

17.2.2026**Author**

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Title

Academic hierarchies in neo-feudal capitalism : how status competition processes trust and facilitates the appropriation of knowledge / Tilman Reitz

Publication year

2017

Source/Footnote

In: Higher education. - 73 (2017) 6, S. 871 - 886

Inventory number

45509

Keywords

Hochschulreform : allgemein ; Hochschule und Staat : allgemein ; Hochschule : Wettbewerb

Abstract

The article offers a socio-economic explanation of the much-discussed proliferation of evaluations, performance indicators, rankings and ratings in higher education and research. The aim is to show that these social technologies not only restructure the world of knowledge via status competitions but also serve to align academic stratification with socio-economic inequality. The theoretical framework is derived from critical analyses of the knowledge economy and from the credentialist theory of Randall Collins. Both accounts are further elaborated. With regard to the knowledge economy, the argument is that status hierarchies enable a privileged and profitable use of knowledge even where it is not feasible to establish intellectual property rights. In order to establish this argument, credentialism is extended from a theory about the labour market privileges of graduates to a theory about the social valuation of knowledge producers, knowledge products and knowledge institutions in general. Three main propositions are developed and defended: (1) A capitalist knowledge economy can only work as a status economy where income levels of qualified work and the exploitation of intellectual assets

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depend on accepted entitlements; (2) basic infrastructures of assessing the status of knowledge and knowledge workers are cultivated in higher education and research; (3) by codifying trust in knowledge, these academic (e)valuations facilitate its private appropriation in reputational capitalism.
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