On Academia and Sea Elephants
Landes, Xavier; Andersen, Martin Marchman; Nielsen, Morten Ebbe Juul

Published in:
IIAS Newsletter

Publication date:
2011

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Opinion: On academia and sea elephants

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 productivity, that is, the number of publications 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 fuzzy conditions like personality traits, and so forth. But, in the end, it is almost exclusively how much you produce in comparison with people around you that matters. The person 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 females. If you ask a man (or an elephant) to maximise 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 answers to questions that academics are pressured to publish, the more they tend to publish everything. Most of us have received similar advice from an older colleague: ‘if you write a lot, you 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 baneal point, but someone should read it: if not, there is no advantage at all to be had. Again, the more academics pressure researchers to publish, 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 among 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 ‘innovations’ 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 enquires. 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 even more, 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 questions 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 be forced to see teaching as a burden, time wasted for our research and publications. In Denmark where we work, the most efficient researchers are usually relieved of their teaching duties and this ‘burden’ then falls largely on the shoulders of young researchers. They are often left with just enough time for their own research and cannot provide the quality of teaching normally associated with well-established professors. Moreover, while specialisation might be productive in the natural sciences (though there are good reasons to doubt this as well), specialisation within the humanities makes fertile points of contact between individual scholars and society ever harder to achieve.

In terms of the third social benefit – contribution to wider society – the situation is no better: neither the popular articles, contributing to social debates, organising conferences open to a wider public, since these activities will not help us improve our publication records. As a result, society is losing some of its richness and the social benefit produced by universities is declining. In sum, the gap between the reproductive performance of males, a self-defeating genius with that of ‘more production equals better quality’ is increasing between researchers in their ivory towers and the rest of society. It will not change the fact that some researchers will fare better than others, but it might result in an academia 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 locally genius with that of ‘more production equals better quality’ engenders the false notion that we should structure incentives so as to ‘squeez as much out of those brainiacs as possible’. But consider: is it not plausible that a single article, carefully constructed through dialogue and criticism in academic forums, informed by several written articles and academic (sub-) disciplines, can be better, and contribute more (to both research and the public) than 10 highly specialised peer-reviewed articles, read only by specialists? Certainly, expanding the range of criteria will not (and should not) cancel out competition. It will not change the fact that some researchers will fare 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 levels.

Above: Are academic publications lost in a blizzard? Sea elephants on Amsterdam Island in the Indian Ocean. Photo by StorrmPiet rapport.

Martin Marchman Andersen
The University of Copenhagen, Denmark
mmarch@hum.ku.dk

Xavier Landes
The University of Copenhagen, Denmark
xlandes@hum.ku.dk

Morton Ebbe Jøul Nielsen
The University of Copenhagen, Denmark
mejb@hum.ku.dk

Notes
2 Frank, Robert. 1995. Escape from the ‘Prisoner’s dilemma’ or social coordination problem. What is rational to do against the requirement of collective 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 peer review processes pegging one’s professional interest is collectively

WHAT DO YOU THINK? Share your views by posting a comment at www.iaas.nl/newsletter-57.

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.

We should remind ourselves that ‘to publish more’ is not an intrinsic good. First, to be useful a publication should bring forth answers to questions that academics are pressured to publish, the more they tend to publish everything. Most of us have received similar advice from an older colleague: ‘if you write a lot, you 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 baneal point, but someone should read it: if not, there is no advantage at all to be had. Again, the more academics pressure researchers to publish, 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 among 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 ‘innovations’ 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 enquires. 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 even more, 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 questions 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 be forced to see teaching as a burden, time wasted for our research and publications. In Denmark where we work, the most efficient researchers are usually relieved of their teaching duties and this ‘burden’ then falls largely on the shoulders of young researchers. They are often left with just enough time for their own research and cannot provide the quality of teaching normally associated with well-established professors. Moreover, while specialisation might be productive in the natural sciences (though there are good reasons to doubt this as well), specialisation within the humanities makes fertile points of contact between individual scholars and society ever harder to achieve.

In terms of the third social benefit – contribution to wider society – the situation is no better: neither the popular articles, contributing to social debates, organising conferences open to a wider public, since these activities will not help us improve our publication records. As a result, society is losing some of its richness and the social benefit produced by universities is declining. In sum, the gap between the reproductive performance of males, a self-defeating genius with that of ‘more production equals better quality’ is increasing between researchers in their ivory towers and the rest of society. It will not change the fact that some researchers will fare better than others, but it might result in an academia 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 locally genius with that of ‘more production equals better quality’ engenders the false notion that we should structure incentives so as to ‘squeez as much out of those brainiacs as possible’. But consider: is it not plausible that a single article, carefully constructed through dialogue and criticism in academic forums, informed by several written articles and academic (sub-) disciplines, can be better, and contribute more (to both research and the public) than 10 highly specialised peer-reviewed articles, read only by specialists? Certainly, expanding the range of criteria will not (and should not) cancel out competition. It will not change the fact that some researchers will fare 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 levels.

Martin Marchman Andersen
The University of Copenhagen, Denmark
mmarch@hum.ku.dk

Xavier Landes
The University of Copenhagen, Denmark
xlandes@hum.ku.dk

Morton Ebbe Jøul Nielsen
The University of Copenhagen, Denmark
mejb@hum.ku.dk

Notes
2 Frank, Robert. 1995. Escape from the ‘Prisoner’s dilemma’ or social coordination problem. What is rational to do against the requirement of collective 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 peer review processes pegging one’s professional interest is collectively

WHAT DO YOU THINK? Share your views by posting a comment at www.iaas.nl/newsletter-57.