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Isabelle GINOT

Translated by Jacqueline Cousineau from "Inventer le métier", in *Recherches en danse* [En ligne], 1, 2014.

# INVENTING THE PROFESSION

Isabelle GINOT

Translated by Jacqueline Cousineau from "Inventer le métier" in *Recherches en danse* [En ligne], 1, 2014.

To be a researcher in dance is to redefine the profession of dance research daily. Such is the utopic call that I actively maintain regarding this profession. In fact, one of my favorite courses that I have taught these last years is entitled "Inventing One's Profession." Here, therefore, I want to reflect on research as a profession, and specifically the profession of the academic teacher-researcher. When brainstorming what questions to share with the readers of the first edition of *Recherches en danse*<sup>1</sup>, an important theme came into view; a theme which is at the heart of many debates and exchanges in dance studies as in other arts fields: the relationship between theory and practice - an ill-defined relationship that many researchers in dance and the arts speak about without an apparent consensus on what it means to each of us. This "theoretical-practical" dimension orients my practice as a researcher and also defines the specificity of the research team that I belong to, and yet we do not share a position or definition of what we understand by the term, nor do we have equivalent practices. This text will give me the occasion to think about how I understand and how I personally exercise theoretical and practical research, which I will come to define more specifically as "situated research."

I have chosen to present this reflection in the first person and to highlight several examples in my own career as a researcher. This choice merits an explanation. It is certain that a large part of the ethical, political, and methodological approaches that I am going to evoke here, far from resulting from a trajectory of solitary work, are the fruit of my journey within the research laboratory "Laboratory for Analysis of Discourse and Practice in Dance (*Analyse des discours et pratiques en danse*)"<sup>2</sup> of University Paris 8. These developed approaches owe a lot to the work ethic initiated by Michel Bernard and Hubert Godard, and acti-

<sup>1</sup> *Recherches en Danse* is the first review consecrated to dance research in the international field of Francophone publications. The review offers a variety of texts and this article belongs to the first edition published in 2014 entitled "être chercheur en danse."

<sup>2</sup> The Laboratory for Analysis of Discourse and Practice in Dance is an internal group within the post graduate research unit 1572 "Esthetics, musicology, dance, and musical creation" at University Paris 8.

vely continued and transmitted by Isabelle Launay the moment I arrived and became part of the team in 1997. Without this work environment, I would have certainly never become a researcher. However, within our larger research team today, it seems to be that if the question of “theory-practice” remains central to all, it has also known a diversification that this article cannot take into account, whereas the recent evolution of my own research has created a singular approach for my own representations. Finally, regarding this question that spans a large part of research in dance today and is explored in the most varied of manners, it seems useful to me to reflect on it in a unique and personal way while bearing in mind a possible collective reflection in the future.

To briefly summarize my own professional and scientific trajectory, I can distinguish three distinct periods: the period of the thesis<sup>3</sup>, parallel to my first “profession” as a dance critic and actor in the choreographic world<sup>4</sup>. The period of analyzing works: from my entrance into the university (at first as an adjunct professor<sup>5</sup>) where I consecrated my time to questioning the relationship between how one practices seeing dance and practices of critique. The challenge was both pedagogical and theoretical: it had to do with opening the definition and the possible horizons of the very narrow field of “contemporary dance criticism.” And finally, since 2006, my work has been consecrated to the epistemology of somatic practices, and to the political use and social practices of gesture and sensation in regard to vulnerable populations. I will not attempt to give an a posteriori coherence to a trajectory of professional practices that have always been heavily influenced by circumstances, opportunities, and encounters wherein intuition has played a powerful role. I believe, however, that throughout I can observe a work ethic that, although constructed progressively, seems to me today homogeneous; even though it led me through radical changes in both theme and terrain - to such a point that one could now question my legitimacy as belonging to research “in dance.”

