

The fierce world of academia

An examination of the competitive environment which surrounds
academia through the lens of academic capitalist and academic self-
governance

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Abstract

Universities within the Netherlands try to be valuable for society. This is done through a variety of means, one being the publishing of academic research. Yet many structural, cultural, personal and economic factors play a role in the process that is research. Within this thesis I have looked at the implicit knowledge of academic research. To do this I have used two concepts from the literature: **Academic capitalism** and **academic self-governance**. Through the usage of these concepts, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with academics who are currently involved with research activities within the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). These participants range from PHD candidates to full professors. Through the interviews I found that the high level of competition within academia has the following negative consequences: 1) competition discourages cooperation between academics working on the same topics, 2) research topics with existing infrastructures and interested groups are prioritized, 3) It creates a work and reward system which undervalues any type of facilitating, supporting or teaching activities researchers do and, 4) academics experience large amounts of anxiety and stress due to the high amount of competition. Issues such as publishing, funding and the networks of academics are also discussed. Within the thesis some points are further elaborated on such as the mental health of academics, the function of transdisciplinary work, the role of non-academics in research and conflicts of interest within commercial funding. The study concludes that although science contributes much towards society, the current system surrounding academia is not beneficial towards the development of these contributions.

Keywords: academic capitalism, academic self-governance, neoliberalism, university research activities

Introduction

The relation that science and society have to one another is complex. Through scientific research and discovery solutions for societal problems can be found, yet the process surrounding the production of knowledge is complicated. There are a multitude of factors which shape research. Within this study I hope to be able to examine a few. I believe this to be of interest as factors influencing the research process are very consequential for the production of knowledge. Knowledge gained or created by academics and universities is then used to inform, legitimate and justify decisions which have a large impact on people's life. The production of knowledge at universities is often funded by public money and thus can rightly be expected to be helpful for societal problem-solving (Fecher et al., 2021). The role that academics hold when generating socially relevant insight has been studied (Lindgreen et al., 2021), yet the way in which the research process is affected by elements such as disciplinary tradition, university research policy, funding and a researcher's network is understudied. Institutes such as universities, government bodies, funding organization and academic journals play an important role in forming this environment of implicit knowledge. The influence of these factors will reflect on the research by the interpretations and navigations made by a researcher. This is why my main interest within this thesis will be on the experiences of researchers.

Until around the 80s of the previous century the focus of universities has been on offering education to citizens (Zomer, Benneworth, 2011). Within this context the role of academics has been to teach as well as to produce research. Although seemingly two different roles, some consider the education offered at universities as 'education through research' (Simons, 2006). This way of doing allowed academics much freedom within deciding the curriculum and their research activities. This double role of academics has persisted until the present, yet the aims and goals of universities have been shifting. Since the 80s universities have been increasingly expected to play a role within regional development and economic growth. Due to this shift of objectives, there are currently many questions surrounding legitimacy, governance, marketisation and internationalization of universities (Zomer, Benneworth, 2011; Shore, 2010). The way in which academics and research should contribute towards these new goals is also unclear. This is important to scrutinize since:

“Social impact of research is a subject loaded with political objectives, financial interests and epistemological positions. The dependency of universities and many institutes for basic research on public funding makes them vulnerable for pressures to show ‘value for money’ in terms of social impacts” (SIAMPI, 2011, p. 9).

As stated by the association for Dutch academic universities (VSNU), the role of universities should be to “give academic education from a high standard, enact research which is of the same high standard and through this build a strong knowledge society” (VSNU, 2022). The association for universities of applied sciences (VH) sees their role as one of “societal bridgebuilder” (VH, 2017). Academic universities and universities of applied sciences are both trying to underline their role as not only regional or national institutes but also as international players who are able to ‘contribute’ to international companies, the Netherlands and other partner countries (VH and VSNU, 2015). This conception of universities as value creators and ‘contributors’ is not only shared by overarching organizations, but it is also the case for individual institutes. The Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) is also vocal in its wish to be valuable for and engaged with society. This is visible within mission and vision statements, social media activity and its statement of values (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2022).

