On Academia and Sea Elephants
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Published in:
IIAS 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.

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 knowledge, but also on how 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 counts. The most 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 the competition has reached a level where males often suppress females during the reproductive act due to their excessive dimensions, then if one hopes 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 new and important knowledge. Thus, academics are pressured to publish, 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 are pressured to publish, the less they pay attention to their other 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 and understand the 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 flow 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 field. 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 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 graduate students. The end result is that we are forced to see teaching as a burden, time wasted for our own research and cannot provide the quality of teaching normally associated with well-established professors.

Moreover, while specialization 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 even more critical. Contributions to social debates, organising conferences open to a wider public, since these activities will not help us to build a better list of publications. 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 academics, more productive than before, and the reproduction of ideas based on the confrontation of arguments is widening. As a result, it seems that we are producing more knowledge while at the same time losing the capacity to share this knowledge.

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**Notes**


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