A Welcome Clash of Academic Cultures

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Abstract
Alan Ruby reflects on an unscripted display of the differences between national research communities.

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Going to education research conferences is a bit like a six-year-old’s Christmas: you know there is no Santa Claus but you still expect a present.

The welcome surprise for me at the European Educational Research Association conference in Porto in September was an unscripted display of the cultural differences between national academic research communities.

There was a forum on governance in higher education which included a presentation by two US-based colleagues on their recent research on moves to increase institutional autonomy at public universities in Kazakhstan.

Among their preliminary findings were that university leaders doubted the usefulness and capacity of a local board and preferred the oversight of a distant and small government ministry. The researchers also observed that the ambit of authority of a board was limited in a system where the admissions policy is centralised and rectors of public institutions are appointed and dismissed by the minister or the nation’s president. These observations and their concluding suggestions about how to improve the strategy to strengthen institutional autonomy generated a puzzling frisson in the audience. The reasons became clearer in the discussion session.

European scholars challenged the inclusion of recommended actions and the supposed US-centric character of the steps proposed to improve the strategy. The words “hegemony” and “exceptionalism” were muttered. The US researchers appeared not to notice the challenge to the act of making recommendations.

The Nordic moderator of the session, noticing the omission, intervened, as did the questioners, to comment that US conference “norms” called for implications to be drawn from research findings and possible next steps or actions for improvement offered. It was all very genteel to my eyes but in the break between papers there were murmurings about the argument that latecomers had missed.

In sessions that followed I heard about the Finnish academics who had published articles for or against the unequal allocation of public money to universities in the government’s pursuit of a world-class university, and an account of how some English institutions had responded to changes in national policy on tuition fees. Neither paper entered into recommendations on how the policies might be refined or how they challenged the principles on which they were based.

The differences between the cultures reminded me of discussions with colleagues on the purpose of research communities interested in large-scale open learning. We looked for lessons from the guilds and early scientific groups. The founders of the Royal Society began meeting in the 1640s to improve knowledge through experimentation, observation and debate. The society’s early attempts at improving the trades foundered in large part because of a difference between the cultures of philosophers and mechanics, one concerned with acquiring personal knowledge and refinement and the other with production and the collective skills and capability of the craft.

From this and other examples we deduced that an effective research community should have an overarching purpose to collect, test, curate and disseminate information that will improve the field, foster innovation and add to the common weal; and to do so rationally, economically and openly, with the rigour and discipline of science. That would be better than the simple accretion of facts.