

154 What and where to publish? Tensions of publishing choices for individual researchers in Finland

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

A great deal is known about academics' publishing patterns. But what kinds of individual choices are there behind those patterns? This study examines how different factors affect academics' choices of research topics and publishing outlets. The studied context is Finland, a non-Anglophone country with one of the most performance-based research evaluation systems in Europe. The data for this mixed-methods study is being generated with an online survey (N = >277) from academics representing different fields and career stages. The preliminary results indicate that although there is pressure to study "strategic" topics and publish in high-impact journals, researchers' primary motivation of choosing research topics stems from personal interests. Furthermore, researchers want to publish in outlets whose scope is suitable rather than in outlets owned by big publishing houses. These results suggest a high-level of academic freedom and that Finland-based academics are resilient when it comes to the pressures of neoliberal academia.

Full paper

Introduction

Academic work is constantly being measured with different metrics, shaping the work and identities (Kulczycki, 2023; Lupton et al. 2018; Pardo-Guerra, 2022). Interestingly, as Shore and Wright (2015) argue, academic organisations and academics have easily conformed to the calculative, performative rationality of performance measurement systems while simultaneously being critical about them.

In this paper, we study this tension of complying yet critiquing in relation to publishing. Specifically, we are interested in how different factors—such as metrics—affect individual researchers' choices of research topics and publishing outlets. Our research questions are:

1. What affects researchers' choices regarding their research topics and publishing outlets? Are there differences between disciplines or career stages?
2. What kinds of tensions are there behind the choices?

Theoretically, we analyse researchers' choices through the concept of reactivity (Espeland & Sauder, 2007): As humans are reflexive beings constantly monitoring and interpreting the surrounding world, as well reacting and adjusting to it, all measures are re-active (p. 2). Therefore, we are particularly interested in how researchers describe the causes behind the factors that they consider important.

The context of this study is Finland. Although a relatively small higher education system, Finland offers an illuminating case of a non-Anglophone country, which has one of the most performance-based research evaluations systems in Europe (Pölonen, 2018; Sile et al., 2018).

Data and methods

We created an online survey which included questions about respondents' background and employment situation, how different aspects influenced the choice of their research topics (13 different statements and an open question),

and choices around publishing outlets (21 different statements and an open question). The survey was available in three languages, Finnish, Swedish, and English.

By early June 2023, 277 respondents representing different fields and career stages had completed the survey. The preliminary results are reported by using 231 responses, and the results will be updated once the survey has been closed.

Results

Regarding how to choose one's research topic, the preliminary results are as follows:

Figure 1. The impact of different aspects on one's research topic (1 being "not important at all" and 5 being "extremely important").

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
I'm personally interested in the topic	0,4%	0%	0,9%	19,0%	79,7%	4,8
The topic is important for society	1,7%	5,6%	20,4%	50,2%	22,1%	3,9
I've studied the topic before	2,6%	12,6%	33,5%	39,6%	11,7%	3,5
The topic is unconventional or understudied	1,3%	15,2%	28,7%	39,6%	15,2%	3,5
I want to work with people who are interested in the topic	4,3%	16,0%	32,5%	34,2%	13,0%	3,4
There might be funding for the topic in the future	11,7%	14,7%	23,4%	35,9%	14,3%	3,3
The topic is suitable considering my current workload	7,4%	15,7%	24,9%	38,4%	13,6%	3,3
The topic is a good choice considering my future career plans	16,6%	9,2%	22,7%	32,3%	19,2%	3,3
There is funding currently available for the topic	10,8%	17,8%	28,1%	29,0%	14,3%	3,2
The topic aligns with the research profile of my faculty, department, or research group	15,2%	18,7%	26,1%	29,1%	10,9%	3,0
Data for my topic is easy to collect or acquire	9,1%	25,1%	39,4%	21,6%	4,8%	2,9
The topic is a requirement in my job description	27,7%	17,6%	25,1%	15,9%	13,7%	2,7
The topic aligns with the research strategy of my university	25,1%	30,0%	25,1%	15,4%	4,4%	2,4

Based on Figure 1, it seems that respondents wanted to study topics that they are personally interested in or topics that are important for society. The first aspect was considered overwhelmingly important: almost all respondents found the topic extremely or quite important. By contrast, the aspects that had the least impact, on average, were the topic being a requirement in one's job description and aligning with the research strategy of one's university.