Universities want to create a positive social impact. Universities have influence on society and can have an important role to play when promoting well-being and prosperity for instance (Moriau, 2020; VH, 2017; VSNU, 2022). Yet within a university many different interests are represented. Academics still hold a certain amount of power within the production of knowledge through a variety of means. They have a degree of autonomy when producing studies, are the ones reviewing other studies and have positions on grant review committees. This means any research produced is always judged through the lens of academic values and disciplinary culture. The way in which **academic self-governance** plays a role within the production of knowledge cannot be understated (De Boer et al., 2007). Yet universities are publicly funded institutions and therefore can be put under political or public pressure. In recent years this has led towards a situation in which the development of more neoliberal ideals have been prevalent. Due to this the market has gained a more central role within funding and evaluating research and its applications. For

academics the consequence of more neoliberal ideals within society has led towards **academic capitalism**. This entails academics acting within highly competitive environments towards the production of knowledge which often prioritizes enhancing economic growth or short-term safety (Hackett, 2014; Slaughter, Leslie, 2001).

I will try to examine the experiences of researchers through these two opposing concepts. Both concepts are influential within contemporary research and are of academic and social relevance. Both concepts dictate a specific way in which research should be produced, articulated and be of value. Although never explicit, both concepts and their outcomes play a role within the production of academic studies. They are an ever-present factor which influences what is studied, how things are studied, by who it is studied and for who it is studied. Understanding this influence can not only be informative for academics but also for the university policies on research. When looking at the social relevance, research is used to inform the public as well as policies made on regional, national and the international level. Research is very consequential in deciding which 'tools' are in the toolbox. These 'tools' are then used to influence the world in which everybody lives. Through understanding how the research process is shaped by academic capitalism and academic self-governance I hope to understand how research can best be used to the benefit of society as a whole. Within this thesis I interview individuals who do research at the EUR to find out the following: *How do academic capitalism and academic self-governance shape the public role of research?*

Academic capitalism and academic self-governance

I will start with a short history on the development of the university within the welfare state. The development of the welfare state was partly due to a desire by authorities to promote national solidarity (Giddens, 1994). Education was seen as something which was a desirable for all and therefore, the ability for all to attend university was seen as an important objective. Since education was the main focus of the university, research was not seen as an important point to take into account and thus academics were mostly left to govern themselves. Through funding by the welfare state, citizens could get an education through which they were able to have a better understanding of the world surrounding them consequently creating prosperity (Kwiek, 2006). The wealth produced through this system was seen as valuable to society, as within this system there was not a big difference between individual wealth, the wealth of a community and national wealth (Kwiek, 2006; Meeropol, 1991). Through pragmatic, economic and ideological motives the traditional state-centered governing arrangement of universities has been changing (De Boer et al., 2007). A main reason for this was the rising number of students applying for universities (Kwiek, 2006; Lorenz, 2012). The increased costs combined with an ideological pivot led towards privatization, deregulation and austerity measures within the Dutch public sector (De Boer et al., 2007). These changes took place under a new governance paradigm: neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a multi-faceted concept which works on many different levels (Larner, 2003). There are many different definitions for neoliberalism as a concept depending on the discipline it is studied through (Ganti, 2014). As universities have mostly been affected by

neoliberalism as a form of governance, I will follow the definition of Steger and Roy (2010). they consider neoliberalism to be:

“a mode of governance that embraces the idea of the self-regulating free market, with its associated values of competition and self-interest, as the model for effective and efficient government” (p. 12).

The way of management inspired by neoliberalism is known as new public management (Lorenz, 2012). Through this style of management many economic, cultural and political changes have been taking place at universities (Larner, 2003). Universities have shifted closer towards functioning as commercial enterprise instead of public institutions. This paradigm shift did have opponents due to the fear that the development of commercial interests within higher educational institutes could lead to a change of the image of universities and weaken academic values (McMillen, 1991). A report published by the VSNU states that investment into research done at Dutch universities is decreasing yet the share of private investment is increasing (Prestaties in perspectief, 2012). This increase of private funding has not only been seen in the Netherlands, but in institutes across Europe (Parker, 2012). Within Dutch higher education the money funding research has primarily been increasing through international organizations, yet the reliance on commercial investment is dependent on the specific situation of individual university (Rathenau institute, 2020). When assessing universities partnership with private companies in the tourism sector, it has been noted that the knowledge which is used is mostly decided upon by business elite (Thomas, 2012). This shows that not only are researchers more often privately funded but the findings of research are also beginning to be interpreted by market actors. All of this is to say that under the new public management research institute activities are being relegated towards economic stimulation (Benneworth, Jongbloed, 2009).

