Publish or Perish? 
Academic Performance – Are Researchers only Publishing Machines?! 

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Nachhaltigkeitswoche 2019 
Bamberg 
https://www.uni-bamberg.de/nachhaltigkeit/nawo/2019/
First, a bit about me

- **Sociologist** (Italy, Sweden, Spain)
  (but also worked as **employee in logistics** in Italy and Spain)
- Phd in **urban studies** (2014) at Bicocca University of Milan (Italy) and KU Leuven (Belgium)
- **Post-doc** (2016-2017) at WSL (Switzerland)

Research topics: urban sprawl, land consumption, (urban) sustainability, spatial planning, (land) governance, comparative methods
First, a bit about me

• **Akademische Rätin** (since August 2018) at the Chair of Governance of Complex and Innovative Technological Systems, Uni Bamberg (Germany)

• We give a course called „**Politics and policies of Sustainability**“:

My presentation will be about:

1. What does it mean to „do research“ today?

2. Performance in academia
   - Impact factor
   - Competition (individual and institutional)

3. Slow Science network

4. Cheetah (Gepard)

2. Ox

3. Elephant

4. Snail
1. What does it mean to „do research“ today?
Becoming a researcher: getting a PhD

• Overall: after your master, you start your PhD (Doktorat)
• Ideally, work on the same topic as your master thesis for your PhD
• You work on your PhD between 3-5 years
• Ideally, part of a larger project team (or scholarship)
• PhD thesis in monograph, but better as „cumulative“ papers
Becoming a researcher: After the PhD

• Get a post-doc
• Get a tenured position (assistant professor, professor)
• Have a lot of publications (articles, books)

„Race to publications“
(„rat race“)
Becoming a researcher/academic

„Rules of thumb“:
the more **linear** this path, the better
the **faster**, the better
the **more** publications, the better
„Fast“ academic performance

Production of knowledge

2. Performance in academia: The Impact Factor (IF)
What are academic papers?

• Papers are articles published in recognised (inter)national journals
• Academic journals are disciplines-specific (e.g., mathematics, engineering, psychology)
• Goal: disseminate scientific advancements/research results to the international academic community
Scientific journals
Scientific journals

- There are countless scientific journals
- Discipline-specific
- International and national
- Several issues over the year
- Owned and managed by different publishing houses (e.g. Sage, Elsevier, Taylor&Francis)

How to „navigate“ through this „sea“ of journals?
Impact factor

• Synthetic indicator to rank journals by discipline
• Ratio between cited items and all published citeable items of the previous two years
• Changes over time
• Institute of Scientific Information (ISI), Thompson Reuters

• E.g. Science: 37.205; Urban Studies: 2.604

Goal: Map the important journals discipline-wise by frequency of citations

https://clarivate.com/essays/impact-factor/
Impact factor: “an exaggerated reverence“

- Synthetic indicator to rank journals by discipline
- Evaluate scientific performance, institutes and personal careers
- Extremely effective for „objective“ decision-making, i.e. to allocate resources to departments/individual professors or researchers
- A productivity measure: publish or perish
- Sometimes, a „performance short-cut“: Open Access

DOI: 10.1126/science.322.5899.191b

And „Slow Interview“ to Paolo Cherubini:
Limits of the Impact factor

Limits:

- The impact factor is **useful to a certain extent** to evaluate performance
- The impact factor is useful for ranking journals, less for evaluating research

„Slow Interview“ to Paolo Cherubini:
Limits of … the publishing machine

• Open Access vs. Open Science
• **Who decides** if a paper should be published (double-blind review, but for free and unaccountable)

What is the difference between a „god“ and a „bad“ peer-review process?

Open Science as an Early Career Researcher: Viva la revolución?
[https://figshare.com/articles/Open_Science_as_an_Early_Career_Researcher_Viva_la_revoluci_n_/8034746](https://figshare.com/articles/Open_Science_as_an_Early_Career_Researcher_Viva_la_revoluci_n_/8034746)
Alternatives to the Impact factor

Alternatives:

• Importance to consider the **size** of the disciplinary community to calculate the impact factor
• Impact factor as **one of the possible measures**, not the only one
• Alternatives especially important for social sciences and humanities („**fair competition**“ with the natural sciences)

Other ideas?

„Slow Interview“ to Paolo Cherubini:
2. Performance in academia:
Competition (individual level)
Stages of individual competition in academic research

• **First**: Get accepted in a PhD program
• **Second**: Get your PhD diploma (time and scholarship limits, working on papers, conferences, sometimes no funds for own research, no social security)
• **Third**: After the PhD: what to do? Generally temporary contracts (abroad), but nevertheless high pressure for publishing (to get funding, etc....)

A constant pressure to valorise/capitalise on the CV

Cécile Piret, Joël Girès (2018) L’université : une fabrique de l’emploi néolibéral?
Individual competition in research: A vicious competition cycle/spiral

- Performance threshold
- Competition for PhD
- Performance threshold
- Competition Post-Doc
- Competition tenure-track
- Performance threshold
Individual competition in research:
Actually: a reinforcing feedback loop

Performance threshold

Competition for PhD

Performance threshold

Competition tenure-track

The more publications, received research grants, invitations, etc.,

The more publications, received research grants, invitations, etc.

