Publish or perish thwarts young researchers’ urge to innovate

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Publish or perish thwarts young researchers’ urge to innovate

Early-career researchers constitute a vast pool of talent. They are the largest group of researchers and their numbers are growing fast. They are essential for enabling research to meet the needs of knowledge economies and, as the League of European Research Universities wrote in 2010, universities’ research crucially rests on their access “to the best talents of the rising generation and the creative influence of the irreverent young”.

Despite all this, our research has found that whatever the country and whatever their discipline, early-career researchers face a precarious work environment. Their careers entail many moves between institutions, short-term contracts and heavy workloads. The last of these stems largely from the need to fast-track academic development in a quest for scholarly reputation and tenure. It is this precariousness, as much as researchers’ age or generation, that shapes their scholarly attitudes and behaviours.

As a result, early-career researchers are stuck in the middle. They work in an unbending system of rewards and reputation. But they also inhabit a rapidly changing and enticing environment of digital scholarly communications driven by open science and social media.

On the one hand, they must adhere to the norms of academia, stifling any revolutionary thoughts about the current system. On the other hand, many are digital natives and have a natural inclination to think and behave more expansively, innovatively and publicly. The means at their disposal are changing fast, but the ends they are striving to achieve have barely budged.

The outcome reveals the tensions created by academia’s digital transition: scholarly practices, behaviours, representations, wishes and objectives are moving in many directions, while the formal frame of evaluation remains as rigid as ever—if not more so—thanks to greater levels of global competition.

Early-career researchers see the possibilities for change, but cannot act because of a lack of time and authority. These tensions and trade-offs explain the apparently contradictory findings in our study, Early Career Researchers: The harbingers of change?

Funded by the Publishing Research Consortium, an industry association, this was a three-year investigation of 116 science and social sciences researchers from 81 universities in China, France, Malaysia, Poland, Spain, the UK and the United States. Subjects were generally 35 or younger, and were either doctoral students or post-docs—none had a permanent, tenured post. They were interviewed for an hour or more in their own language. Interviews focused on early-career researchers’ attitudes and behaviours in respect to scholarly communications, and the adoption of technologies, such as social media, online communities and open science.

In general, the pressures on early-career researchers prevent them from taking the initiative in shaping how they work, especially in publishing. Instead, they follow their seniors. They avoid risk when choosing their research projects, and this extends to how they publish.

We found that early-career researchers focus almost wholly on one element of the research cycle, publication, often to the detriment of everything else. This is rational, at least until hiring, tenure and promotion requirements are expanded to include novel ways of disseminating and measuring scholarly achievement.

For the time being, all their efforts go into publishing papers in high-impact-factor journals, or at least those indexed by citation databases, such as Web of Science or Scopus. Thus, their publishing strategy is simple and myopic: publish many articles in top-tier journals, with the most prestigious co-authors and research groups.

A good number would love to move away from this overriding preoccupation with publishing papers. They do not, however, feel they have the status to change things, believing that this has to be done higher up the ladder.

Beyond publishing, many early-career researchers see outreach activities as part and parcel of their job, and many expressed their frustration at not being able to practice this activity. There is an exception among UK researchers, who are more able to reach out to practitioners, policymakers and the public, often using innovative means such as social media. This is undoubtedly due in part to the inclusion of impact beyond academia in the UK’s national research evaluation, the Research Excellence Framework, showing what can be done when the reward system is (partly) changed.

Collaboration and sharing, albeit activities long embedded in academia, are often trumpeted as scholarly activities particularly congenial to the young. We found that these are things that early-career researchers do and enjoy—and would like to see given more recognition—but not at the cost of losing a competitive edge.

They collaborate mainly because it leads to publication in top journals and gaining valuable international contacts. Collaboration is Continued on page 8

‘Pressure prevents early-career researchers from shaping how they work.’
Early-career researchers from page 7

easier than ever thanks to scholarly online networks, although conferences are still the most important way to build research alliances.

Digital tools have made sharing research almost effortless. While early-career researchers talk a lot about sharing as central to their scholarly lives, they still have to abide by the rules of academic competition. This means that there is little sharing of ideas and interim results using social media. Sharing research outputs after formal publication, in contrast, is popular.

Our picture of early-career researchers offers mixed news for publishers and bad news for libraries, the two main pillars of traditional scholarly communication. Publishers own the highly-ranked journals, but many young researchers understand little of what these companies do. Some researchers lack what we might call a publishing culture; confusing, or unable to distinguish, one publisher from another. This may be partly explained by the default use of Google Scholar rather than publisher platforms for finding and accessing papers.

The picture is more worrying for libraries, as their scholarly services seem to have lost all visibility. Many early-career researchers have not set foot in their library for years, and consider them mainly as places for undergraduates to work. As with publisher platforms, Google has supplanted their discovery systems. To make matters worse, institutional repositories are not popular, either. This poses some challenges for publishers, as they have long worked hand-in-glove with libraries.

Advocates of open-access publishing see it as a game changer, but most early-career researchers do not. Gold open access, where authors pay to make papers freely available, is universally seen as a good thing. That being said, young academics are aware of its problems, such as predatory publishers with dubious editorial practices. They are also worried that open access might tilt the playing field in favour of those who can afford to pay for it.

Distrust of open access has declined relative to earlier surveys, but our respondents still saw a journal’s prestige as its decisive attribute. Despite a growing number of funder mandates, publishing in open-access journals is not part of many publishing strategies. Green open access—depositing in institutional repositories—is done when obligatory, but there is a general lack of knowledge of and interest in repositories.

Will early-career researchers be the harbingers of change? Some academic leaders—including the League of European Research Universities, a consortium of 21 of the continent’s top research universities—hope so, believing that the young could sweep away tired and obso-

‘Many young researchers understand little of what publishing companies do.’