

Non-Publishers in European Universities

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In a traditional account of the scientific community, full-time academics employed in European universities, who do *not* conduct research, should not be regarded as part of the scientific community. No publications means no research. No research does not fit the profile of the European university sector—or does it? There are a few hundred thousand non-publishers across European universities. Is non-publishing increasingly becoming compatible with academic work in current massified universities?

The data reported here are drawn from 11 European countries involved in the “Changing Academic Profession” (CAP) and “Academic Profession in Europe” (EUROAC) surveys: Austria, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. We only analyzed the subsample of (N=8,886) full-time academics working at universities and involved in research.

CROSS-COUNTRY DIFFERENTIALS

More than 40 percent of Polish academics; and between 15 and 20 percent of Finnish, Portuguese, Norwegian, and German academics—as opposed to less than 10 percent of Irish, Italian, Dutch, and British academics—are actually research nonperformers. According to surveys performed in the university sector in 2007 or 2010 in various countries, the percentage of full-time employed, self-reported non-publishers is as follows: the Netherlands, 2.7; Italy, 5.4; the United Kingdom, 5.7; Ireland, 9.1; Switzerland, 12.4; Germany, 15.4; Norway, 15.9; Portugal, 18.3; Finland, 20.2. In Poland it is as high as 43.2. The data for Austria: 72.2 percent of nonperformers, seem unreliable and are therefore not commented on here.

Differences in institutional cultures and in national academic cultures lead to other levels of research productivity. Institutions of low academic standing may not value academic research, while institutions of high academic standing may exert normative pressures on academics to get involved in research. Similarly, the normative pressures exerted on academics, to get involved in research in some countries, may be considerably lower than in others; and Poland, until a recent wave of reforms, is a good example. In an age of massified universities, though, perhaps the scale

of the phenomenon of research nonperformance should not be surprising. But the fact that in a country like Poland, the share of non-publishers across all clusters of academic disciplines and all age groups exceeds 40 percent—demonstrates how far Polish academia has drifted away from the traditional academic values of combining teaching and research (that is, publishing) in European universities.

GENERAL PATTERNS OF NON-PUBLISHING

European non-publishers share some general patterns. Unsurprisingly, in the whole sample (N=17,212) studied, their share in the nonuniversity sector is higher than in the university sector. Their share among part-time academics is higher than among academics employed full-time. The gender distribution is consistent: in all countries, except for Germany and Poland, the percentage of female nonperformers is higher than the percentage of male nonperformers. In most cases, the difference is 50 percent; it is strikingly higher in the Netherlands (with 7.7% vs. 1.3%) and in Switzerland (23.5% vs. 7.8%) respectively.

In terms of age, surprisingly, the highest percentage of non-publishing academics is under 40. But in Poland, Italy, and the United Kingdom, most non-publishers are aged 60 and over. On average, among disciplines, engineering has the highest percentage of non-publishers in most countries surveyed. They reach almost 40 percent in Finland and almost 35 percent in Germany, two countries with a very high patenting rate.

NON-PUBLISHERS, LOW PUBLISHERS, AND HIGH PUBLISHERS

Although there is a difference between nonperformers and low performers, both groups significantly reduce the average national research productivity.

The combined share of non-publishers and low publishers among academics (defined as producing an average of 1–4 articles in three years) totals about 30 percent in the Netherlands and Italy and 60–70 percent in Poland, Norway, Finland, and Portugal. In Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, their share is about 50 percent.

In contrast, the percentage of high publishers (publishing 10 and more articles) is also highly differentiated across Europe: it is about 40 percent in the Netherlands and Italy; about 30 percent in Switzerland and Germany; and 16–22 percent elsewhere, with Poland coming last with 13 percent. In the most productive national systems, the Netherlands and Italy, the share of nonperformers is the lowest and the share of high performers the highest.

The global research competitiveness of European universities—especially in such countries as Poland, Finland, and Portugal—is clearly endangered unless strong policy

measures are introduced: the share of nonperformers there is much above the European average.

EXPECTED TO PUBLISH?

Certainly, in an age of massification, it is not realistic to expect that every European academic will publish something. But it is realistic to expect *university* academics to publish. The prestige of universities in Europe rests almost entirely on research and publications. Non-performers should increasingly be transferred to less research-oriented higher education institutions, or encouraged to leave the academic profession. Given the increasing role of competitive research funding in most European systems, there may simply not be enough space for unproductive scholars in the university sector.

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INCREASING SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The social stratification of science is increasing. Our research shows that the top 10 percent productive academics in European universities produce about 4 out of every 10 articles (41.5%) and the top 20 percent about six (61.2%). The remaining 80 percent produce less than four (38.8%). If we divide the research-active European academics into two halves, the top half produces more than 90 percent of all articles (91.5), and the bottom half produces less than 9 percent.

High performers, low performers, and nonperformers in science have always been differentiated by their individual research output. As John Ziman argued in *Prometheus Bound. Science in a dynamic steady-state* (1994), research “is a rigorous pursuit, where incompetent performance, as signaled by persistently low achievement, eventually clogs up the system.”

Indeed, in European research universities, and in Polish universities in particular, non-publishers may soon clog up the system. The ongoing changes in the social stratification in science have therefore powerful policy implications for academic recruitment, retention, and progression.