Since the eighties the neoliberal idea of a small state with a large market has become more prevalent. This directly affected the public sector and consequently, the educational sector (Lorenz, 2012). Through a discourse of crisis many austerity measures were and are taken within the public sector (Ramirez, Hyslop-Margison, 2015). Through government austerities, universities where and are increasingly expected to become more able to be self-financing. A consequence of this is the increasing number of international students within higher education institutes around the world. The main reason for this is that it diversifies income streams of universities, which supports their new aim of becoming financially self-sufficient (Sharipov, 2020). This aim puts the focus on efficiency and graduation rates instead of the quality of education (Lorenz, 2012). This has led to a system in which student numbers are on the rise, yet expenditure per students gets lower each year (Prestaties in perspectief, 2012). This is one of the many examples of the way in which the neoliberal paradigm has affected the actions of universities. This is indicative of the shift from a focus on the liberating of citizens as the universities function towards the function of creating commercial value (Saunders, 2007; Shore, 2010). A consequence of neoliberalism in research is the development of academic capitalism.

Academic capitalism entails the involvement of universities and faculties in market-like behavior (Saunders, 2007; Slaughter, Leslie, 2001). This is exemplified in the commercialization of university activities, such as knowledge created at universities being

sold to business, the creation of spin-off companies to sell expertise and research, institutes competing for funds or other activities specifically focused on the generation of revenue streams (Saunders, 2007; Slaughter, Leslie, 2001). Slaughter and Leslie (2001) argue that, because of university staff being increasingly expected to expend human capital in a competitive environment, they become state sponsored entrepreneurs. Through these market activities universities are restructured into institutes in which the gaining of outside capital is necessary to remain operational (Hackett, 2014; Slaughter, Leslie, 2001). Through this the capitalist market system gains influence over what is and should be researched. Through the influence of capitalism, research is focused on that which enhances economic performance or measures of security instead of issues such as well-being or the gaining of more fundamental knowledge (Hackett, 2014). Another issue which arises out of this competition for universities to gain investment is that it is not equally divided between universities. The top of universities have suffered from overinvestment while the majority of universities suffer from underinvestment (Münc, 2014). An element shared by neoliberalism and academic capitalism is the way in which a power imbalance is created thus putting students, academics and others into a precarious position (Jessop, 2018).

Although neoliberalism and academic capitalism have gained influence when deciding the course of research done at institutes, many of the older university structures build around academic self-governance are still functioning. These structures function through the researchers' intellectual curiosity, disciplinary traditions and the research policy created by the faculty or university (Lewis, 2013). The structures of academic self-governance are best described by Clarke (1983) as 'academic oligarchies'. With this naming he not only tries to address the high power position of specific academics but also the role that academic interpersonal relations play within these structures (Clarke, 1983). Although this mode of governance centralizes power with a set of specific individuals, it does feature a form of community decision making which contrasts the top-down decision making which is more characteristic of new public management (Park, 2013). Research within the organization of more contemporary structures of Dutch universities have found that more traditional modes of state regulation and academic self-governance have lost some ground to the new public management, yet this should be viewed more in terms of a shift in balance (De Boer et al., 2007). nonetheless, it can be stated that the university has been strengthened to be able to act as a corporate actor in the last 20 years (De Boer et al., 2007). Within the current system the executive board has both the responsibility for academic and management matters. Although the university council, consisting of student and staff, still have an advisory role, many of the more consequential powers have been removed in the last 20 years (Amaral et al., 2013). Eventually, the changes within the power structure of the university have led to a system in which the executive board holds much control over all aspects of the university. They are able to decide the course of the university to a considerable extent.

Academic self-governance forms an interesting contrast to academic capitalism as the main influence on what kind of research is done and why this research is done. This is very consequential for research as it also influences the way in which academic values such as independence, thoughtfulness and critical analysis are upheld (Boud, 1990). When relating the concepts towards this research we need to operationalize them to make them

useable for the construction of an interview guide. As stated previously, academic self-governance encompasses the dimensions of intellectual curiosity, disciplinary tradition and research policy (Lewis, 2013). When operationalizing these dimensions, it can be stated that intellectual curiosity is the intrinsic motivation held by the researcher for a specific topic. Disciplinary tradition can best be seen as a set of organizing principles which are indicative of the disciplinary culture. This set of norms and values are enforced within research through the peer reviewing process. The way in which faculties are divided can also be traced back towards disciplinary tradition. Research policy can be seen as the way in which local, national and international policy interests steer research activities through funding or performance assessments. The executive boards of universities have an important role in translating these policy interest towards, for instance, strategic pillars which influence individual studies (Lewis, 2013).

