

The “Republic of Research Administrators” in Europe: How to Get the Researchers Moving

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It is often assumed that knowledge, especially academic knowledge, simply moves around the world in a seamless global flow. This article, however, examines the difficult political and institutional constraints that shape how knowledge, students, and scholars move around the world. When people speak of the “global university,” they generally focus on the dense connection of scholars working and collaborating with one another across long distances (i.e., the “Republic of Letters”). Missing from this view is the recognition of the incredible institutional work that facilitates such collaboration in the first instance—what I call the “Republic of Research Administrators.” Indeed, running parallel to the Republic of Letters is a large number of human resources (HR) personnel, university administrators, and policy makers whose actions help (or hinder) the flow of knowledge.

The administration of academic-knowledge production has been a particularly pressing issue for the European Union (EU), the world’s most complex international regional organization. As the EU recovers from the Eurozone crisis, there is growing interest in finding ways to expand “free movement” to researchers and students (Chou 2012). After mobility barriers are removed, the belief is that knowledge will circulate freely, making Europe one of the most dynamic economic regions in the world. How the free movement of knowledge, or the “fifth freedom,” is implemented thus provides an entry point for studying regional initiatives as part of and in response to the internationalization of higher education.

This article discusses EU efforts in implementing the fifth freedom to reveal a less-examined dimension in fostering knowledge mobility: that is, the administrative apparatus essential to facilitating the movement of researchers across national borders. I show how implementation of the main instrument for enabling the fifth freedom has contributed to establishing the Republic of Research Administrators in Europe. This particular configuration, however, is fragile and illustrates how—even within a more formalized framework (e.g., the EU) for international cooperation—the creation of a global movement of academic knowledge is tenuous at best.

The first section discusses the main adopted instrument for creating the institutional conditions for the free movement of knowledge. In the absence of political and regulatory support from the member states, I show how the European Commission (EC) recognized the need to bypass national administration and establish the Republic of Research Administrators to implement this instrument. The second section provides

firsthand information about how this “Republic” is organized. The third section considers the role that the Republic of Research Administrators has in facilitating the free movement of knowledge: that is, as a site of political and instrumental learning rather than rule harmonization. The article concludes with reflections about the type of administrative work required to get the researchers moving, even within a confined geographical space.

A PAN-EUROPEAN HUMAN RESOURCE POLICY FOR RESEARCHERS?

In March 2005, the EC adopted the “European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers” (hereinafter, the Charter and the Code) as a recommendation to the member states—that is, national officials in research and education ministries (European Commission 2005). The Charter and the Code is the key research policy measure promoting knowledge circulation that the fifth freedom would later embody. According to the European executive, the uneven treatment of research staff across Europe prevents “talent” from wanting to move. The aim of this policy, therefore, is to enable knowledge circulation by ensuring that the institutional working conditions at European universities and research institutes are similar and of high quality.

During the first three years, however, there was a low adoption level of the Charter and the Code. Consequently, in 2008, the EC launched the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (hereinafter, Strategy) to support the implementation of the Charter and the Code at the university and research-institute levels. The target audience thus became HR personnel at universities rather than ministry officials. The Strategy is a five-step process involving an internal-gap analysis, its publication, the awarding of a “badge” to recognize compliance, and internal and external evaluations (Chou and Real-Dato 2014). Participation in this process is voluntary and currently involves more than 1,200 institutions in one of four cohorts from 35 countries; so far, 130 institutions have obtained the HR Excellence in Research badge (Euraxess 2014). In light of the initial disinterest from member states to endorse the nonbinding Charter and Code, the high participation level in the Strategy is intriguing.

Using a unique dataset obtained from participant observation in three implementation sessions of the first cohort, this article describes how the EC bypassed national administrations to successfully connect with universities and research institutes to initiate reforms of their HR policies for researchers. Since the European executive began administering EU-level research

funding in the 1980s, different constellations of the Republic of Research Administrators have emerged. Like the Republic of Letters, the Research Administrators spans across several continents (including institutions from the EU and European Economic Area states as well as Israeli institutions), and it respects institutional, national, and regional differences in the treatment and recruitment of researchers and scientists. The configuration of the Republic of Research Administrators continues to evolve over time and in response to the EU instruments that need to be implemented, but it is essentially a dense network of administrators at European universities and research institutes. By focusing on how it is set up, this article confirms the emergence of a supranational layer of governance in the knowledge-policy domain. Yet, the fleeting presence of this specific Republic also points to its institutional instability and the uneven integration of the fifth freedom.

