



Credit: Sara Zivony

Academia is not a meritocracy

Evaluating PhD students by their publications may have the outward appearance of a meritocracy, but as long as students from minority groups do not enjoy the same privileges as their peers, the playing field is anything but level, argues Alon Zivony.

// A high GPA is not enough. Skill is not enough. Even an impressive research project is not enough. If you want a job in academia, you have to publish, and fast.” I received this grim piece of advice not long after I had decided to pursue an academic career in cognitive psychology. Thinking of the path ahead, I suddenly realized: this was going to be hard.

Whether facing a failed project or a rejected application, or dealing with the uncertainties inherent to academic life, PhD students are no strangers to hardships. However, the growing competition for jobs and funding opportunities pushes trainees to churn out publications at an ever-increasing rate. This state of things has done more than add new pressures to the list: it has also exacerbated the existing ones.

Still, hardships by themselves are not necessarily a bad thing. They can become opportunities for growth and learning. Overcoming them can be a test of students’ resilience and commitment, qualities that an academic must possess. Framed in this light, it may seem that the publication-based evaluation system accomplishes exactly what it’s meant to accomplish: screening candidates based on excellence and merit. Publishing as a PhD student is tough, but fair’s fair, right?

Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Having finished my PhD with several publications, I’m tempted to say that mine is a story of relative personal success, garnered solely by dedication and hard work. Those are the building blocks of an excellent academic narrative. However, such a story would be incomplete. Looking back, I recognize that I also had certain privileges playing in my favour. The word ‘privilege’ is often taken to indicate a special and undeserved advantage. When I say I had privilege, I simply mean I was not hindered by certain barriers that affect other people.

Some privileges help PhD students in straightforward ways. Financial support allowed me to live in relative comfort near the university, attend international conferences and selectively take on teaching

positions. The cumulative effect of these benefits is hard to quantify, but they had undoubtedly helped me to put more time into my research and my professional development relative to students who had no financial security.

Other obstacles are more difficult to identify, but can have far-reaching consequences, like the stress related to being part of a minority group. On top of everyday stresses, PhD students from minority groups face various forms of prejudice, both overt and subtle, both within and outside of academia. Being part of a sexual minority, I experienced some of these stresses myself, though I was relatively protected from their harmful effects. Others aren’t so fortunate. Experiences of prejudice can lead to a state of constant alertness to potential threats and stressful interactions, sapping mental resources, eroding resilience and harming mental health. Such conditions increase the chances for burnout and deplete the strength needed to navigate the challenges of publishing research articles.

The effect of minority stress on psychological well-being is old news. Already in the 1950s, the famous psychologist Gordon Allport wrote that “one’s reputation, whether false or true, cannot be hammered, hammered, hammered, into one’s head without doing something to one’s character.” In other words, being rejected and stereotyped-against by large swaths of society is stressful and psychologically harmful. For example, numerous studies have shown that LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people, especially those who are transgender or bisexual, those who experience overt discrimination and those who lack social support, are more prone to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Unsurprisingly, studies also show that LGBTQ students are dropping out of the academic career path at higher rates than their heterosexual peers.

We tell ourselves academia is an equal playing field where bright minds can prove their worth. A meritocracy. But like most

real-world competitions, advancement in academia is not based solely on merit. Some get a head start, while others are left behind through no fault of their own. It’s true that in this sense advancement in academia has never been fair. However, evaluating PhD students based on their publications does nothing to level the playing field. It only creates more extreme pressures that further favor privileged individuals, who have more means to excel under such conditions. Publication-based evaluation is making inequality worse.

Academia has much to lose from failing to live up to its meritocratic ideal. Inequality inevitably leads to homogeneity of viewpoints and experiences, which limits our ability to ask new worthwhile questions and raises the risk of scientific stagnation. A fair evaluation system is therefore crucial not only from a social justice perspective, but also from a scientific standpoint.

PhD students deserve better. We must acknowledge and work to negate the effects of financial inequality and of minority stress. Beyond that, we must strive for a kinder evaluation system. The PhD period should allow young scholars to develop their potential. This requires a less publication-driven PhD process and mentors who are more adept at noticing and dealing with the mental well-being of their students. Until that happens, we must be truthful with potential students about the current state of academia. They need to know that talent and passion might not be enough; that financial security and mental health will play a part in their ability to withstand the stresses of publish or perish. At the very least, they deserve to know what they’re getting themselves into. □

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