Within the work of Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) the dimensions described within academic capitalism are networks and practices. Networks entail new circuits of knowledge and networks that intermediate between academia and private companies. An example would be a think tank. Contrary to academic self-governance this not only mixes individuals from different fields but also academics with non-academics (Clarke, 1983; Slaughter, Rhoades, 2004). Practices are mostly seen in investment and marketing activities. The most disastrous consequence of these practices can be found within the medical world in which there are some examples of research that has been influenced by market actor to positively reflect on specific medication (Brennan et al., 2006). Practice also includes the way in which academics need to compete with one another. The role of self-interest regarding the competitive element of academia is also a point of interest as it is a clear indicator of the neoliberalism (Roger, Steger, 2010; Slaughter, Rhoades, 2004).

To research a researcher

I will be examining researchers who are currently involved within research activities at the EUR. I chose researchers from the EUR for the following reasons: 1) the EUR is a university with a limited number of faculties. This allows me to analyse a research university which comparatively less complexity than other Dutch research universities, 2) unlike many older universities, the EUR has been a more corporate university from its inception. This can be ascertained through its clear roots within economics and business and 3) through being a student of the EUR I can more easily get in contact with individuals who do research at the EUR. Within this study I will make use of semi-structured interviews. An interview guide will be made for this based on the two main concepts and the five dimensions they encompass. I will select my participants by emailing individuals who are listed on the EUR webpage under collaborating with our researchers. The individuals who are listed as external will not be contacted since I am focusing on researcher from the EUR. The interviews can be conducted both online and in person as this allows for necessary flexibility when fitting the interviews within the busy schedules of the participants.

Within the process of contacting the participants and interviewing them I adhered to the following principals: mutual respect, non-coercion, non-manipulation, the avoidance of

harm and the importance of informed consent. These ethical principles will then be used to guide my action within the research but will not be used to form ethical judgment (Hammersley, 2015). Before the data collection process started or participants were contacted an ethical checklist has been filled in for the department of public administration and sociology of the EUR. This ethical checklist includes the usage of ethical principles as mentioned above, the storage of data and the confidentiality of private information. The checklist itself is included within this thesis as appendix 1.

A total of 5 interviews have been done which lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Although aiming for doing most interviews in person, I was sadly only able to do one interview in person. The other interviews were conducted via teams. The participants interviewed all had differing positions within the EUR. This ranges from PHD candidates to full professors. After the interviews I had the feeling that I had captured a large variety of experiences at different stages within individuals academic careers. This was something I was not necessarily aiming for and therefore I was pleasantly surprised. The interviews themselves went smoothly as it turned out that all participants had a personal interest in the topics. The recordings of the interviews were summarized. From these summarizations interesting points were taken and are explored within the following section.

The interviews

During the interviews it became clear that intellectual curiosity played a part within all interviewees motivation to do research. Some concrete ways in which this took shape were curiosity through familiar ties, interest from work field experience, a desire and belief that the topic of research would be something socially valuable or an interest into the relation between the current topic of study and previous studies and developed theories. Although all interviewees stated their personal interest to be of importance, this was not the primary consideration when seeking topics to study, writing proposals or when applying for positions. All interviewees understood that for them to succeed in getting funding, engaging with other academics and to eventually publish, they had to adapt towards the criteria set by grant organizations, universities, journals and other academics. These organisations have research policies they need to adhere to and this can undermine the intellectual curiosity of a researcher. As one interviewee stated:

‘Sometimes to fit within the criteria you end up with something you don’t want to do.’

All interviewees found finding a balance between their own interest and fitting within the framework a sometimes difficult dilemma. Most saw resolving this dilemma as an iterative process. This entails personal interest leading to certain number of possible topics, which each have a number of funding opportunities. The researcher then has to adjust the initial interest to fit within the criteria of the specific organization providing the funding. Once funding was gained the interviewees felt like they had a reasonable amount of autonomy when performing the research. This then leads to the next step in which peer reviewers and academic journal standards are crucial in determining the final content and appearance of

the study. Eventually this process hopefully lead to publication. Fitting within these criteria often involves a performance in which a proposal, for instance, is tailored specifically towards the interest of the funding organization. As an interviewee said while talking about writing a proposal:

'I look for something in which I am interested, yet which at the same time is also perceived as sexy'

A problem with this is that what is 'sexy' is subjective. Another interviewee talked about how roughly 50 percent of proposals are generally of good quality, yet the personal interest of commission members can be a deciding factor. The final decision of who gets funding can be very arbitrary. She saw this as detrimental deciding factors since this is not related to the quality or virtue of the potential research. Although individual researchers play a large role in shaping their work and career, other academics are also invaluable for successful publishing.