The Human Resources Strategy for Researchers is organized as a form of “peer-learning” based on the “exchanges of experiences”; the working method is an “exchange and joint elaboration of relevant documents, online/email discussions on specific topics as well as physical meetings (workshops)” (SINAPSE 17-08-11).

ORGANIZING THE REPUBLIC OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATORS: THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN CHARTER AND THE CODE FOR RESEARCHERS

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An online medium known as SINAPSE was used to create an e-communication platform through which agendas, presentations, and other relevant information (e.g., news clippings) were shared with other delegates. This SINAPSE community was a “closed” one, which meant that only its members had access to the documents and to communicate through this e-platform. In practice, however, workshop notifications were e-mailed directly to the delegates and then uploaded to SINAPSE. According to the official description, this e-platform was set up to “facilitate the exchange of documents...and for storing them in a coherent, easily accessible manner”; although there were plans to use

“e-debate” functions for “discussions and surveys,” it did not happen (SINAPSE 17-08-11). According to several participants, the reasons were that “SINAPSE is not too flexible for quick response and quick communication” and the “password” function hindered easy access (Minutes 29-10-10). These comments indicated that for implementation to be effective, resources must be available and appropriate for the task.

The institutions belonging to the first cohort fell into one of six categories, as follows: higher education institutions (e.g., University of Oslo); research institutions (e.g., IMDEA Water); funders (e.g., Norwegian Research Council); multiplier/researcher employer (e.g., European Science Foundation); multipliers (e.g., Marie Curie Fellows Association); and umbrella institutions (e.g., Rectors’ Conference of the Swiss Universities) (SINAPSE 17-08-11). As it turned out, other cohorts perceived the diversity of institutions as hindering peer-learning, which was

reflected in the final workshop at Palermo: participants were grouped into similar institutional types and sizes. The membership composition revealed that the Strategy, unlike the Charter and the Code, targeted those directly involved in administering HR policies. Yet, as several participants emphasized, the state’s lack of ownership of the process was problematic, particularly when amending national legislation was a prerequisite to implementing the Charter and the Code. The next section describes how the Republic of Research Administrators operated in practice. The discussion revolves around how peer-learning is induced, who is learning, and what is learned.

LEARNING IN AND FROM THE REPUBLIC OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATORS

For the first cohort, the implementation of face-to-face workshops was the primary vehicle for peer-learning. The EC policy officer and the institutional host were the primary organizers and, based on the format of the first three sessions, they envisioned that peer-learning would take place in a more “relaxed” and “informal” environment. To this end, the structure of the initial three meetings combined peer presentations, questions and answers (Q&A), and breakout interactive sessions. The EC policy officer opened the workshops with an update and reminder that this was “your event, your meeting”, which gave the participants a sense of ownership as well as responsibility for the outcomes (Minutes 29-10-10). However, the workshop format changed in the last two sessions, when the EC transferred its operation to Deloitte, which secured the tender for implementing the European Partnership for Researchers (European Commission 2008). What was gained and then lost between the initial three and final two workshops included the informality and ease of communication among participants; this, in turn,

disrupted the learning process and contributed to destabilizing the Republic of Research Administrators.

Learning among the participants during the first three workshops primarily consisted of “lesson-drawing” (i.e., instrumental learning). The basic assumption was that policy challenges were rarely unique and that policy makers simply need to derive “inspirations” from elsewhere (Freeman 2008, 376; Rose 1991, 4). Lesson-drawing was evident in the Q&A sessions following peer presentations. For instance, at the third workshop, the discussion revolved around why the “acknowledged” institutions chose not to prominently display their HR Excellence badge. Explanations ranged from institutional resistance (e.g., a Swiss delegate noted that the webmaster refused to put the badge on the institute’s home page because “something else was already there” and the “badge colors clashed”) to concerns about the “meaning” that the badge projected (e.g., an Italian delegate stated that it was difficult to translate the badge’s “tagline”—it was easier to simply not use it; and a Greek delegate said that the badge was used only when referring to HR policies and mobility, not on all institutional documents) (Minutes 29-10-10). Respect for differences was clearly evident among the participants. As conversations with first-cohort members revealed, this stemmed from the recognition that each institution possessed a different capacity and faced dissimilar constraints rooted in national legal culture and resource availability. Combined with the voluntary nature of the Strategy, I argue that this awareness is a key source of the uneven integration of the fifth freedom. The third workshop ended with a long social program that extended late into the evening.

