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Whither accounting research? A European view



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ABSTRACT

"Whither Accounting Research?" is the question raised by Hopwood (2007) in an essay documenting a growing sense of unease about the state and direction of accounting research. This paper addresses this question by focusing on the European Union, discussing the causes for a narrowing of topics and methods in research and proposing some remedies. Specifically, it connects academia's understated performance in developing research relevant to European Union society with the widespread practice of assessing academic quality based on journal rankings, which tends to reward conformity to the US-mainstream. The paper promotes a view of accounting research that is strongly embedded in its economic and socio-political context and deals with the fundamental objectives and constitutional setting of the European Union. Consistent with this view, it develops novel research questions and discusses possibilities for changing the European scholarly debate towards more innovative and influential research.

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"The principal objective for social science with a phronetic approach is to carry out analyses and interpretation of the status of values and interests in society aimed at social commentary and social action, i.e. praxis". (Flyvbjerg, 2001; p. 60)

1. Introduction

There is, nowadays, a growing sense of unease about the state and direction of accounting research. A number of critical studies have highlighted a detrimental tendency in academia, that is the excessive spread of performance measurement practices and the flow of conformity they tend to engender and consolidate (e.g. Gendron, 2008, 2015; Parker, 2011; Pelger & Grottke, 2015; Wilkinson & Durden, 2015). Much of current research tends to operate within the elitist parameters set by academic practice rather than questioning and challenging them. According to Hopwood (2009), this is the main reason for the apparent failure of academia to identify any of the recent financial and economic crises.

By focusing on the European Union (also "EU" hereafter), this paper shows that academia's understated performance to address issues relevant to European society has much to do with institutional incentives faced by academic scholars in their careers, including tenure, promotion and research grants based on journal ranking lists, which encourage academics to over-focus on "hits" in allegedly high-quality journals (Hopwood, 2007, 2008; Tourish & Willmott, 2015). Accounting journal ranking lists are dominated by United States ("US" hereafter) journals, whose research is very much focused on shareholders' wealth and stock market-based economies (Callen, 2015; Hopwood, 2009; MacKenzie, 2008; Sikka, 2015; Wilkinson &

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