Academics can be of significance to one another as sparring partners. Although sometimes through formal channels, such as performance reviews with supervisors, most interviewees said this often occurs within informal situations referred to as 'water cooler chats'. Although described as valuable, the interviewees felt like these informal chats happened rarely, due to the time pressure which they experienced. They felt like they had to do their work in a 'rushed' way and didn't have time for these kinds of chats. This was especially the case with one interviewee higher in the university hierarchy. This interviewee said the following:

'At this point in research, if you are a successful researcher, you are basically a manager.'

This is referring to the way in which his tasks were mostly guiding others in doing research, while doing little research himself. He also did not have much contact with peers. This is a shame as most interviewees found these informal chats helpful for two reasons. First, this helped them check for any possible oversights or blind spots they might have. This was mostly the case with individuals who were working in the same field and understood the disciplinary tradition. Secondly, it has the possibility to help them see issues from a different perspective. One interviewee stated that this happened since someone from a different field does not hold the same knowledge on the topic as he does. This meant he had to think about the topic in a different way to be able to explain it to the other. The questions he got in return were based on the concerns found within the other's disciplinary tradition. These were sometimes issues he had not yet thought about. This exemplifies that the function informal chats have depends on the distance the researcher's fields have to one another. If the fields are relatively close to one another, checking for blind spots was more common, while if the fields are further away from one another it could allow for the development of new perspectives. The value of peers close to one's field as well as those further away from one's expertise was acknowledged by all researchers interviewed. Yet contact between academics from differing fields is not commonplace. Most interviewees found that they did not have many contacts with which they spoke regularly that were not in their discipline. The way in which faculties are divided, conferences or workshops are organized and journals publish leads to academics having a professional network which almost exclusively exists

out of academics from the same discipline or sub-discipline. Not only does this network not involve other academics, most interviewees barely had any non-academics within their professional network. Interviewees stated that some connection with organizations did exist but these were always based on necessity. One interviewee who was at the start of her career made it clear that she felt that having a network with others in her field had priority over developing a broader network. This way she could learn more about her chosen field and become more knowledgeable. The connections could also help her get funding and recognitions as people within the discipline were also the ones on grant commissions. These kinds of closely interwoven networks surrounding discipline or sub-disciplines are more characteristic of networks within academic self-governance than academic capitalism, since within academic capitalism networks partly function as intermediates between academics and private companies (Slaughter, Rhoades, 2004).

The relation academics have to one another has also been described as dual. Researchers are colleagues yet they are also each other's competition. Peers have a very useful role, yet one interviewee also described that he had to be careful what he said on conferences. He thought that sharing his full knowledge on a topic could be harmful to his career. If the academic he shared his knowledge with would publish a paper on the same topic as him before him, he might not be able to publish his paper. This discourages academics to cooperate since oversharing once knowledge could lead to a competitive disadvantage. This promotes undesirable behavior such as stealing ideas, taking credit for others work and overselling once ability or research. As succinctly stated by one interviewee:

'We are encouraged to be self-interested.'

Self-interest is beneficial for researchers as funding can be more easily be gained if one has a lot of publications or is cited a lot. One interviewee described research like playing a game. Most researcher play because they enjoy the game and compete within it to keep playing. This competitive side of academia is something felt clearly by all interviewees and leads to a large amount of stress and anxiety for all of them. Even though one interviewee already had tenure he still stated that he feels like he needs keep being productive to survive. This same interviewee state that he thought other academics enjoyed competing more than playing. He stated that those are the ones more often gaining funding or being promoted. They would see other academics as competitors.

Within the interviews I also discussed those deciding the rules of the 'game'. When discussing the research policies within the EUR and its faculties concerning funding, one interviewee plainly stated that the only true criteria was the chance of getting published. The focus on publishing has some negative consequences. This means funding and time is mostly devoted to existing fields of knowledge which have an infrastructure of existing journals in which one can publish. This sidelines the relevance and merit research has outside of academic circles. As one interviewee said:

'It creates pockets of peer who protect each other and have a mutual interest in keeping a specific area of research alive.'

When questioned about this he also stated the opposite to be true. Any underdeveloped or non-popular field might not attract research funding due to the chances of publishing being

lower. This means that new societal developments might not be researched adequately due to it not being 'trendy' or fitting within current academic thought. This also leads to a system in which academics who have published before can more easily get funding. This is due to them having a proven track record and thus being a safer bet to publish. They understand the audience which they are writing to and how to touch upon the issues important to this audience. If young academics do not publish much early in their career, they will have a much harder time gaining any funding later on, as other candidates will have a competitive advantages. This not only causes more work pressure and stress, it also undermines the ability of academics to devote time towards non-academic activities. One interviewee talked about him and a colleague having an idea to publish one of their articles with extra explanations and without jargon. This way people without a scholarly background could make use of their research. This is something which didn't happen as it would mean they would devote time to something which does not advance their careers, recognition or citation numbers. This would make it harder for them to continue doing academic research and possibly endanger their livelihoods. This is a good example of how the competitive nature of academia leads to loss of value for society.

