It’s time for an academic detox

Almost every day, science is shaken by homemade scandals: bullying by professors, glossed over publication lists, mass publishing in predatory journals and even brazen falsifications of results (just to name a few examples).

These reports have shaped, and will continue to shape, the discourse in society about science and academia in the coming years, creating a less than favourable opinion of universities among members of the public, politicians and policymakers.

As a result, academia’s first mission – to create knowledge for the common good – is at risk of receding from public view and falling by the wayside. In fact, the scandals that hit the headlines are only the tip of the iceberg.

In everyday academia’s “business as usual”, there are a number of smaller grievances that corrode science bit by bit. Many colleagues will find these situations familiar. For example, early career researchers face the problem of professors requesting to be added to the author list of a paper, even if they only wrote three sentences, if any at all. Many people understandably prefer to publish the results and share the findings, accepting implicitly that these feudal publishing strategies will help progress their careers.

Where do these academic poisons come from?

In our view, many of these poisons can be traced back to hypercompetition in academia with its inherent quantification. Resources in the scientific world are strictly limited and our science system is growing much faster than the funding that underpins it, creating a breeding ground for toxic behaviour.

Academic hypercompetition brings forth strange fruit because it is not coupled with proportional knowledge gain. As many studies show, this competition creates an immense amount of pressure to adapt and produces little autonomous research. Instead of real centres of excellence, "predatory" academic groups emerge, focused mainly on how to develop effective fund-grabbing tactics. This leads to an erosion of many existing good practices.

A little less conversation, a little more action please

Our recent initiative, Academic Detox, joins a steadily growing trend of pushing back on toxic academic culture by academics themselves. Colleagues writing in the *International Journal for Critical Geographers* sign up to the notion of "slow scholarship" to counteract a hyperproductive university. Others at the University of Aberdeen attempted to "reclaim their university" calling on management to support a university that serves the academic community rather than business interests.

In creating Academic Detox we wanted to collect good practices to fight the toxic behaviours in academia, as we believe that they may damage the system beyond repair. On our website we are currently collecting good practices and actions that can fight these poisoning practices. A large share of the work that is needed to detox science will have to rest on the shoulders of more senior colleagues who are in more authoritative and less precarious positions than their junior colleagues.

In fact, acknowledging the precariousness and the associated existential fears of more junior colleagues would be a good place for senior academics

to start. The toxic authoritative structures characterised by seniority and patriarchy have been criticised by those more precariously employed, yet in order to overturn such structures, established scholars will have to act much more responsibly.

Existing antidotes

There is already some great work being done towards this mission. The computer scientist Andy Ko recently published a blog post on how to de-quantify the short biographies academics typically put on their websites, CVs and grant proposals. The goal of this is to emphasise the quality of academic output over quantity, and also to give weight to activities such as teaching and outreach.

Two of us, Melissa Nolas and Christos Varvantakis, started a new journal to detox the reviewing system (among other things) and engage authors and reviewers in a deep and productive conversation. Detoxing the review process is even possible for established journals. We should stop calling for flat rejections, but rather give constructive advice to the authors, wherever possible, of how a paper could be made acceptable. And senior colleagues should actively disengage from the growing malpractice of awarding short-term contracts purely out of habit or convenience: why not, instead, hand out contracts for as long a period as possible, according to the available funding?

Further small steps include abandoning quantitative metrics when evaluating scientists for academic positions or awards.

We should again aim for Alexander von Humboldt's ideal of holistic science. If not, the brutal economic conditions of modern-day science will suffocate academic freedom sooner or later. We need to take action to disseminate the antidote to this poison.

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