Transforming higher education spaces through ethical research publication: a critique of the publish or perish aphorism

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Abstract

The publish or perish aphorism declares publishing a condition for survival in academe. It resonates with the imperatives of neoliberalism that privilege individual success, entrepreneurship, prestige, promotion and monetary gain. In this paper we use the concept 'aphorism' to refer to the phrase 'publish or perish' in order to draw attention to how it has been universalised as 'a general truth about the world' (Samadova 2020) of research and publication in higher education while it is actually subject to debate. It 'signifies a doctrine according to which the destiny of an academic depends exclusively on success in publishing scholarly work […]' (Moosa 2018). In other words, it is fast becoming a litmus test for academic identity, rather than one element of it. According to this saying, academics lose academic respect, acknowledgement or creditworthiness (Brown 2015) if they fail to publish as much research as possible (in a short space of time). While some researchers have identified debates about the legitimacy of 'publish or perish' as it pertains to researchers' desire to write and the ethical obligation to disseminate knowledge (Heron, Gravett & Yakovchuk 2020), there are still oversights in such debates. In this theoretical paper, we engage multidisciplinary literature to reflect on some such oversights. We analyse how it contributes to various kinds of exclusions and how it can jeopardise the relation between research and social justice. Our analysis also relates to Bruce Macfarlane's *Think Piece* for HECU2022 as we address the issue of trustworthiness of research published in the rush to avoid perishing. We attend to the ethics related to what Macfarlane calls 'faking' in research to expose its violence, not only to the researchers' credibility, but also to the communities and individuals from whom research is conducted. The ultimate goal of the paper is to propose a more transformed and democratic approach to research and publishing, for the sake of ethics, justice and fairness.

Keywords

Research publication, neoliberalism, human capital, research ethics, research faking