Other funding opportunities with direct links to governments are of course available, such as the NOW talent program. One of the parts of this program, called the Veni subsidy, has the advantage that it focusses on academics who are at an early stage within their career and therefore diminishes the competitive nature of getting funding. However, the Veni does expect the academic to be able to show how their research would be beneficial toward the academic's personal development and be socially relevant. Even though this funding might be more accessible, only a fraction of proposal eventually gets funding. Another way of getting funding ,which was discussed, was funding via commercial routes. None of the interviewees talked with much eagerness about this kind of funding for two reasons. First, there is much less room within commercially funded research for new discovery. One interviewee commented on this by stating that she felt like private funders wanted the purpose of research to be narrower and more specific then public funding. There needed to be a clear goal and practical use. This limits the scope of any commercially funded research. The second and perhaps bigger problem is that commercial investment can make fertile grounds for conflicts of interest. This was reflected on by all interviewees and has led to a negative opinions on commercially funded researches being held by most. Yet although public funding might seem like the better alternative, most interviewees found that the difference between both kinds of funding is decreasing. This was stated to be the case due to governments wanting to make it easier for research to be used by companies and for the boosting of economic growth. This would entail a direct link between money spend on research and a conception of societal value. When speaking on the strategic pillar of innovation within the EUR, one interviewee said:

'Most innovation talked about at the EUR is just old wine in new bottles.'

Through the encroachment of academic capitalism within the universities and governmental organization the focus on research is no longer on producing that which is desirable but that which is attainable and advantages for economic growth on the short term.

Relating the results to academic capitalism and academic self-governance

From the interviews it is clear that academic capitalism plays a large role in the different aspects of doing research at the EUR. I will relate the interview results back towards academic capitalism through the notions of competition, funding and publishing. I will also reflect on academic self-governance through the role of peers and academic networks.

When discussing competition within academia, many disadvantages were stated: 1) competition discourages cooperation between academics working on the same topics, 2) research topics with existing infrastructures and interested groups are prioritized, 3) It creates a work and reward system which undervalues any type of facilitating, supporting or teaching activities researchers do and, 4) academics experience large amounts of anxiety and stress due to the high amount of work pressure. One of the consequences of the high level of competition is that researchers feel like they have to keep producing work to survive. One interviewee stated he felt like this even though he had tenure. This is not accidental but by design as previous studies have noted that putting individuals within precarious positions is a feature of academic capitalism (Jessop, 2018). Due to being in this precarious position, researchers feel like they are forced to stay productive and keep publishing. This can lead to a decrease in the quality of research as within other research the high level of competition and work pressure have been linked towards more research being fabricated or falsified (Gopalakrishna et al., 2022). This highlights how high levels of competition are detrimental to the quality and trustworthiness of research. The high level of competition also influences the behavior of researchers as employees of a university. One interviewee stated that the best way of gaining promotion was to apply for a position at another universities. If the other university would be willing to take you this means an outside actor has confirmed your value. This may prompt your own institute to offer you a better position since otherwise you might be poached away. Not only does this underline the competition between universities, but this also reaffirms Slaughter and Leslie's (2001) notion that researchers are more like state sponsored entrepreneurs. Although these academics are employed by the public sector, they are expected to expend human capital within a competitive environment. Through them developing as individuals and therefore becoming more valuable for other institutes they become more autonomous from the university that employs them.

During the interviews it became clear to me that the EUR is an institute which does a lot of research on social issues, which has multiple implications for funding: 1) The amount of commercial funding within the EUR is limited, 2) the perceptions by interviewees on commercial funding is negative and 3) most of the funding that is given for research is used to pay for salaries. Within my interviews it was clear that none of the researchers I spoke to have gained or knew people who gained commercial fundings. The reasons given for this is that social research has a the low appeal for commercial companies as it is harder for the results to be explicitly useful. Within my literature is already discussed the uneven distribution of commercial investment based on the status of the university (Münch, 2014). The findings within this study would point towards another factor within the division of private

