Balancing relevance and excellence: Organizational responses to link research with decision making
Julio Frenk

This paper examines two issues affecting research organizations: the excellence versus relevance conflict and the internal brain drain suffered by research organizations. The author suggests organizational changes to resolve the conflict and four principles to reverse internal brain drain.

Excellence versus Relevance

The author simplifies the relationship between researchers and decision makers as a conflict in which scientists emphasize the advancement of knowledge while decision makers value the relevance of findings to specific problems. Many differences between researchers and decision makers fuel this conflict — priorities, language, and political time versus scientific time.

The author describes three models for addressing the tension between excellence and relevance: 1) academic subordination, in which decision-making requirements are paramount; 2) segregation, in which differences are institutionalized and researchers are free to pursue long-term goals; and 3) integration. The first model favours decision makers, the second researchers, and both are weaker than the integration model favoured by the author.

Integration Model

This model involves building bridges between researchers and decision makers while still preserving academic quality. To enhance relevance, both researchers and decision makers sit on the organization’s governing board. Researchers offer decision makers products other than academic papers, such as progress reports and executive syntheses of papers that translate research results into recommendations.

To promote research excellence, Frenk suggests adopting peer-review bodies and granting researchers freedom from interference by decision makers once a set of pertinent projects has been agreed upon.

Key messages

• Research institutions face the challenge of balancing the excellence cherished by researchers with the relevance of research to decision-making valued by decision makers.

• These barriers may best be overcome by integrating the quest for excellence and relevance through changes in organizational structure.

• Any strategy to promote the use of research in decision-making must also protect institutions from the “internal brain drain” of researchers permanently abandoning research for management positions.

Internal Brain Drain: Guiding Principles

Frenk also discusses the “internal brain drain” that occurs when researchers permanently abandon research for administrative positions. He suggests four guiding principles to lessen this drain: parallel careers, academic autonomy, administrative sacrifice, and inverted incentives.

Principles 1 and 2 seem at odds with each other initially, but the contradiction is resolved by principles 3 and 4. Principle 1, parallel careers, promotes a change from the status quo, where researchers rank below several levels of administration in the hierarchy, to a system in which a research career path offers upward mobility, rather than mobility requiring a switch to administration.

Paradoxically, principle 2, academic autonomy, is best supported when researchers fill research organization management positions. This can eliminate the distrust between researchers and non-scientist managers and help preserve research autonomy.

Frenk resolves the paradox with principles 3 and 4: administrative sacrifice and inverted incentives. The principle of administrative sacrifice states that occupying an administrative position should be a sacrifice made to preserve academic autonomy rather than a reward. To accomplish this, the principle of inverted incentives couples incentives to move up the research ladder with incentives to move back to research after a stint in administration.
In one organization, for example, researchers are awarded tax-free stipends based on a peer-review process. Researchers temporarily occupying administrative positions are also reviewed but do not receive their rewards until they return to research.

Frenk’s integration solution for the excellence/relevance question and his four principles for turning the tide of internal brain drain offer ways to mend the separation between research and decision-making while protecting academic autonomy.