

How reporting requirements can shape research activities

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Introduction

Research indicators have become more important in the management of universities and research institutions. The use of such bibliometric indicators favours some forms of scientific production more than others. The social sciences and humanities (SSH) suffer from this development because their traditions of publishing, co-authorship and citing are different than in the STEM fields, which is why bibliometricians advise against basing evaluation of SSH research on bibliometric indicators (Nederdof 2006; Hicks 2004; Hammarfelt 2016).

The importance of bibliometric research indicators comes with several issues, two of which we would like to point out: The first concerns the scope of scientific work. A focus on bibliometric indicators leads to a limited understanding of what SSH researchers do and what is important in their scientific endeavour. Currently, research quality is defined by the data and indicators available instead of the other way round: deriving indicators from what is actually to be measured (Donovan, 2007). This data-driven research evaluation is shown to not correspond with the criteria considered as important by SSH researchers themselves (Ochsner et al. 2016).

The second issue is the phenomenon that Campbell called Corrupting Effect of Quantitative Indicators: „The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, [...] the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor“ (Campbell, 2011 [1976]: 49). Researchers tend to adapt by changing their behaviour and production patterns to meet changing evaluation criteria, thus changing the notion of research itself.

Our research studies the interaction of these two processes, linking reporting from the institutional as well as from the researcher’s perspective with research processes. We shed light on how reporting shapes researchers’ perceptions of what they have to deliver and how this affects their research practices and also on what parts of the research process remain unseen and risk to be neglected.

Methodology

Using a mixed methods approach, we analyse quantitatively and qualitatively the bibliometric information on the scientific production of two institutions in the years 2012 to 2016 using three sources: the annual reports of the institutions themselves, the institutional repositories and Web of Science. Furthermore, we complement this data by qualitative semi-structured interviews with employees of the two institutes.

We chose two institutions for our research – FORS, the Centre of Expertise for the Social Sciences in Lausanne, Switzerland, [further: FORS] and the Institute of Sociology and Social Work at Vilnius University, Lithuania [further: ISSW]. The two institutions were chosen according to three criteria: (1) similarity of size and research field (2) international comparison (3) combination of the perspectives of insider and outsider of the two authors. The last point is important because finding invisible (or less visible) structures and publications, which is central for the research question, requires insider knowledge while outsider knowledge helps identifying institution-inherent structures that seem obvious or irrelevant to the insider.

Results

Obviously, not all scientific production is „visible“: researchers and institutes themselves often choose to report only part of what they produce. Yet, our results show that what becomes visible differs between the two institutions. The most interesting result, however, is what is not visible and why.

At the first glance, the amount of research production differs a lot between the two institutes. While staff size is quite similar through all the years, FORS produces 1,5 times more outputs than the ISSW. The reason for this lies not so much in a „real“ difference of production, nor in different amounts of particular output types, but rather in different reporting patterns.

Interestingly, researchers at FORS report less than the institute reports in its annual report, while it is the other way around at ISSW. There is a strong selection in the reporting of ISSW, concentrating mainly on such outputs as books and journal articles. Also, differences appear because of double affiliations of researchers.

But not only institutes are selective in their reporting, the researchers also do not give a full coverage of their productivity. For example, when asked whether they report presentations, ISSW researchers wonder: „Do I need to report these too?“. Rather, in both institutions, researchers firstly report publications and interpret ‘publications’ as peer-reviewed publications even if peer reviewed journal articles are not as frequent an output as others. The reasons for this reporting behaviour vary from „it is required“ to „show my work to other researchers“. However, when asked what is an important output of their work according to their own perception, the answers are much more diverse and the peer reviewed article becomes less important. Some of the researchers mentioned the meaninglessness of scientific publications in terms of readership, others say that they would find more satisfaction in having their own blog for communication. So, the notion of importance is twofold: importance for the institution and importance for the researcher.

Our findings show that researchers work and live in certain social contexts that form their behavioural patterns. Using our materials of interviews and reporting patterns, we identified three “ideal types” of researchers and how they interact with their institutional and disciplinary context: (a) the „real“ researcher (fluent adaptation to the academic requirements, „I want to communicate with my peers and I succeed in doing it“); (b) the troubled researcher (trying to adapt, but not always succeeding, „Am I a researcher if I do not publish enough?“); (c) the double identity (researcher on the one hand and lecturer, social policy researcher or data producer on the other hand, „it is important for me to be in this other role“).

Conclusion

Bibliometric indicator-based research evaluation limits the understanding of the work of a researcher, ignores the variety of personalities needed within universities and disregards activities that remain invisible but are important for the functioning of research. An incomplete reporting comes with the risk of compromising SSH research's function in society and tends to separate activities that should be linked.

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