funding, namely one between social research institutes and applied or technical institutes. This division might also be caused by the academics within the social research institutes, as they have a rather negative opinion of commercially funded research. Even though this would put public funding in a comparatively positive light, this is not necessarily the case as interviewees noted that the difference between commercial and public funding has decreased. Goals within public funding have become more stringent, short sighted and based on cooperation with companies or in support of economic growth. Although the amount of commercial funding within the EUR is limited and the objectives behind public funding are dubious, the EUR still relies heavily on outside funding. All researchers interviewed stated that most of their funding went to paying their own or others salary. This was stated to be due to the low costs, besides of salaries, of doing social research. This reinforces the need for outside funding to keep the EUR operational since without researchers providing the funding for their own salary there teaching activities would have to be paid for by the EUR itself. This would fall in line with Hackett's (2014) point that within the modern university outside funding is a requirement to stay functional.

As discussed, universities are in competition with one another. One of the main points which universities compete over is funding (Saunders, 2007). An interviewee stated that a metrics which is important for a university, in regards to competing with one another, is publications and citations. Through this they can distinguish themselves from other universities. This puts the main focus of faculties and universities on publishing as much as possible. One interviewee thought this could have the effect of creating 'pockets of peers' (PoP). He explained this as an academic ecosystem in which a select group of academics has a mutual interest in keeping an area of research alive. Through academics within this ecosystem functioning as gatekeepers through their roles as peer reviewers and the universities facilitated this by a focus on publications and citations over social relevant research, a PoP can be created and sustained. This PoP does not necessarily contribute towards society but functions to gain funding and to publish. Another consequence of universities focus on publications is that academics are encouraged to be self-interested. Publishing and gaining credit for publishing is necessary to advance one's career. This incentivizes academics to take as much credit as possible, oversell their own research and undervalue other research. It also discourages academics putting their focus on activities outside of publishing, such as teaching. Although once established academics have more freedom to explore their own interest, when starting out none can avoid this highly competitive system in which self-interest is promoted and rewarded.

Academic capitalism has taken its toll on academia, yet it would be untrue to state that these changes are purely based within the new public management of institutes. Many of the underlying problems stem from the strong disciplinary traditions and hierarchy of academic self-governance. As one interviewee stated, although universities can partly decide the direction of their research activity, the most important ones deciding the direction of future research are other academics. They are the ones peer reviewing studies and deciding for which projects funding is given. Through this powerful position they decide on the norms and values which are enforced. To become one of the 'academic oligarchs' (Clarke, 1983), one has to stay invested within a specific field and/or topic. This hinders connection between academia and social issues as social issues are never within one field or

contained to one topic. The rate with which societal issue change is also faster than the speed at which research adapts to it. Being valuable for solving societal problems and advancing ones career sadly have less overlap then would be desirable.

A second problem with academic self-governance is that the networks and connection made are based within the university or between universities. This is contrary to the functioning of networks within academic capitalism. Through the specific norms and values decided on by peers, disciplines become segregated and this leads towards encouraging networks within a certain discipline instead of outside of it. The number of societal actors, be they NGO's, governments, municipalities, companies, or members of the general public, within academic circles are negligible. Interviewees who did have contact outside of the university made these contacts only based on necessity. Through this segregation and self-isolation academia is out of touch with society. This way academic self-governance has not been conducive to generating societal value. Through academic capitalism contacts and networks are made outside of the university, yet these are made with a conception of societal value in mind which entails cooperation with companies for the generation of economic growth. Although the conception of societal value as economic growth is neoliberal in nature, the existing structures within academia lacked a strong connection with society and thus it was also easy for a new governance paradigm, such as neoliberalism, to shape the relation research has to society.

Discussing the implications

When looking at the findings many interesting implications spring from it. With the help of some additional literature, I explore the issues of academics mental health, the role of transdisciplinary work and the networks of academics outside of academia.

Within this research I have found that academics experience a high amount of anxiety, stress and time pressure. This has also been found in other studies (Santos, Doherty, 2017; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Interestingly, most studies done on these topics focused on stress in relation to burnouts (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). This could imply that the stress and anxiety experienced by academics are only important enough to research once it has the potential to lead to a loss of productivity. The way in which researchers are managed also has a large influence on their well-being. Another study compared performance management to enabling performance management. Performance management is underpinned by theories which focus on financial success, rational individuals and self-interest while enabling performance managements is underpinned by trust, moral commitment to a job and a collaborative way of setting goals (Santos, Doherty, 2017). When concluding on performance management within their study, Santos and Doherty (2017) stated:

“The more academics perceive the use of directive performance management practices such as performance measures and targets, the worse they feel in terms of stress and vitality” (p. 35).

