On Academia and Sea Elephants
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Opinion: On academia and sea elephants

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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.

THE NUMBER OF WORKING HOURS among academics and researchers is on a constant rise. They spend more and more time and energy to their work, which often impacts their personal life. They spend less and less time with their partners, children, relatives or friends; they experience loneliness and stress. A study published some years ago on the well-being of academics in Great Britain found that their levels of psychological distress were worse than those of accident and emergency staff (nurses and doctors).1 Almost half of British academics experience levels of stress requiring medical intervention. In our experience, this pattern is consistent across Europe and North America: different places, different people, same story.

It seems plausible that at least a part of this pattern can be explained by the increased pressure to produce articles in peer-reviewed journals—certainly within the humanities and social sciences—since that has become the main criterion of evaluation. Terrific levels of productivity in this one domain have now become the prerequisite for obtaining tenure or funding, and the exigency has become even more pressing in a context of economic downturn. (To be clear here, the point is not to abandon the principle of competition, but nevertheless: endorsing competition as a principle does not mean accepting all the potential flaws that follow from a particular structure of competition.) In any case, this over-emphasis comes at the cost of other social benefits and, as we shall argue, even at the cost of the thing which it is supposed to foster, namely quality research. As a result, academics are stuck in a ‘race to the bottom’.

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Let us elaborate this last point: When applying for a position, the chances of being hired do not just depend on your absolute level of publications, but on how much you have published relative to your competitors. Of course, job applications mention other criteria such as the ability to teach, the ability to raise external funds and sometimes other less obvious conditions like personality traits, and so forth. But, in the end, it is almost exclusively how much you produce in comparison with people already in the contest. The more involved in the competition faces a strong incentive to publish, and therefore everyone raises the standards for all.

The behaviour of male sea elephants seems to be analogous: The bigger a male is, the higher his chances of beating his opponents during fights, and thus, gaining access to the females. It is precisely this competition that has reached a level where males often suppress females during the reproductive act due to their excessive dimensions.2 If offsprings are not going to be born as a result of the reproductive performance of males, a self-defeating dynamic is clearly at work here.

We should remind ourselves that ‘to publish more’ is not an intrinsic good. First, to be useful a publication should bring forth something new. Therefore, academics are pressured to publish, but, the more they tend to publish everything. Most of us have received similar advice from an older colleague: ‘no matter what, just publish, publish, publish everything!’ Consequently, the standard volume of published work is rising for everyone and, everything else being equal, the quality of everyone’s publications must be going down.

Secondly, it is a banal point, but someone should read it: If not, there is no advantage at all to be had. Again, the more academics that that are producing, the less they pay attention to each other’s work, for the simple reason that they won’t have the time to read other people’s stuff. The picture is quite absurd. The average number of readers per academic article varies from below 1 (it is an average) to a handful of people. A common joke amongst academics is to say that, on average, four people read an article: the two anonymous referees, the author herself and her mother.

More seriously, why put such an emphasis on publications if so few people actually access the knowledge? It is particularly worrying if we consider the fact that the majority of ‘invention’ flows from our ability to produce new ideas that will be discussed by peers. Academia has always been a community of ideas based on the confrontation of arguments and enquirers. It has been this way because this kind of human interaction produces the most benefits. But, in reality, academia appears more like a rat race. The point here is that it has become impossible to read everything of value—or just a reasonable selection of it—that is published in each of our fields. The chance is high that we will lose track of some important contributions, new developments and occasions to produce better research. Moreover, in order to publish we have to produce something, we are forced into ever higher degrees of specialisation. Consequently, we find ourselves locked in highly specific, tall and narrow ivory towers, with very little knowledge about the forest of ivory towers surrounding us.

If we take the question to another level, the problem is that publications are only one kind of social benefit that a society can expect from its higher education. Colleges and universities also have an educational purpose. They are supposed to offer valuable courses and consistent pedagogical follow-up. If we were completely rational, we would suppose that offering value courses and something useful, we are forced into ever higher degrees of specialisation. Consequently, we find ourselves locked in highly specific, tall and narrow ivory towers, with very little knowledge about the forest of ivory towers surrounding us.

Notes

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The Newsletter Network | 41