

Case Study: University of Siena (Italy)

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The complexity of modern research requires a pronounced specialization of scientific work. Research is organized in different disciplines and each discipline is often divided in different fields which are clearly distinguished from each other. Thanks to this sophisticated division of labour, different international communities of scholars communicate and evaluate their results across the globe. In this way, science can produce internationally evaluated knowledge and creates a global civil society that spreads across nations and cultures, contributing to the co-operation among different countries. The evaluation of doctoral studies is obviously easier and less parochial when the boundaries of the doctoral school coincide with those set by the international division of scientific research. International rankings become possible and offer criteria for the relative performance of the different disciplines within each single university.

In spite of its evident success, the internationally standardised division of scientific labour has several disadvantages. The division of labour among disciplines erects barriers which may impede useful flows of communication of scientific work. Even worse, the boundaries among disciplines may, sometimes, be better explained by the search of monopoly rents than by the principles of an efficient division of labour. Barriers are sometimes erected to define narrow fields where researchers are protected from the competition of other scientific communities. Typically, they may make the language of research more complicated than useful (it becomes “academic” in the worst meaning of the word!). Moreover, even when the division of scientific work is entirely done with the purpose of advancing research, the resulting development of science may make it obsolete and require a redefinition of disciplinary research boundaries.

The organization of high quality doctoral studies faces the problem of defining the disciplinary boundaries of the doctoral schools. Evaluation is easier when the boundaries of the doctoral schools coincide with the prevailing division of scientific labour and there is a lot to say in favour of movement in this direction. However, when the evaluation uses disciplinary lines, it pays even more for the researchers to be at the “centres” of the disciplines and to sacrifice the exploration of interdisciplinary fields. There is no easy solution to this dilemma and it is important that different solutions are experienced and evaluated.

In my presentation I will consider in some detail how the University of Siena has tried to give one particular solution to this difficult problem. Here, I anticipate that our (not always successful!) attempts were based on the following principles:

a) aggregate doctorate schools at the disciplinary level consistent with international standards (when their scope is more narrowly defined than disciplinary boundaries, as it was the case for the large majority of Italian doctorates).

b) evaluate the relative performance of the scholars in their own international community

c) do not activate doctorates in the disciplinary fields where the scholars of the University are comparatively weak

d) stimulate and fund common projects among different schools; fund visiting chairs at the boundaries among different sectors, possibly those associated to new potentially emerging disciplines.

e) build and organize residential structures that stimulate informal contacts and discussions among doctorate students and other scholars belonging to different disciplines.