The strict goal-oriented focus of performance measurement is a consequence of the new public management of public institutes and is related to the negative consequence of pressure to publish also discussed within this study. Creating a work environment in which practises such as greater consultation, communication, resources, excellence recognition and opportunities for development are prevalent could help relieve stress felt by academics (Santos, Doherty, 2017).

A second issue within current academia is the specialization and disciplinary boundaries found within existing universities and academic journal frameworks. These can be seen within faculty division, academic journal's focus on discipline over topic, grant organisation's criteria or the networks academics have. I believe this type of specialization and disciplinary boundaries are not conducive towards societal problem solving as many problems in contemporary time could be described as 'wicked'. 'wicked' problems can be seen as problems which are complex in nature and involve many different actors, examples being climate change, soil degradation or food security (Gillis et al., 2017; Bouma, 2015). Through the high complexity and discipline overlapping nature of such problems monodisciplinary research cannot adequately aid solving such problems. Yet there is some hope as the amount of funding which is invested in transdisciplinary research has been increasing and there are an increasing number of transdisciplinary journals, such as the International Journal of Transdisciplinary Research and the Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science (Gillis et al., 2017). There are still issues surrounding transdisciplinary work such as the development of a suitable methodology (Bernstein, 2015). Another issue which hinders the development of transdisciplinary research discussed within this study is the low amount of exposure academics have to other disciplines. Through the system currently discouraging contacts outside one's own discipline it consequently also makes transdisciplinary work more difficult as researchers are less knowledgeable about the concerns, issues or work methods employed by their colleague and peers in other fields. Gaining this knowledge could become easier if the faculty division weren't necessarily based on discipline and building contact outside of one's own discipline was incentivised instead of discouraged.

The third issue I will consider is the networks of academics outside of academia. Within this study I found that contact outside of academia do exist, yet within the EUR these are based on necessity. Other research has found that civil servants only use academic research in exceptional circumstances. This is due to the lack of time, incentives not promoting the use of academic research or a lack of means to access such resources (Head, 2015). The solution proposed for this is to institutionalize better practises and incentives (Head, 2015). This should be adopted by both universities as well as government organisations as this could lead towards academic research being used by civil servants to develop informed policies. Even when there is cooperation between academics and non-academics, conflicts of interest can arise. There are quite some examples where medical associations have been criticized for getting large amounts of financial support from industry leaders (ESC board, 2012). Yet there are some methods to combat the negative sides of conflicts of interest, such as introducing local regulation to protect the freedom and judgement of academic researchers, set-up committees to oversee conflicts of interest or the development of university policies which shield individuals from inappropriate influences

(Hurst, Mauron, 2008; Resnik, 2015). Although these solutions might decrease the number of conflicts of interest, within the neoliberal paradigm they might not be developed or implemented properly as they interfere with corporate interests in academia. This is something which should be scrutinized carefully with an emphasis on transparency and accountability.

When we return to the main research question it is clear that academic capitalism and academic self-governance have a deep and pronounced influence on the way in which research is done at the EUR. Although academic capitalism and academic self-governance are quite different from one another, both can be detrimental towards creating valuable research for society, either through a financial short-term focus or by underprioritizing societal problems. Scientific research still contributes towards much good within society. This not because of the system but despite of it. Currently the system makes research a competitive not cooperative game. There is a need for a system which promotes selflessness not self-interest. Research funding needs to leave more space for serendipity, which cannot be given if there always has to be a practical or financial use for the findings. Academics have to not only be more in contact with other academics further away from their field of expertise but also with more parts of society. This will hopefully lead towards scientific research which can help society tackle important issues on the long-term.

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Appendix 1

CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Master thesis, sociology: engaging public issues

Name, email of student: Storm Fransen, 627822sf@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Willem Schinkel, Schinkel@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 4th of February – 19th of June

Is the research study conducted within DPAS

YES

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES

If 'NO': skip to part V.

- If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? NO

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? NO
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? NO
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? NO
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? NO
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? NO
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? NO
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? NO
8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? NO
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? NO
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Online public resources of the EUR

Interviews with individuals either online or on the campus of the Erasmus

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

Between 5-10 interview

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

Academics who are actively engaged with research activities within the EUR.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

Data storage on the short term will be done on my mobile device. This will be deleted once the thesis is passed.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Storm Fransen

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

No backups will be made

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

I will not collect any data based on the persons personal information

—

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Storm Fransen

Name (EUR) supervisor: Willem Schinkel

Date:

15/06/2022

Date: 20/03/2020