## *Gestural knowledge, minor knowledge*

In teaching as well as research, the team that I am a part of accords a central place to gestural knowledge, most notably through the Systematic Approach of Expressive Gesture developed by Hubert Godard and Christine Roquet, as well as by a number of movement analysts that regularly teach with them. This systematic approach unites and organizes our interest for a large ensemble of gestural practices: dance techniques, somatic practices, social dances, etc. This gestural knowledge is first and foremost thought of as “knowledge of the dancer.” Biomechanics, physiology, anatomy, that which also concerns movement, is part of our approach but is not the center of it. The history of our team is therefore marked by the place

<sup>3</sup> *Dominique Bagouet, un labyrinthe dansé. Essai d'analyse de l'oeuvre chorégraphique*, under the direction of Michel Bernard. Université Paris 8, October 1997. It was the subject of a book, entitled *Dominique Bagouet, un labyrinthe dansé*, Centre national de la danse, Pantin, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1983 and 2005, I worked as a dance critic for diverse publications: *La Marseillaise, Révolution, Regards, La Croix, Les Lettres Françaises, Ballett International/TanzAktuell*, as well as for diverse cultural structures: *La Marseillaise, Révolution, Regards, La Croix, Les Lettres Françaises, Ballett International/TanzAktuell*,

<sup>5</sup> “Adjunct associate professors” (*MCF associé* in French) or “adjunct professors” (*PR associé*) are professionals contractually recruited by the university to teach according to their experience in a certain domain. A MCF has to justify at least 7 years of professional experience in the domain of the department; a PR, at least 9 years.

of practical knowledge among our sources; this source, however, is not exclusive – like all researchers, we draw from several disciplinary fields – but very often, it is central, that is to say that it can *organize* our reading (and interpretation) of other sources. Otherwise said, the exogenous knowledge of numerous other disciplines does not have a dominant status in our approach, and even less so a superior authority. In my own career, I would define this source (or this authority) of practical knowledge more on the side of knowledge-sensation: such is the principal approach that I maintained during my time analyzing works (particularly while exploring the sensations of the audience), and that led me to somatic practices and their perceptive techniques. Beyond technical challenges, anchoring ourselves in practice is not only defined by referencing dance and gestural practices, but by the status we accord to practical knowledge. Do we recognize it as legitimate, and furthermore – at least for a certain number of us – do we recognize this knowledge as authoritative in relation to other spheres of knowing that are more traditionally academic?

However, our work needs to remain research and should not be confused with the work of practitioners and artists. The project remains the production of analyses, new conceptualizations, and new critical apparatuses. Criticism itself for that matter seems to be consubstantial to that approach; in its absence, the risk would be to confuse the recognition of practical knowledge with its sacralization. Finally, this integration of practical knowledge into research seems to me to imply an increased epistemological vigilance. Dialoguing academic knowledge with the practitioner’s knowledge is not a given, and such dialogue imposes one to constantly rethink one’s references, contextualization, and usages<sup>6</sup>.

This preliminary step engages with an ensemble of work modalities: crossing traditional academic methodologies – notably bibliographical work – with emerging methodologies : reading of gesture, analysis of practices, descriptions of processes, direct experimentation of observed practices, categorization of practices, etc. In addition, navigating between different temporalities and spaces (the studio and the library; the seminar and the festival), one has to collaborate with other researchers, but also with artists, pedagogues, practitioners, clinicians, and, as it relates to me, *users* of corporal practices. Moreover, one should consider these users as fully participating actors in the research. One should never allow oneself to make the easy assumption that consists of viewing the actors and their work as “subjects” of one’s research . . .

Research anchored in gestural knowledge is therefore a practice, a commentary on the practice, a theory on the practice, and especially a work ethic. It builds on an ensemble of heterogeneous methodologies formed by the endogenous knowledge of dance and gesture, by “alter-disciplinary” knowledge coming from the ensemble of human and social sciences, and often from the so called exact sciences (neuro-science, biomechanics, anatomy, etc.). Therefore, what seems to me to establish a specificity here is not the importance given “to the practice,” but rather to what one would call, according to Jacques Rancière, the equality of knowledge<sup>7</sup>. That is to say, we need to resist the hierarchy of knowledge that dominates the scientific