Although the fourth workshop was titled “Mutual Learning Seminar,” the way that this meeting was organized actually interrupted the patterns of learning established in previous sessions (Minutes 23-05-11). Stated simply, learning was disrupted. Three distinctive new features were introduced: (1) new vocabularies that had been absent in earlier sessions (e.g., Key Performance Indicators [KPI] and Crucial Success Factors [CSF]); (2) “Ten Golden Rules,” which instructed participants on how to behave “respectfully”; and (3) a hierarchical structure to organize the sessions that previously had had a bottom-up structure. The

asking us instead to “focus on the [pre-assigned] theme”). More interesting—from the perspective of the teaching structure adopted to promote learning—was a comment from a Deloitte organizer when referring to the Charter and the Code: “I don’t actually know the content” (Minutes 24-05-11). This raises the question: Who else is learning?

The EC, represented by its policy officer, was observed to be learning from the Republic of Research Administrators (i.e., political learning). This was evident at the fourth workshop when participants raised concerns about the “state,” which was depicted as a key barrier to the successful translation of the Charter and the Code: “national legislation would not allow this principle in practice” (Minutes 23-05-11). To this, the EC policy officer responded: “What do you think the EU could do to make CC [the Charter and the Code] implementation more attractive?” (Minutes 23-05-11). Responses revolved around ways to incentivize participation in the Strategy; a prominent suggestion was to give those institutions that are compliant with the Charter and the Code a “favorable” status in competitions for EU research funding (i.e., the current “Horizon 2020” scheme). This response was repeated at the final workshop when the facilitators asked for ways to sustain the positive results gained through the Strategy (Minutes 25-04-12).

The extent to which the EC will endorse this repeated proposal remains to be seen. What can be observed (at the time of this writing) is that the voluntary implementation of the Charter and the Code has been pushed (farther) down the EU policy agenda. This occurred following the EC’s call in mid-2013 for a feasibility study that would investigate the “development of a certification mechanism for genuinely good HR management in the public research sector in Europe” (European Commission 2013). The European executive’s consideration for a possible “binding” mechanism was strongly resisted by British institutions participating via the Concordat Strategy (Vitae 2013). Indeed, they questioned the very foundation of the feasibility study and argued that any outcome must respect the completed processes and results achieved. The lack of development on this issue suggests that it is unlikely that the EC will advance any proposal without British support.

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workshop now had “organizers” (i.e., Deloitte) and “facilitators” who “coached” and “led” the discussions. The facilitators were first-cohort members; there was no formal explanation about how and why they were chosen. This new structure, also used in the final workshop, was the focus of much discussion among “normal” participants. What was noticeable in the fourth workshop was the confusion among participants (e.g., “Where are we supposed to go?” and “What do we have to do?”) and the physical distance from the facilitators (e.g., the facilitators in my breakout groups did not circulate or contribute to the exchanges,

EUROPE AT THE KNOWLEDGE-POLICY CROSSROADS

The year 2014 is significant for the “Europe of Knowledge” because it marks the long-anticipated delivery and renewal of Europe’s ambition to become the global-knowledge leader. Indeed, it is the deadline set for implementing the fifth freedom as well as the official start of Horizon 2020, the primary and largest EU funding instrument to date for pure and applied research. This article traces and describes the creation of an instance of the Republic of Research Administrators. My intent was to highlight the administrative apparatus behind the

creation of the Republic of Letters, which often is missing from discussions concerning the establishment of the global university. Whereas this particular case study confirms the emergence of the EU governance layer, it also reveals its fragility and the implementation challenges associated with the fifth freedom outside of the “shadow of hierarchy” (Héritier and Lehmkuhl 2008). Indeed, this case study demonstrates that a robust Republic of Research Administrators needs the involvement of higher-education institutions to follow the EU knowledge-policy objectives they aimed to enact in their own institutes in a timely manner. Furthermore, this article shows that a Republic of Research Administrators must go hand-in-hand with the Republic of Letters if knowledge will indeed circulate beyond national borders. Here, the EU has a choice: the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty that extended a legal base for realizing the fifth freedom. If Europe decides to push for binding regulations in the knowledge-policy domain, the issues of higher education and world politics must be at the top of both policy- and academic-research agendas in the future.

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