And so on

Competition Post-Doc
Individual competition in academic research

An issue for all:
- Submission of research proposals to get funding for own research
  (time consuming, uncertain result)
  e.g. Horizon 2020 Marie Curie

Where is the threshold between „good“ vs. „bad“ competition in academic research?
Effects of competition in research at the individual level)

- Decreased mental health
  - stress
  - depression
  - anxiety
  - burn-out

- Total engagement
  - overexploitation vs. flexibility/vocation/Beruf

What is the threshold between own flexibility and overexploiment?

Cécile Piret, Joël Girès (2018) L'université : une fabrique de l'emploi néolibéral?
Individual competition in academic research

- Academic researchers/staff/professors are privileged
- But increasing job instability and uncertainty

ESF (2017) data:
- High employment rate (95%) of PhD holders
- Unemployment rate in the Humanities higher (9%) than for other research domains (4%)
- Less permanent contracts in academia than non-academic sectors

European Science Foundation (ESF) (2017)
Individual competition in academic research

European Science Foundation (ESF) (2017)
Retrieved from: http://www.esf.org/fileadmin/user_upload/esf/F-FINAL-
p. 36
Competition in academia: the issue of diversity

- Gender inbalance
  Feminist critique to academia
  Gender quota

- Minority issues
  minority quota
  „differently able“ people

Are these policies enough?
Or is it just „ticking the boxes“?

The issue of diversity

• Students and staff (in higher education) is increasingly diverse
• Being aware that only with our presence we bring diversity
• Comparative advantage of small universities

Is this enough?
„Fast“ academic performance

Production of knowledge

Teaching

Teaching

• Not only pressure on research/career, **but also** teaching
• Does not „pay“ career-wise
• A task for junior staff (and it is generally underpaid)

How can teaching be more sustainable?
An „impact factor“ for teaching?
„Fast“ academic performance

Production of knowledge

Teaching

Service

The elephant in the room: Which kind of research, and for whom?

Eve Tuck @tuckeve · 1 mag
I have spent last months traveling + visiting with members of Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Métis, Cree, Dene, Yukon, and Inuit Nations + communities; what I have learned is that they are totally exhausted by the new wave of clueless academics showing up to do research on them

https://twitter.com/tuckeve/status/1123543935610228736
The elephant in the room: Which kind of research, and for whom?

Eve Tuck @tuckeve · 1 mag

All of these researchers show up wanting to do a study that has been approved by the university, funded by a grant, and is often on something that the community has already studied or doesn’t want to study. The researchers say the same thing: but I already have the funding!

https://twitter.com/tuckeve/status/1123543937275310080

A provoking thought: instead of 20+ articles, isn’t it better to have “just” 2 good books that also consider the needs of the object/subject of study?
„Fast“ academic performance

Production of knowledge

Teaching

Service

Performance in academia: Competition (institutional level)
Institutional competition in academia

- Competition among **universities** (rankings)
- Selected **global centres of knowledge** production
- Hegemony of the **English language** in academic research
  
  e.g. studies on Latin America published by English speaking scholars

Can technology be a solution?

“Slow Interview“ to Javier Ruiz-Tagle
„Fast“ academic performance

Is an alternative possible?
3. Slow Science network
Slow Science network/platform
(in Belgium)

An interuniversity platform for discussion on academia's future

Web: https://slowscience.be
Twitter: @slow_science_
Slow Science: Doctoral school workshop

4 UNIVERSITIES, WORKSHOPS, DEBATE & ACTION

INTER-UNIVERSITY
DOCTORAL COURSE
6TH EDITION

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A RESEARCHER IN 21ST CENTURY ACADEMIA?

APRIL 4, 25 & 26 2019
ANTWERP (UA), BRUSSELS (VUB & KU LEUVEN CAMPUS BRUSSELI) & GHENT (UGENT)

MEMBER OF THE OFFICIAL DOCTORAL SCHOOL TRAINING PROGRAMME

http://bit.do/ujXXk

Slow Science: Reclaiming study practices

PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE
2019

RECLAIMING STUDY PRACTICES
18–20 September 2019, Leuven, Belgium

https://ppw.kuleuven.be/phec
Slow Science: vision

- Heterogeneous group of scholars
- Debating on which kind of academia we want in the future (direction, speed, linkages with broader society)

“against the fast, competitive, benchmarked research that not only restricts the choice of research topics and curricula but also threatens the quality of the knowledge”

“movement of resistance against the restructuration of the university into a science enterprise”

https://slowscience.be/our-vision/
Slow Science.be: manifesto

1. Science is not a business
2. Science at the service of society as a whole
3. Education and science for all – knowledge as commons
4. Accountability in knowledge „production“ / generation
5. Developing other conditions and practices for “respons-able” research
6. Independent and critical inquiry should be favoured
   school (scholè, free time) vs. ‘busy-ness’ (a-scholè)


Also (but different): http://slow-science.org/
„Slow“ academic performance Possible?

Picture from: https://fishofgold.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/ox-1.jpg?w=350&h=262 ; http://farm3.staticflickr.com/2717/5753952271_06037038bf_z.jpg
UGent new personnel policy: A good practice?

new personnel policy called “stepping out of the rat race” and “no longer wishing to participate in the ranking of people”

• Since 2018
• Promotion based on research, teaching and service (quality), not only on number of publications (quantity)

But:
Which indicators? Which qualitative assessment? i.e. which/how to find a balance?

Other useful references


Thank you for your attention!

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Questions?

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