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‘PUBLISH OR PERISH’: SOCIAL SCIENCE UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract

There is the general expectation that universities (higher education institutions), especially public universities, should deliver high-level education, should play a significant role in the development of society (social impact), and that academicians are expected to deliver basic research and publish its results (academic impact). This essay discusses whether these three core dimensions are well-balanced in the current university system. The answer is very close to ‘no’, as in most countries, and especially in countries using performance financing allocation of public grants to universities, the academic impact receives too much attention. Unfortunately, too heavy of a focus on academic impact delivers critical moral dilemmas, especially in countries with lower academic ethics (probably all countries in the Central and Eastern Europe region fall into this category).

Keywords: universities, social impact, academic impact, social science programmes, Central and Eastern Europe.

1. Introduction

Many authors stress in their research that universities (higher education institutions) are expected to play a significant role in the development of society (see, for example, Diamond,1992; Pederson, 1997; or Moscardini, Strachan and Vlasova, 2020). Universities are expected to foster student success, to prepare students to be 'master thinkers' able to grasp and use a wide array of knowledge and skills. At the same time, universities are expected to be socially embedded, fostering development through direct engagement—most authors speak about the social impact of universities (such as Jong and Balaban, 2022). Finally, academicians are expected to deliver basic research and to publish its results (academic impact).

Are these three core dimensions balanced in the current university system? Alternatively, the truth is what, for example, Dalen (2021, p. 1675) states: 'The publish-or-perish principle has become a fact of academic life in gaining a position or being promoted. Evidence is mounting that the benefits of this pressure are being countered by the downsides, such as forms of goal displacement by scientists or unethical practices. Publication pressure is high and is related to a faculty position and university ranking position.' Do universities still foster high-quality education?

This short essay evaluates the current university practice in Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on the data and information from two countries—the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This text aims to evaluate how the current performance financing systems, applied in the region at the university level, impact the balance between good teaching, universities' societal responsibility, and the duty to deliver research and publish. The focus is on the balance between the academic and social impacts; the quality of education is just 'touched'. The main object of this analysis is the social science programmes, where the above-indicated imbalances are best visible.

2. Financing universities in Central and Eastern Europe

In most Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, public schools predominantly deliver higher education, and the share and role of private higher education institutions (HEIs) is limited. Some exceptions exist—for example, in Estonia, there are five private HEIs, six state universities and seven state institutions of professional higher education; in Hungary, between 2019 and 2021, the vast majority of previously public HEIs were transferred to the maintenance of trust funds performing public duties thus becoming private institutions; in Poland, private HEIs provide the majority of higher educational offer (approx. two-thirds of institutions); and in Slovenia there are three public universities, four private universities and many private colleges (Eurydice, undated).

Depending on individual country rules, private HEIs in CEE may not receive public funds. Public HEIs are predominantly publicly financed, in most cases by some formula —performance financing systems are utilised (in some countries, like Croatia or Hungary, the state reimburses the estimated costs). In all countries where direct performance financ-

ing is used, the core part of the subsidy allocation formula is the number of students, and the other parts of the formula are research and publication results. For example, the state subsidy formula in the Czech Republic uses the following leading indicators: number of students, R&D outputs, international staff and student mobility, graduation rate, graduate employment rate, and the number of foreigners at HEI. The number of enrolled students is only loosely capped (Eurydice, undated).

If the number of students is the core part of the formula and the number of 'state' students (students which do not pay fees) is not effectively capped (two countries clearly fall into this category—the Czech Republic and Slovakia), this system of financing has the potential to negatively influence the quality of the higher education. Universities are motivated to accept and keep as many students as they can attract. However, if the quality of the marginal student decreases, the average quality of education is expected to decrease, too. Schools have to adapt the quality of teaching to the capacity of the weakest performing students to keep them in the programme if they want more public resources. Moreover, if most students apply the 'minimax' strategy, there is no mechanism to push the quality of education forward.

3. Social impact: 'demand' and 'supply' barriers

At the Transylvanian International Conference in Public Administration, organised from 3rd to 5th of October 2024, one of panels critically assessed the role of social sciences university programmes in the development of society. It was unanimously accepted that the quality of social impact of social science-related programmes lies significantly behind to what is achieved, for example, in technical sciences or medicine. This statement was of universal character, but it is even more visibly valid for the CEE region. Critical barriers exist in this region on the 'supply' and 'demand' sides.

Regarding the 'supply' side—universities' interest in delivering social impacts—full performance financing might be a critical barrier for a simple reason—social impact can hardly be directly included in the allocation formula. If the social impact is not directly measured and 'rewarded', the top-down motivation of universities to deliver it is not created, and everything depends on internal motivation at the institutional and individual levels.