The respondents' answers to the open question however revealed tensions. For example, several respondents stated that even though it would be great to study what one wants, one cannot often choose the topic but instead has it dictated by the research group, available funding, or planned future projects. Such responses were primarily given by those who were early on in their career and/or in a precarious job situation, highlighting the differences between different career stages.

Regarding the decisions on publishing outlets, the results are presented in Figure 2:

Figure 2. The impact of different aspects on the chosen research outlet.

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
My research fits well with the outlet's focus or scope	0%	0,4%	3,0%	31,2%	65,4%	4,6
The outlet's type is suitable (e.g. it is a journal)	0%	0%	6,5%	30,0%	63,5%	4,6
The language of the outlet	1,7%	3,0%	13,4%	39,0%	42,9%	4,2
The outlet is established in my field	2,2%	3,9%	18,3%	45,2%	30,4%	4,0
The quality of reviews	2,2%	11,3%	26,1%	40,0%	20,4%	3,7
My co-authors recommend the outlet	5,2%	8,3%	24,8%	44,8%	16,9%	3,6
The outlet is Open Access	5,2%	15,2%	28,7%	30,9%	20,0%	3,5
My other colleagues recommend the outlet	3,5%	11,7%	29,6%	40,9%	14,3%	3,5
Researchers in my field are expected to publish in the outlet	4,8%	14,0%	25,8%	37,1%	18,3%	3,5
The JUFO level of the outlet	9,6%	12,6%	21,3%	30,9%	25,6%	3,5
The speed of the review process	2,6%	19,9%	36,4%	29,0%	12,1%	3,3
The potential publishing fees	14,3%	15,2%	22,2%	27,0%	21,3%	3,3
I'm familiar with the outlet	8,2%	17,3%	26,9%	38,5%	9,1%	3,2
The outlet is officially recognized in Scopus and/or Web of Science	18,8%	14,0%	18,8%	23,1%	25,3%	3,2
The outlet's suitability considering my future career plans	12,2%	15,3%	26,6%	30,6%	15,3%	3,2
The outlet also publishes unconventional research (topic, method, or form-wise)	12,7%	20,2%	38,1%	22,4%	6,6%	2,9
I have been invited to contribute to the outlet	24,7%	22,0%	26,4%	16,3%	10,6%	2,7
The outlet is part of a large, well-known publishing house (such as Springer, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Emerald, etc.)	23,1%	21,4%	28,0%	20,5%	7,0%	2,7
The acceptance rate of the outlet	13,0%	34,2%	35,9%	15,2%	1,7%	2,6
My formal job performance evaluation requires such an outlet	31,7%	25,5%	18,1%	14,1%	10,6%	2,5
I know the editors of the outlet	41,5%	29,3%	20,1%	8,7%	0,4%	2,0

Here there were several aspects that more than half of the respondents found either extremely or quite important: research fitting well with the outlet's focus or scope being the most important on average. By contrast, the lowest rated aspects were knowing the editors of the outlet and one's formal job performance evaluation requiring such an outlet.

Like with the research topics, the outlets seem to be partly determined by "what has to be done" or "what is smart", while simultaneously being what one believes is "the right thing to do" or "one's personal preference". Many respondents described multiple factors driving their decisions, even if they did not like it, illustrating the reactivity of different publishing-related factors.

Discussion and conclusion

While we cannot yet suggest any strong arguments or implications based on the preliminary analysis, there is tentative evidence that Finnish academia is still, in fact, quite robust and allows strong academic freedom. Researchers primarily study what they want to study instead of what is stated in strategies and publish in suitable outlets instead of a journal of a big publishing house. However, the open answers of the survey suggest that academics are constantly juggling between what they would like to do and what they have to do, which raises some concern over the future of doing research and publishing in Finland.

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