<sup>6</sup> “Practical” knowledge, even in its written form, is always attached to the context of an exercise; therefore, it seems to me that the use of such knowledge in the circumstances of a discursive debate must take into account this contextual layer. This is the problem, for example, with Richard Shusterman’s approach. His approach draws on the oral and practical knowledge of the Feldenkrais method and reutilizes them as “theoretical” knowledge with general and universal value without taking into account the inherent “use” that makes them what they are. That is the critique that I give his book *La conscience du corps* in the article : “Discours, techniques du corps et technocorps,” in *A l[’a]r[en]contre de la danse contemporaine : porosités et résistances*, under the direction of Paule Gioffredi, L’Harmattan, collection “Le corps en question,” 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*, Trans. Julie Rose, Wiley, 2016.

sphere as well as, it seems to me, a large part of “dance studies.” This hierarchy presupposes the authority of discursive and conceptual knowledge over practical knowledge - which is considered minor and *objects* of legitimate knowledge. Opposing this viewpoint is an “equality of intelligences”; otherwise said, one needs to *assume* equality: “This doesn’t mean that everyone is equally competent in all things; it means that although it is distributed differently, intelligence is the same for everyone.”<sup>8</sup>

To be a researcher in dance today however is not defined for me solely by a body of knowledge references, objects of research, and partners in heterogeneous research, composed as much from practical as from discursive knowledge. Just as crucial in my practice of the profession is the perspective of *situated research*. Otherwise said, I need to belong to the emergence of a research practice and its implementation from the “milieu.” And the definition of this milieu - and constantly re-questioning it - is a massive part of my work.

## *Motivations and destinations*

How does a research theme establish itself? To whom is it addressed? Even before finding a research topic and question, how does the *penchant* form that determines, in any case in my career, the orientation of periods of work lasting 10 or so years? This intuition does not at first emerge from dialoguing with research peers, from reading, or from a survey of the research subject. Rather, it comes from immersion in a “milieu”: exchanging with others at theater doors and studios, discussions, reading critiques, encountering recurrent difficulties in certain practices... And it is without a doubt *because* this intuition proceeds from an immersion in an ensemble of practices that the working out of that intuition must take place outside of the milieu in which it emerged - academia serving most often as such a space.

This was, for example, the genesis of my thesis project: having become a journalist in dance a bit by accident, I was confronted with too many contradictory tensions: on one hand, the difficulty of writing “about dance” (very much beyond the constraints and journalistic techniques learned “on the job”); on the other hand, the absence of an acceptable model; finally, the conviction that criticism should communicate the concerns of the observed work, but it should not be confused with the discourse of the dancers. If these tensions were able to be transformed into a thesis project, it is first of all because I was progressively able to perceive them as a driving collective force that pushed far beyond my own incompetence and shortcomings as a dance student and beginner critic.

It is the same type of intuition, where personal desire and perception of a collective necessity meet, that years later motivated my work towards somatic practices and displacement towards the milieu of social work. On one hand, I had the impression that the milieu of dancers that had been the subject of my work up until then had abandoned a certain political register. On the other hand, I perceived the emergence, from the margins of this first milieu, of a new preoccupation of dancers that moved their interest towards spaces that were less culturally legitimate such as hospitals, prisons, schools, and the world of the handicapped. In the 90s, while there was a reactivation of the same questioning of “the work” and virtuosity, a different

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*, Trans. Julie Rose, Wiley, 2016, p. 115.

representation of the *work of the dancer* appeared as virtuosity of sensation. Somatic practices, which came back at that time in force among contemporary dancers, could be strongly attributed, in my perspective, to that change in representation. It was no longer the sharing of “a work,” but the sharing of the practice of sensation that initiated, since the end of the 90s, a new space for politics in dance, a new definition of the “audience,” and a new definition of the profession in “the choreographic arts.” Echoing this movement, I myself started to dream of another practice, Feldenkrais, not “for the dancers,” but “with the dancers,” and with other audiences; and therefore, I started ask myself what would be a political use of somatics.

Anchored in the professional and social milieu by my initial motivations, the destination and objectives of my research remain there as well. Whatever the theme, the intention is always political: contributing to transform something in the relationship of forces that organize a milieu. In this respect, I do not differentiate between research and political engagement, or even activism.