Most recent articles clearly document that universities should deliver critical social impacts (programmes in social sciences also have sufficient capacity to do this, for example, by supporting evidence-based policy-making at the central and local levels), which is still underscored by the national performance evaluation schemes (accreditation) and performance financing of universities. For example, Plaček *et al*. (2024, p. 2642) mention the Czech and Slovak inability to capture the social relevance of the research and even the limited capacity to understand what does the expression social impact of universities mean: 'The 2017+ Methodology does introduce a category of societal impact, but if you look at what gets points there, it is not just outputs that meet that characteristic, because ultimately, it is being evaluated from a scientific level. The assessors quite often give a mark for

social relevance commensurate with where the work was published and whether it was at a sufficient theoretical level'.

Plaček *et al*. (2024, p. 2640) also stress the critical factor deviating university scholars and management from the focus: 'I saw the transition between these methodologies as a greater push for quality research in terms of impact journals. However, the extent to which it is going now, I see that as a bit detrimental because the pressure for those top outputs —the Q1s and things like that—seems to me to be a bit out of touch with the reality of where those universities are or what the reality is'.

Another barrier is the fact that it is somehow expected by all kinds of evaluation schemes that social impact must relate to research results and their publication. For example, the most recent Slovak evaluation attempt to measure universities' social impacts requires linking social impacts to a concrete research project (!). Plaček *et al*. (2024, p. 2644) also highlight this issue: 'The fact that I work (as a volunteer) at the level of a United Nations committee is neither reflected by the Slovak R&D evaluation system, nor by internal mechanisms of my university'. It is obvious that the central level, but in many cases also the university and faculty management levels, do not fully understand social impact and its importance (Plaček *et al*., 2024).

On the 'demand' side, one might expect that central and local governments would regularly require and use university capacities to help to develop economic and social spheres, and to deliver effective evidence-based policies. However, there is sufficient evidence that such cooperation is primarily rhetorical and that the real impact of social science programmes on socio-economic development is marginal. The EUPACK reports (European Commission, 2022) and many academic articles clearly confirm that evidence and co-creation (triple-helix) based policy-making suffers from significant deficiencies in most countries in the CEE region.

4. Academic impacts: non-ethical behaviour

It is obvious and fully apparent that using the performance formula in financing universities generates visible adaptation strategies at all levels. The total volume of research outputs (academic publications) increased visibly in our region, and no doubt existing performance financing schemes contributed to this.

However, too many pervasive effects were generated by too much (improper) stress on academic publishing in the performance schemes (especially if such schemes remain unchanged for too long). Unfortunately, existing formulas motivate mechanical and, several times, unethical increases in publication output. For example, the mechanical 'principle' is evident in economic sciences today. A 'standard' economic article collects some data (solves the problem if it is unreliable), processes it with a computer program, and delivers the calculation results, without any discussion. Some economists even go so far as claiming that the reality is unimportant, but that the formulas are.

The scale and scope of unethical practices, which must be published as much as possible is comprehensive. The rectors and the deans, for example, in Slovakia, still accept the

publishing by staff in 'predatory' or 'grey' journals, as the government pays for this via the performance financing scheme (Pisár and Šipikal, 2018). Moreover, this issue is occasionally ventilated in the media and presented as bad practice. Who is responsible for the large-scale problematic publications of CEE academicians—publishers who try to publish as much as possible, or academia, trying to publish as much as possible? There is no 'supply' without 'demand'. It is academia that created publishing factories, like MDPI.

Other typical gaming strategies (Plaček *et al*., 2024) are increasing the number of authors per publication, participation in predatory conferences with indexed proceedings, publishing monographs with problematic publishers, publishing in authors' own faculty journals or even creating their own journals abroad, hiring external researchers who are not involved in the actual running of the faculty but are only tasked with generating publications because the internal members of the departments are not capable of doing so, or exchanging publications (one real author, many formally claimed authors) and citations within a circle of authors.

In Western countries, existing performance financing schemes also deliver visible pervasive effects, but they are not on a scale comparable to our CEE region. The higher level of academic ethics should be behind this fact. The unethical practice is evident online today, as anybody can visit the profile of a selected researcher in Clarivate, Scopus, Google Scholar, and other schemes. However, this does not prevent some CEE academicians from doing problematic things. Is it normal that a social science academician has 50 Clarivate registered publications in one year? Is it normal for an article on banking to be quoted in biology journals? Certainly not, but this still happens.

5. Conclusions

There is no doubt (at least for the author) that universities should balance their social and academic impact as well as possible. University programmes in technical sciences and social sciences have/ should have the potential to influence socio-economic development at the central, regional, and local levels. However, this expectation is not a systemic reality in the CEE region (at least in most of its countries) and also seems worldwide.

This article suggests that limited academic ethics and imperfect performance financing schemes result in too much stress on the academic impact, leaving 'good teaching' and working for society behind – even in public universities financed from taxpayers' money. 'Q1' and 'Q2' may be the most important expressions for many universities and their management. However, this is not correct. Can we return back to reality, or is the 'publish or perish' principle is here for ever?

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