Making Room for Everyone’s Talent

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We had a Recognition & Rewards Festival in the Netherlands yesterday. This was a very inspiring event where all our colleagues involved in our national programme, and some of our international colleagues, I am glad to say, shared good practices. We inspired each other in a plenary programme and 17 workshops co-created with the people I work with every day. I am very happy that I could join you here in Paris and explain a little about how we like to make Room for everyone’s talent in the Netherlands.

This is our ambition. We aim for a healthy and inspiring environment for our academic staff where all talents are valued – teaching, research, impact, patient care and good leadership in academia – and we hope to see this not only in the Netherlands but all over the world.

What I will be sharing today is why we think we need this change, what we want to change, how we think we will be able to achieve this change in the Netherlands and beyond, and also how you might contribute to this change in academic career assessment.

Why do we think change is needed? We can see in academia that we have a broad mission as universities, research institutes and university hospitals, but we only reward our academics for research output and publications, or even just a small set of indicators.
What we see is a mismatch, that Utrecht University translated in this beautiful visualisation comparing a calliper and a very simpler measuring instrument measuring only research as the primary focus of academic assessment. Our ambition is for this measurement instrument to be a little bit more advanced so that we can measure all aspects of what an academic, scholar or scientist does, and that is not only research. It is also teaching and impact. We also need good quality leaders in academia.

What do we want to change? There are five key aspects in our ‘Room for everyone’s talent’ position paper of 2019:

What we strive for is that there will be more diverse career paths in academia, so that there is a career for you if you are good at doing research and publishing in the right journals, but also if you are good at teaching and at working together with organisations, society, and industry. We hope that we can form teams - and we think there already are teams - based on these different types of talent in academia, but we really want to recognise all these different talents.
We think that there should be a better balance between the individual and the team, so we strive for team spirit and teamwork. And I think we should focus more on the quality of the work. Because good scientific research increases scientific knowledge and contributes to solving societal challenges, and that is what we aim for. Of course, we want to stimulate open science. This is the Open Science European Conference, and we all know that if we want to stimulate open science we really should reward scientists who publish in open access journals, who work on research data management and share their data, software or materials. The fifth element of our approach is that we would like to stimulate good quality leadership in academia, and we think this is also key to make this change in academic career assessment.

How do we think we will be able to achieve this change? We set up a joint programme in the Netherlands and we work together and share good practices. We share experiments and are building an online community to make this possible, which we also already did in joint meetings. Every university, research institute and research funder has set up a recognition and rewards committee. We bring the chairs of these committees together in meetings, including at our Recognition & Rewards festivals, where we share good practices and co-create new work. Mutual learning is also key to our approach. The committees themselves translate our national position paper, ‘Room for everyone’s talents’, into their own visions based on their own context and the missions of their organisations. Our approach is therefore both bottom-up and top-down because we think that it is important to bring researchers into the conversation. We cannot make this change if there is no dialogue with the academic staff themselves. We also, however, involve the important leaders in academia in the Netherlands. That is important, in order to have ambassadors of this change movement.

The guiding principles of our approach are as follows. We think that we are working on a culture change, which is a fundamental change of beliefs and not just a change in the rules of the game. What we need therefore is also patience to make this change. It will not happen overnight. We need this broad dialogue in academia, and we need to involve the academic community to make sure they are able to decide themselves how they are assessed. We need to share good practices. We are striving for a balance between giving room for ideas and then bringing them together, and to make this change, good leadership in academia is really, really necessary.

We need to work together, so we have to follow all the international initiatives (and there are a lot these days – I agree that we are gaining momentum) and share our own experiences at conferences like this. We all have the same vision and are striving for culture change, but we need diversity in approaches, and we need communication and we need to share good practices to make this change possible.
I would like to give a little idea of the lessons we have learned so far in the Netherlands because we are not there yet. We really make sure that academics are involved. We are not advancing too quickly. It is very important that some people speed up the process, but it is also very important to be patient as well because we do not want new tools that lead to the same box-ticking exercise. We really want a change that is fundamental.

To end my talk, how can you get involved? I hope you will start a dialogue in your own context and listen to the concerns of your colleagues and peers. Perhaps you could even start a small experiment yourself, and I am very proud of a couple of PhD students who did this at Utrecht University. They just started at some point with a form they did not like, with a form that did not fit the way they thought about academic career assessment, and they changed that form. I think these small experiments are key to make this change happen.

In conclusion, we think we need a better balance in how we recognise and reward academics to help us achieve excellent education, research, impact and leadership, as well as the highest level of patient care in our university hospitals. However, we cannot change academic career assessment on our own. We need to work together in Europe and beyond to change the way we recognise and reward academics.

**To go a step further**

“The Dutch national approach of research assessment is broader than the open science approach because it also includes teaching, leadership and societal relevance or societal impact. It is very important because an academic, a scholar, is more than a researcher. Teaching is key to the mission of universities, so it is fundamental to invest in the quality of teachers and to give them room to grow in academia and have a career path as well.”

“In the Netherlands, some professors and even ECRS have written open letters to return to the old assessment system. We see this as the academic community sharing concerns, so I think we should really involve the academic community and start a dialogue. We did this by inviting one of these people, the first author of one of these letters at a round table at our Recognition & Rewards Festival yesterday. And we had a really, really good dialogue with him and with the board members involved in our initiative. I really understand that a lot of researchers, a lot of scientists, are concerned about their careers. And we are experimenting. We do not know what it will look like in a few years. So I think we should really take these concerns seriously, start a
dialogue, keep this dialogue going and make sure that we all do that on a national level and on the level of a university, faculty or research unit.”

References