We could ask ourselves, “what is political in dance research<sup>9</sup>?” to paraphrase Laurence Louppe. Here again, the relationship between dominant knowledge and minor or subaltern knowledge has always held an important place. The questions of the critic and analyzing of choreographic works contributed in the 90s to the interest of “giving a language to dancers,” according to the phrase Hubert Godard so often used to describe the political reason for the university dance department’s existence in the milieu of dance. Beginning in 2000, the discourse on choreographic works, assimilated and redeployed by the dancers themselves, was being transformed into empty rhetoric by new “avant-garde choreographies.” From then on, the artists developed a sort of “critical auto-discourse” that looped in on themselves<sup>10</sup>. In 2003, on the margins both of the spaces of these so-called avant-gardists and university publications, I attempted to think about the transformation of the milieu that my research addressed, and I implicitly announced my separation from that milieu - no longer finding any resonance with my political motivation<sup>11</sup>.

This entrenchment in a practice is therefore in part linked to a representation of research as political. All my work up until now has attempted to act on certain dominations within a given context. This aim for efficiency however does not at all exclude the work that is long, hard, and apparently independent of context, but the goal organizes the roadmap. In effect, the goal of the field of work that has occupied my mind since 2006 has been to make educative and artistic corporal practices (notably somatic practices) accessible to vulnerable populations; to say it another way, the point is to share the knowledge of dance and somatics with people that are politically and socially assigned to be excluded from them. This work in the beginning had a double objective: first, provide these practices with a new conceptual model in order to preserve their pertinence in these new contexts. As it is, the “theoretical” discourse produced by somatic practitioners (and principally the founders) is to my eyes highly problematic and creates an obstacle to the circulation of somatics in contexts where the “culture of gesture” is not a given<sup>12</sup>. The second objective is the reconceptualization of these practices as “techniques of *empowerment*.” Empowerment, sometimes defined as “the power to act,” is a notion created by activist movements (mostly American) that take the

<sup>9</sup> L. Louppe, “Qu’est-ce qui est politique en danse ?” *Nouvelles de danse* n°30, Winter 1997, pp. 36-41.

<sup>10</sup> Alain Buffard and Xavier Le Roy comment on Jérôme Bel’s work in “Dialogue sur et pour Jérôme Bel,” *Mouvement* n°5, June/September 1999 ; Christophe Wavelet analyses Alain Buffard’s work in “Appropriations singulières,” *Mouvement* n°6, October/December 1999

<sup>11</sup> “Un lieu commun,” *Repères, Biennale nationale de danse du Val-de-Marne*, n°11, March 2003.

<sup>12</sup> This critique of somatic practices was the subject in the article “Discours, techniques du corps et technocorps” cited in footnote 6.

opposing view of alienation theories<sup>13</sup>: ". . . it was a matter of becoming, of a recreating of the power of thinking and acting where previously only victims had existed<sup>14</sup>."

However, this project quickly encountered strong resistance from medical and social institutions and their financiers, and they made things very difficult for the team of somatic instructors mainly because of our incapacity to mobilize a "somatic" vocabulary accessible to health professionals. The institutional injunction for a "result" and for objectives defined by the norms of social work sometimes turned out to be contradictory with a somatic approach. We encountered the hegemony and omnipotence of medical and "scientific" representations and discourse that *a priori* disqualified the arguments of the social and human sciences. We saw the weakening of our positions due to the absence of publications and studies . . . This resistance has led us to think up a more academic program within which we deconstruct the discourse surrounding somatics and reconstruct it with concepts that are more easily shared. Within this program, we analyze the implicit ideological frameworks that phagocyte the dominant protocols in social work and that oppose the values of somatic practices, despite the desire and engagement of all involved. The necessity to "publish" (oh, how academic!) was imposed on us to legitimize our work in the eyes of teams and financiers.

This heavily theoretical and textual work takes place under a long term period that could seem contrary to the immediate political goals of the initial project. It is however because these goals for immediate efficiency remain in the forefront that such detours are conceivable. It is also why, just as the distinction of "theory/practice" seemed terribly unproductive to me, the distinction of "fundamental research" and "applied research" (as well as the implicit hierarchies that it carries) begs to be rethought. The research that interests me is before all situated somewhere; the distance between its anchor point and its object can vary from very close to very far. It is *equally* made up of the Feldenkrais workshop that I give to several migrants co-opted by "accompanying social life services" or to residents of a "specialized welcoming house" for those suffering severe neurological pathologies *and* by the passionate discussions on the term "empowerment" to identify and name our use of somatic practices as well as the identification of our practices to Michel Foucault's "techniques of the self."

