

Information ecosystems in early academic career building: how do researchers in the social sciences and humanities learn the tricks of the trade?

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Introduction

In this paper, we analyse “early career building information ecosystems” (ECBIEs) in the social sciences and humanities (SSH). In such information ecosystems – conceived as “complex organizations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms in flows” (Susman-Peña et al. 2015: 13) - early career investigators (ECIs) in the SSH learn how to build their career, and in particular how to deal with the various evaluation processes that constitute an essential part of their professional development. Universities are indeed “information environments” and “knowledge ecosystems” in which ECIs relate to formal, non-formal and informal resources (texts, humans, tools, cultures and environments), most often in the context of social relationships, to create experiential, personal, technical, disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge (Miller 2015).

Our analysis of ECBIEs is based on the eight “crucial dimensions” constitutive of the information ecosystem model conceptualized by Susman-Peña et al. (2015), considering the information contents as well as the context in which information flows and the perception and experience of the information users. Central to the model is the analysis of the production and movement of information. Hence specific attention will be brought to the diverse “communication channels” on which ECBIEs rely, which we define as all types of channel (human and non-human) through which information relating to early career building and evaluation processes is communicated to ECIs.

Methodology

In 2017 and 2018, 53 semi-structured interviews were conducted with ECIs (PhD + 8) from diverse SSH disciplinary fields in 14 countries around Europe (Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia) about their experience of the first stage of the academic career including the PhD period. Interviews were then content analysed through two complementary grids. The first takes the information channel as recording unit, focusing on the analysis of the types of information channels, the contents of the channelled information and the evaluation processes to which each channel relates. The other focuses on the individual researcher as recording unit and investigates ECIs’ perception of the research labour market and its level of transparency.

Preliminary results

Information needs

ECIs need information of an epistemic nature in regard to their PhD thesis completion. They also require information about how to publish successfully, in particular in the context of the first publication (article or monograph). Informed learning about grants, open positions and recruitment opportunities is deemed crucial too. There is a general perception that ECIs, whatever the country, are in need of more institutionalized professional training and career accompaniment possibilities.

Information landscape

Some national academic labour markets are perceived as being more under the influence of performance indicators and open to international competition, while others are viewed as still dominated by practices of local recruitment and inbreeding. The national academic

recruitment landscape and its history shape the information ecosystems as well (for ex. some countries having only one university, or a tradition of nepotism in academia).

Production and Movement

In regard to institutionalized and formal communication channels, the PhD director is perceived by many respondents as not providing satisfying information, regarding epistemic matters as well as the networks to incorporate. Evaluation processes themselves and review reports of articles and grants are viewed as valid communication channels, as long as they are transparent and constructive, while national regulations (including lists of qualifying journals) are sometimes seen as ever-changing and/or not properly translated by institutions. Performance indicators are perceived – in particular by ECIs from non-Western countries - as potential improvements in comparison to less transparent national labour markets, contributing to objectify professional requirements. Other respondents do not consider them as systematic guarantors of more transparency though, since they are easy to manipulate. Informal channels of communication, such as the support of “likeminded colleagues” or more generally national and international networks of peers, appear to play a crucial role in the informed learning of ECIs, in particular in the context of the first publication.

Dynamic of access

A double centre/periphery logic affects ECIs' informed learning. On the one hand, access to communication channels depends on the status under which the PhD studies were pursued, the family status and the teaching and research work balance. On the other hand, the institution's position in relation to the Western research centres affects the possibilities for ECIs to learn in an informed way about international job requirements. Other relevant factors are the availability of funds to get abroad (and to network internationally), as well as the accessibility of epistemic information through bibliographic databases.

Use of information

Communication channels relate to different evaluation situations (PhD defence, post PhD recruitment, career evaluation, peer review of publication or project). The information that ECIs receive is mostly used to seek for positions in the local, national and international labour market; to improve their publication practices, including the proper understanding of the peer reviewing system and the definition - largely grounded in perceptual knowledge - of what makes a quality publication at institutional, national and international level, both in regard to epistemic contents and choice of journal; to get involved in academic activities and conferences; to seek for available grants and funding; to improve the thesis; to learn about the networks and interpersonal relationships to be built.

Impact of information

Accessible and relevant information on evaluation criteria has a positive impact on career development of ECIs, while the lack of information on evaluation procedures mainly results in a shrinking sense of security.

Social trust and Influencers

Many respondents trust non-formal networks of likeminded peers, both at local, national and international level, while some report lack of confidence in nepotistic labour markets, or in the false transparency of performance indicators being used in support of non-merit based evaluation processes.

Discussion

ECBIEs are viewed by our respondents as fragmented, relying (too) much on non-formal or informal communication channels, while perceptual knowledge plays an important role. ECBIEs can also be unfair to those at the periphery of the geographical and/or institutional centres of knowledge production. Hence, we argue that a better understanding of ECBIEs should make it possible to promote evidence-based changes in the information provided to ECIs and empower them to engage more efficiently in career development and related evaluation processes.

References

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