

BOOK REVIEW

Moosa IA *Publish or Perish. Perceived Benefits versus Unintended Consequences* (2018 Edward Elgar Publishing UK)

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Abstract

This contribution reviews the book by Imad A Moosa entitled *Publish or Perish. Perceived Benefits versus Unintended Consequences* published by Edward Elgar Publishing in 2018.

Keywords

Higher education research; publish or perish; teaching and learning.

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Review

For most members of the profession, the real strain in the academic role arises from the fact that they are, in essence, paid to do one job, whereas the worth of their services is evaluated on the basis of how well they do another.¹

Academics have been hearing the refrain "publish or perish" for decades. Educators of under- and post-graduate students are researchers as well and the pressure to have academic articles published tends to cause tension and becomes problematic when the standing "of the scholar is independent of his students. [He] performs for an audience of experts, [where he] competes with equals...".² Ironically, this "audience of experts" is the *de facto* basis of peer-evaluated academic scholarship, which advocates a perceived notion of quality and stature.

In South Africa the incentivisation of academics at public institutions to produce research publications is on the increase. For instance, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) rewards research output in its accredited journals with financial subsidies for the institution with which the author is associated.³ In addition, the National Research Foundation (NRF) rating of scholars is based solely on a selection of an academic's research publications in peer-reviewed journals, although these are not limited to the accredited lists.⁴

The DHET determines which journals or lists of journals are accredited and qualify for subsidy. The message here is that research is more valuable when published in a double-blind peer-reviewed listed journal (or monograph). The department has acknowledged that this policy has caused certain undesirable outcomes. Some academics choose to split their research into a series of publications rather than to confine it to one comprehensive document, in an attempt to maximise financial rewards (the so-called salami-slicing) – thus compromising the integrity of the research.⁵ Also, the growing number of costly predatory journals with questionable peer-review practices (the Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, to name but one) makes it easier for academics to publish more rapidly, resulting in publications of dubious quality.⁶ It should be noted that this

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¹ Caplow and McGee *Academic Marketplace* 69.

² Wilson *Academic Man* 172.

³ DHET *Research Output Policy* 2.1.

⁴ NRF/RISA *Evaluation and Rating* 3.

⁵ DHET *Research Output Policy* 4.2.

⁶ DHET Directorate *Communiqué* 2.

specific journal was de-accredited retrospectively in November 2014. Moreover, justified concerns are raised about the impact of DHET prescriptive accredited lists on academic freedom in South Africa, as these exclude some specialised journals held in high esteem internationally. That said, academics are forced to publish more regularly to meet university targets, inevitably choosing lesser journals rather than sitting out the extended waiting period, which is often the case with prestige journals burdened with a high number of submissions and a more thorough peer-review process.

Against this background, I found Moosa's work commendable. He explains that "perish" in academia means that an inadequate publishing record could have consequences, such as the termination of employment or failure to be promoted.⁷ However, Moosa does not elaborate further on this.⁸ From a South African perspective, the perceived benefits of publishing are to motivate academics to focus on research generation for the development of their careers and for the greater good of academia and for society as a whole. The acceptance of an article is thus seen as a measure of performance.⁹ He argues that the negatives outweigh the positives, as bureaucratisation coupled with the availability of financial rewards and the globalisation of universities has put pressure on academics to publish with the purpose of getting their names into print rather than for the development of societal knowledge.¹⁰ Added hereto is the negative impact of the "private sector's eagerness to commercialize research ... and the pressure to show return on public investment".¹¹

He sets out his view of the change in academia in no uncertain terms, and I quote his words extensively in order to be able to include his tone of irritation:¹²

Once upon a time, when governments viewed higher education as an investment rather than a cost, universities were well funded. At that time, academics ran the show and the vice-chancellor was typically a brilliant scholar who got paid a salary loading of no more than 10 per cent of the professional salary. The standard of graduates was extremely high and academic staff enjoyed job satisfaction. With the passage of time, governments decided that it was wise to spend taxpayers' money on wars instead of higher education, so they started starving universities of funds, encouraging them to operate like businesses – and so they have done. Vice-

⁷ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 1-2.