## Contexts and work communities

Such research unites collectives of heterogeneous workplaces and cannot be solely held "within" the university or "within" the professional and social environment that it aims to transform. The research necessitates working outside of these multiple contexts. How to do this is never a given: the construction and constant questioning is an integral part of the research. It was the moment I became part of the research team at Paris 8 that I learned about several fundamental aspects of "situated" research even before this term existed. I learned on the one hand, that the plasticity of a collective structure evolves in function with nature of the pursued work, and therefore, daily effort is needed to construct and transform said structure. On the other hand, one should never consider macro-structures (and notably the university in its ensemble) as uniquely prescriptive. The work of research is vast: searching for niches of inventiveness; fin-

<sup>13</sup> See Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, Trans. Andrew Goffrey, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, Trans. Andrew Goffrey, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011, p. 132.



ding faults in obviousness (for example, in the creation of a research team . . . should it be with or without artists?); especially, inventing mixed collectives that evade the traditional split between researchers and practitioners, professionals and observers - they are particularly fertile for critical questioning - the evidence of the milieu being most often the exoticism of the other. It is in this way that I participated in the creation of A.I.M.E in 2007<sup>15</sup> which aims to pursue this utopia of assembling different practices of research, creation, formation, and social work centered on somatic and artistic corporal practices. The initiatives that I led with other practitioners and researchers with associations fighting against AIDS; training medical and social teams in corporal approaches for those in precarity; and my participation in a “colloquium of practitioners” intervening in rare social contexts are in my eyes an integral part of my work as a researcher . . . even if there is no place to put it on AERES<sup>16</sup> documents. It has to do with situating research in multiple and heterogeneous contexts and maintaining equality between these different contexts (i.e. not submitting oneself to the demands of one or the other), and being able to weigh one against the other in function with the needs and different moments of research. To consider, therefore, that the university is one of the legitimate arenas for research but not the only one. Same for the social spaces where I conduct my research that I refuse to consider as “fieldwork.” It has to do with inventing a way of crossing through different milieus to give to each a form of fertile exteriority. By hosting practitioners – and admitting them as co-constructors of research – the context of the university allows itself to bend to the themes, questions, and topics that animate their professional communities. We need to strive to make space for training and research that welcomes practitioners to reinvent their debates in a calm context, liberated of the tensions and challenges of survival that fill the professional space. This is exactly the first vision that I had for the Paris 8 Dance Department when I arrived there: a space “outside of dance” where dancers could come to debate dance. This is also what we have attempted since 2009 with the DU “Body Techniques and the World of Healing (*Techniques du corps et monde du soin*)”: somatic practitioners, dancers, and health or care professionals come to debate – and often to reconstruct – the stakes of their own profession in a forum that their professional context does not offer them. Such research therefore crosses heterogeneous contexts and, it seems to me, draws its political and theoretical force from the distance it maintains from these same contexts.

## *Inventing the profession*

The question therefore of « practical theory » and its non-definition seems to me to best left behind so as to concentrate rather on the notion of situated research. We saw that it implies on one hand to elaborate

<sup>15</sup> *The Association of Engaged Moving Individuals* or A.I.M.E. (*l'Association d'individus en mouvements engagés*) was founded in 2007 by Stéphanie Gressin, Gabrielle Mallet, Julie Nioche, Michel Repellin, and myself. Coming from a variety of professional horizons (performance, osteopathy, patient care associations, the university, somatic practices), the team of A.I.M.E. seeks to develop artistic practices (such as Julie Nioche's artistic projects) and pedagogical and somatic practices that are as much in the traditional cultural milieu as in uncanny social spaces (hospitals, prisons, medical-social structures, secondary schools, etc.) without an hierarchy between these different milieus and forms of intervention. For more information: <http://www.individus-en-mouvements.com>

