

## **“How many *likes* does a university need?”\***

by Markus Hesse

*The Tea Time-talk within the IPSE Research Unit is an informal gathering that brings together scholars from different disciplines, speaking briefly on a common theme, and followed up by Q&A and discussion. The talk of May 2017 was devoted to research and higher education (HE-) policy, where I discussed together with our fellow colleagues Robert Harmsen and Thomas Sigler ([see poster](#)).*

Back when I originally proposed the topic of this talk earlier this year, I had no idea of the turmoil our university would be in this spring and how timely this talk would be in the light of that crisis. Much has been said about this crisis recently, which, in short, consists of the following: severe budget deficit, a lack of robust strategy, and an absence of self-governance. As a consequence of this whole mess, the Rector had to resign on 2nd May. Accordingly, most observers of the current malaise were pointing at the UL in general, and its former president in particular, for explanation. Our own responsibility for the current crisis is certainly obvious; however, it is also time to shed light on the country's higher education (HE-) & research policy in more detail. In the following, I will emphasize three points: the first is on the facade, which is the UL and its claim for excellence; the second is on what takes place inside the buildings, which is not the UL, but effectively Luxembourg's research policy; and the third is on what may lead us out of this turmoil, if a solution is already possible to imagine at all.

The first point, on the facade of HE-policies, came to my attention when I read a piece in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (1) on the rise of rankings in general, and of "likes" as an expression of individual value in particular. In that short article, a psychologist and philosopher reflected on why the idea of the self emerges, why there is an obsession for numbers that seems fundamental here, and why there seems to be an addiction to eternal acknowledgement by an anonymous herd – which has obviously become a rather common phenomenon. Even more so, what seems to be the norm among today's youth, the excessive performance and assessment-driven use of social media is now becoming standard practice at universities as well, and this can pose real challenges.

If one follows the recent press statements over the course of the first two rounds in which the UL participated in the THE-ratings of university excellence, one might overlook that our small and young university is equally addicted to getting good ranks. One is proud that the UL has reached such a good position, and so early too. Besides an overall ranking of 178 worldwide, it jumped to no. 11 among the young universities, and last year it was even named the most international university of the planet. The THE has meanwhile erased the UL from the latter list, along with the University of Qatar, as these two countries are so small that it would be methodologically misleading to have them included. (This was obviously such bad news that our university PR forgot to post it on the Web...). Anyway, as members of humanities & social sciences, we are well aware of the shortcomings and pitfalls of metrics and measurements, of the nature of these exercises as socially constructed and highly biased, and of the difficult political race to the bottom when asked, “What do we get as return on investment?”

This is the question that seems to preoccupy politics and the public. So far the facade, that also recently included the rather ridiculous exercise of wishing to name our meeting rooms after renowned universities like Cambridge or Sorbonne. Pfff... Of course, one has to accept that the claim for excellence and outstanding performance is determining universities' agendas almost everywhere, and so in Luxembourg. Yet, looming behind the facade of endless loops in strategy-making, expectation management, and calls for autonomy (all of which we have been in now for years), is the rather problematic relationship between the university and its host country.

It's the small state and its peculiar system of discourse, of discrete framing and political steering that makes HE-policies appear rather special. Maybe you, dear reader, are surprised to learn that Rainer Klump is now the third in a row of directors of major research institutions in this country that has quit his job inside of two years – after Hilmar Schneider from LISER and Gabriel Crean from LIST who left not too long. All probably left for different personal reasons, but could it be that these abrupt terminations also have something institutional in common? Could this tell us something about the relationship between academia and politics here?

I would argue that it is the peculiar style of governance and governmentality of the small state that is reflected by the goings-on at the university, which is the key issue here. One could argue that this relationship oscillates between two extremes: It is distance from what is being done within academia and what that could mean for the country, on the one hand; and the attitude of control and hegemony (budgetary, topical, discursive) over what the university is apparently for, on the other hand. This is an extremely difficult setting for the long-standing claim of the UL for becoming more autonomous, not least since the draft of the new university law foresees a shift of power away from the government towards the UL's governing board – which may effectively lead to less, not more autonomy of the university ...

My third point here concerns the question of how research and HE-policy might solve the problems addressed here. Of course, we need to keep our ambitions high and improve ourselves constantly. And, it might be noted that the 2015/16-evaluation of the University's research units has provided most useful advice on how to do this. We may continue to serve the facade of rankings and ratings, but this should be done in a way that makes sense, by applying a proper yardstick, for example, and not by exaggerations or misuses. We also might find inspiration for strategic orientation by other cases of young universities (<50 yrs old), such as those in the UK or Germany. These are interesting products of research and HE-policies, all being children of their specific times, whose foundation has resonated with certain societal goals and expectations.<sup>(2)</sup> This – not Cambridge or Sorbonne – is the right context for us, in order to better understand what the societal framework around us means for our work. This could then be turned into a new level of conversation and interaction with society and politics.

Two challenges may remain here, however: First, if Luxembourg is once more about to reinvent itself as a small country in a global context, then the question is what a self-reliant, open and critical academic institution can add to that? Secondly, for the sake of international recognition and acknowledgement, an important question is how can it be ensured that scientific issues that are not necessarily and immediately related to Luxembourg will remain on our agendas, as legitimate topics for re-

search?(3) It is clear that these challenges should not be approached in a linear, unilateral way, where the UL simply has to meet the expectation of those who pay the bill. However, both the University and Luxembourg need to renew their – essentially mutual – relationship, one that is characterized by respect, trust and openness, freedom of critical thought and speech, and the willingness to stand (“aushalten”) even controversial matters. Having said that, it becomes clear that we don’t need more likes, thus painting the facade, but we should aim to be more committed and relevant in what we do, and in turn society is asked to provide resonance, not indifference about what academia is doing.

\* *Slightly revised intervention to our IPSE-Tea Time talk on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2017. Thanks to CC for editing. An extended version of this paper appeared (in German) in forum 374 (p. 14-16), July 2017, and can be obtained via [Orbilu](#).*

*Index:*

(1) Strenger, C. 2016. Wieviele likes bin ich wert? Der Wert des Ichs. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 16.12.2016.

(2) Möllmann, C. 2017. Tagungsbericht Reformuniversitäten und die Zukunft akademischer Selbststeuerung. 12.05.2016–13.05.2016, Berlin, in: *H-Soz-Kult* 03.03.2017.

(3) Stefano Collini (2012). *What are Universities for?* London (Penguin).