⁸ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 5-9.

⁹ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 5-6.

¹⁰ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 6, 9, 13.

¹¹ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 12.

¹² Moosa *Publish or Perish* 9.

chancellors became CEOs with seven-figure salaries and a big entourage of suit-and-tie bureaucrats with fancy job titles such as assistant deputy vice-chancellor for sustainability, deputy pro-vice-chancellor for design and innovation, pro-vice-chancellor for engagement activities, associate pro-vice-chancellor for academic partnerships, deputy vice-chancellor for engagement and vocational education, pro-vice-chancellor for design and social context, and assistant deputy pro-vice-chancellor for the campaign against Donald Trump (I made up the last one, but it is no more ridiculous than the real ones). On a more junior level of bureaucracy, there has been a significant increase in the number of employees called 'senior managers' – as a matter of fact every administrative staff member has become senior something. Schools and departments have school managers, who typically think they are more important than professors. These bureaucrats are called 'professional' staff, which means that academics are 'unprofessional'.

He continues that although academics are expected to publish, "more time is spent attending meetings about research than the time allocated to doing the research itself".¹³ In addition, "high tuition scores must also be achieved as determined by the 'customers' via quality surveys. An academic must not only publish but also strive to get a high GTS (Good Teaching Scale) score and OSI (Overall Satisfaction Index)".¹⁴

Moosa acknowledges that the consequences of "publish and perish" are the inflation of scholarly publications, a deterioration in the quality, relevance and reliability of publications, the hampering of innovative research and discovery processes and an adverse effect on teaching and other non-research activities.¹⁵ In chapter 3 he addresses the consequences of the "publish or perish" policy on the journal industry and authorship patterns and highlights the increase in co-authorship, a phenomenon recognised in South Africa as well. He notes that the pressure to publish has resulted in exorbitant journal fees, the proliferation of predatory journals, exploitation by unscrupulous conference organisers, the rise of elitism and the class structure in academia, and the demise of the single author. More alarmingly, in chapter 4 he demonstrates how "publish or perish" contributes (albeit controversially) to an increase in research misconduct, such as the fabrication of scientific data, plagiarism (including self-plagiarism), salami-slicing, and the manipulation of results, resulting in the retraction of papers becoming more common. This could be ascribed to increasing financial pressure - opinion-based, download frequency-based and market-based. He concludes that

Journal ranking is a wasteful exercise – it does not pay off in terms of costs and benefits. However, if it is imperative to evaluate our performance

¹³ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 11.

¹⁴ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 15.

¹⁵ Moosa *Publish or Perish* ch 2.

according to journal lists, it may be a good idea to have lists that comprise three groups of journals. The first group is that of the top five to ten journals. This is the group of 'the best', which is distinguished from the second group of 'the rest'. The third group would be predatory journals that should be avoided.¹⁶

This is similar to research conducted in South Africa.

Moosa deals with the peer-review process in chapter 7 and notes that apart from inevitable delays, inherent bias and at worse negligent, reckless and dishonest practices cannot be excluded. Comparing the various ranking systems, especially in Australia and the UK, he concludes that although these systems will remain because of the resource allocations of public funds, they are problematic as it is impossible to measure excellence of note. It is not without irony that this seems to be motivated by a research bureaucracy and government's desire to control universities.¹⁷

The last chapter is an attempt to chart a way forward. Unfortunately, his solution to the problem is limited to one-and-a-half pages which do not offer much of a solution. He suggests the abandonment of the "publish or perish"-culture as "a product of neoliberal market ideology according to which universities should be held accountable for the amount of scholarly output, as measured by the quality and quantity of publications".¹⁸