<sup>16</sup> Created in 2007, the *Evaluation Agency for Research and Higher Education* or AERES (*l'Agence d'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur*) is the ministerial organization in charge of evaluation. Highly criticized since its beginning by a large majority of researchers and academics, the AERES is supposed to be soon replaced by a High Council for Evaluation.

as much as from relevant knowledge in the professional praxis as from conceptual and critical apparatuses more traditionally attached to the idea of theory. It equally implies being a part of a heterogeneity of contexts and not to exercise oneself uniquely in the assigned institutional space of the university (or any other scientific institution), and therefore, to admit among its actors an equal diversity. It finally implies, and maybe that is the point that I am the most attached to, a critically active position in regards to dominate hierarchies between legitimate knowledge and minor or “subaltern” knowledge. In this way, situated research sidelines itself from representation of theoretical and scientific work as the “be all” of knowledge, autonomous and untied from reality - that which is often implied by the sacrosanct notion of “neutrality” in research. Situated research also implies that one should think of the recipients: in this it opposes research that “by nature” addresses only researchers and does not have other horizons than internal debate within the scholarly world, in this way becoming a market rather than a space for political work. Situated research demands one thinks about the multiplicity of the addressees.

University research is therefore also “situated”: it presupposes its territory (the university) as well as its recipients (academic peers). It is by masking this situation that it imposes its own norms as the only legitimate ones, implicitly disqualifying more or less other research practices as “unscientific.” This is why I suggest today the research term “alter-situated”: not only “situated differently” or somewhere else than in the university, but also as an alternative to research that purports itself as the only possible norm. Such research is also addressed to our colleagues in dance studies – if they would accept to take an interest in it – but also demands that we think of other horizons: that of the milieu itself and its different strata, and that of political and/or activist actors.

Who is the author of research “results”? And who is the audience for such results? What type of “evaluation” of our work can we trust? Alter-situated research supposes multiple levels of discourse and address. In my recent work around somatic practices, I was able to engage in a theoretical sparring match with other researchers (for example, with Richard Shusterman’s work on somatic practices); but also, I produced studies addressed to social workers that attempted to aid them in transforming their representations of body and gesture for vulnerable populations. In addition, I relied on the “somatic dialogue” offered by an active member of one of the patient care associations to render somatic knowledge accessible to patients themselves. I also wrote short texts accessible to a less literate population . . .

This diversity of addressees and interlocutors demands that we leave the scientific rhetoric and its stylistic codifications. It also demands of us not to be constrained by the norms of scientific evaluation – whether these are the implicit norms of exchange with academic peers or the explicit norms of control and evaluation such as the AERES. It demands that we sometimes confront the conspicuous contempt of our peers for certain types of publications (identified as “unscientific”); for engaging with the so called “fieldwork”; for work with associations; and even for engaging with certain training programs (continuing education, created with professionals in mind and revealing an autonomous service within the university, appears to many as “subaltern” and outside of research work and training). It especially asks of us what I would call an epistemological and political vigilance so that the norms of legitimacy does not dominate our own representations of research so that a hierarchy does not insidiously install itself between our different texts and communications, between our interventions with vulnerable populations and those in academic seminars, and between activities that let themselves be categorized as “scientific” or “unscientific.”

To finish, practicing alter-situated research orients my perception of the effects of current mutations in

the academic world (notably the far reaching impact of the LRU<sup>17</sup>). This incites me to call for extreme vigilance within the community of university researchers in dance so that we continue to “invent the profession” of researcher and not let it be defined and enclosed by so-called scientific norms that, to my eyes, are essentially a way for ideological normalization. This vigilance is even more it seems to me necessary than dance studies, still fragile within the university institution and still perceived as subaltern (even within Paris 8 where the seniority of the department is combined with its insertion within the Arts domain that is particularly spread out and numerous). The temptation can therefore be very big, in the common fight to defend and establish our discipline, to bend as best we can to the norms of legitimized knowledge. However, it seems to me that the other choice is to think of studies in dance as alternative to dominate knowledge.

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<sup>17</sup> Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities is the official name of a French law that aims to overhaul the French public higher education system. It is commonly referred to as the law LRU or the Law Pécresse. The goal is to increase university autonomy in order to decrease government funding.