professorship, the ability to work at several institutions simultaneously, and access to funding from these dubious “funding streams.” It seems that they have also come to dominate most of the decision-making positions for funding allocation. This 80% will not allow an elite corps to emerge. Goldfish will never willingly let a pike into their pond... ■



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