On Academia and Sea Elephants
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Published in:
I I A S Newsletter

Publication date:
2011

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
The social benefits expected from academia are generally identified as belonging to three broad categories: research, education, and contribution to wider society. Universities and higher education institutions are meant to operate within these fields. However, evaluating the current state of academia according to these criteria reveals a somewhat disturbing phenomenon. It seems that an increased pressure to produce peer-reviewed articles creates an unbalanced emphasis on the research criterion at the expense of the other two. More fatally, the pressure to produce articles has turned academia into a rat race; the fundamental structure of academic behaviour has been changed, resulting in a self-defeating and counter-productive pattern.

Two further remarks: First of all, it should be recognised that we are all responsible for this situation. By trying to stand out from the crowd, we are engaging the requirements for everyone else. It resembles what is known in game theory as the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ or social coordination problem. What is rational to do as an individual is collectively self-defeating; it is a so-called ‘smart for one, dumb for all’ logic. Secondly, what can be done? One solution raised by, among others, Alain de Botton consists of paying less attention to our relative positions in the publications pecking order. But the problem is that standing apart from the competition almost certainly means giving up one’s claim to a scientific position. In the existing system it does not seem to be a viable option. It simply clashes with the structure of incentives that academics face—to publish more than their peers.

Other solutions include restricting the amount of working hours (which can be seen as a justification for incremental taxes on extra hours worked) or, more effectively, introducing negative normative judgements to high achievers, justified by specific social conventions. It is uncertain whether the first option is enforceable since it (2) is difficult to evaluate the amount of hours effectively worked and (2) difficult to enforce such a restriction (especially in a context of international and decentralised competition). Regarding the second option, some uneasiness stems from its intrusive and indiscriminate character. Peer pressure of this kind could have a healthy impact, but it could also promote a harsh conformism and undermine the positive impact of competition, especially in an environment that pretends to be innovative.

These suggestions illustrate that there is no straightforward solution. A more workable option would be to value achievements and contributions other than publications and, thus, to expand the array of criteria for evaluating the contributions of a given academic. It would be even more desirable inasmuch as more of the social benefits of universities would be produced through cooperation, and not just competition. More cooperation among academics might bring about the more desirable scenario where fewer but better articles would be published, and at lower psycho-social costs. In order to realise this scenario, we need to move away from a common misconception about academic work, sometimes fostered by academics themselves: the idea of the lonely, secluded genius, developing his or her ideas in isolation, in silent communion with books and papers. As a knowledge producer, academia has always relied on the exchange of ideas between academics, something being undermined by the extremely competitive behaviour propelled by a heavy reliance on individual production.

So, our contention is that combining the idea of the lonely genius with that of ‘more production equals better quality’ engenders the fatal notion that we should structure incentives so as to ‘squeeze as much out of those brains as possible’. But consider: is it not plausible that a single article, carefully constructed through dialogue and criticism in academic fora, informed by several years of research (sub-) disciplines, can be better, and contribute more to both research and the public than 10 highly specialised peer-reviewed articles, read only by a select few? Certainly, expanding the range of criteria will not (and should not) cancel out competition. It will not change the fact that some researchers will face better than others, but it might result in an academia with better working conditions for those involved, and more importantly, fewer but more qualified articles. However, the current national and international standards for research evaluation give the universities no strong incentive to change the current situation. Hardly surprising, but it does confirm that this is a matter for political attention at the highest level!

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