There is nothing wrong, he states, with returning to the pre-"publish or perish" situation, where academics functioned with greater autonomy and academic freedom, where excellent researchers were in the minority, where scholarship instead of monetary status was revered, and where most academics were teachers who did little research.¹⁹ He notes that research would be of a high quality (again), academics would be happy to retire as high-quality teachers, and student satisfaction would (again) improve as academics' resources would not be spread so thinly over both teaching and research activities.²⁰ Moosa supports Storbacka's argument for the specialisation of academics into either teaching or research, which could be achieved by withdrawing public funds, so that "academics will be under pressure to bring in students or perish (for the teaching staff) and bring in research money or perish (for research staff)".²¹ He argues that the notion of universities being managed as private enterprises should be abandoned

¹⁶ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 118, 155.

¹⁷ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 171.

¹⁸ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 181.

¹⁹ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 181.

²⁰ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 181.

²¹ Moosa *Publish or Perish* 182.

and that the focus must be on education as an investment in human capital. He believes that

[g]ood teaching, which is incompatible with POP, is essential to produce future doctors.... The claim that research is essential for teaching is nonsense: when academics are forced to publish anything, they divert resources (including time) to research, in which case the last thing they want to see is a student knocking at their door to ask a question. I have observed first-hand, frustrated students waiting in vain for a reply to an email in which they asked a simple question.

Moosa's work is a valuable contribution to the topic of research in academia, as it highlights the problems experienced by many academics worldwide. As an academic I can subscribe to the opinion that conflict exists between teaching and research and that as a consequence, students are often neglected. This being said, however, it would be too simplistic and sweeping a statement to negate the obligation of academics to teach as well as to publish research material. It is also too simplistic to state categorically that when good teachers publish this could not be a good thing. For one, the growing body of research in the field of education can be regarded as a positive result arising from the pressure on academics to publish. Moosa's argument seems tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bath water, metaphorically speaking. There are many academics who perform valuable research and still remain good teachers, with their research having a positive effect on their tuition. Surely a compromise could be reached between Moosa's two extreme options, facilitating a more nuanced system?

What I find lacking in Moosa's book is a historical view of what academia used to be and why changes were necessary at all. Should his recommendation be to return to a previous scenario of "publish or perish", a review of the previous situation would not have come amiss, instead of his simple assumption that it was better than the current imperfect system. It would have been enlightening to deliberate on whether universities were funded adequately, whether the pass rates and standards of graduates were adequate, or whether, for instance, academic staff enjoyed more job satisfaction then than today. Such claims have not been substantiated.

Caplow and McGee allude to a few possible reasons for the change that took place in academia during the middle of the previous century – mostly relating to the insecurity of and inequitable treatment regarding career progression, recruitment and promotion; and the problems associated with performance evaluation.²² They note *inter alia* that the change was

²² Caplow and McGee *Academic Marketplace* ch 11.

necessitated by the funding required to deal with the proliferation of academic institutions after 1945, when a post-war rise in the adolescent population seeking higher education resulted in existing structures becoming too limited.²³ The proliferation of new subjects and new faculties²⁴ and the need for quality assessment because of the increased mobility of academics contributed to this.²⁵ They also refer to academics' financial self-pity²⁶ and the retaliation against the (real or perceived) "old school tie" practice of filling vacancies with alma mater graduates, notwithstanding the fear of academic inbreeding, and the "unwritten rule" that you cannot be appointed at an institution better regarded than the one you graduated from.²⁷

Whatever the reason, I as an academic would prefer to know what I am moving back to before abandoning the current flawed system.

The above criticism notwithstanding, this work is an interesting evaluation of modern academia and the problems within the system. I therefore recommend it to all academics.

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²³ Caplow and McGee *Academic Marketplace* 2.

²⁴ Caplow and McGee *Academic Marketplace* 3.

²⁵ Caplow and McGee *Academic Marketplace* 69.

²⁶ Caplow and McGee *Academic Marketplace* 4,18.

²⁷ Caplow and McGee *Academic Marketplace* 16-17.

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List of Abbreviations

DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
NRF/RISA	National Research Foundation / Research and Innovation Support and Advancement