

Abel Polese

The SCOPUS Diaries and the (il)logics of Academic Survival

A Short Guide to Design your Own Strategy And Survive
Bibliometrics, Conferences, And Unreal Expectations
in Academia

“*The Scopus Diaries* is an indispensable guide for early researchers who often find it difficult to balance academic life with their non-academic passion. It offers a vision of work-life balance from one of the best in the field. A must-read primer for non-Western scholars interested in learning about the academic strategies in the West.”—Rajan Kumar, Jawaharal Nehru University India

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Foreword

On what criteria build, and develop, an academic career, and one's reputation, and how this book was conceived

“Their genuine goal would be to measure academic performance through quality so to acknowledge individuality and creativity of each intellectual. But if you measure quality through (quantitative) indicators, then academics are just numbers.”
(during a conversation with Artem...)

For some time already, academics from a number of regions of the world, and from virtually all disciplines, have been put under increasing pressure to publish in Scopus, or Web of Science-indexed journals. “Is it a good thing or a bad thing?” I was asked during a workshop.

It is neither. I see it as the result of a long change in the higher education sector that has been happening for some time now. Once upon a time, universities were such a scarcely populated world that you did not necessarily need a PhD to be hired as a lecturer, there was little necessity to ask who was better than whom. Scholars would be known because of an authoritative article, or book in a certain discipline. It was another world back then, a world that I like to imagine romantically slow, with less travel and CO2 emissions and where word of mouth had functions that have been taken over, at least partly, by the Internet now. It was generally assumed that academics were somehow more educated than the others and thus, almost automatically produced smart and quality outputs.

What happened that changed this idyllic scenario? Well, the scenario could be idyllic for teachers but not necessarily for students or people who wanted to enroll in a university but did not manage to for a number of reasons. Much has changed and there are other places more indicated to explore the developments of the university sector. However, in a nutshell, one can observe two tendencies. One is the democratization of higher education, and thus the idea that it should be available to virtually everyone wishing to enhance their qualifications. The other is the demand for university degrees to gain competitiveness in the labor market, and this is a global tendency.

With a demand exponentially growing, the supply has quickly adapted, and the university sector has radically changed. The number of universities across the globe has increased, as well as the variety of formative offers, leading to new degrees and majors that did not exist before. An even faster growth has been witnessed in fields that are perceived as landing you into a good job relatively quickly after completion of a degree. Likewise, the demand for degrees from universities that are perceived as “the best ones” has grown.

This also means that the capacity, or at least potential, of universities to generate money has significantly increased to various degrees, depending on the country and the discipline concerned. More visible and prestigious universities are in high demand and can basically impose their own standards, prices, conditions. The lower you go on the “prestige scale” the more difficult this becomes but, as a general tendency, the university sector interacts with, and affects a growing number of actors, nationally and internationally.

In spite of this, general perceptions of the university sector seem to suggest that money for research, and the higher education sector, has shrunk. Indeed, I often hear from colleagues that funding for universities has decreased but this is a tricky statement. My general impression, since there are a variety of tendencies across world regions or even within the same country, is that the percentage of public funding for universities has decreased. In fact, public expenditure for universities in some cases has increased. However, if the number of universities in a country grows, then the fraction of the money allocated to each university, on average, decreases. Likewise, if the number of universities stays the same but they become bigger, to accommodate more students—and therefore they need more teachers and administrators, their budgets become larger and the fraction of budget that can be paid by public funds gets smaller.

This tendency does not necessarily mean bad times for universities, or at least not all of them. Those able to differentiate income sources, or simply to find a good channel for revenues, may live better than before. But in general, the sector changes and so do the rules of the game so a number of actors find themselves in a transition period, say dire straits, until they find a new way of generating a stable income and a new equilibrium.

When resources become scarce, they have to be distributed with more care within the sector, but also within the same university, faculty and department. While there might be a number of criteria to use for competition, the main official one used at this stage is “academic quality” broadly defined. Money (and so power and prestige) goes to universities, faculties, departments, scholars who deserve it measured through a basket of academic performance standards. This can include teaching, research output and other criteria used to assess a university. However, in reality, it comes down to a few items amongst which research performance is, in my view, the main one.

When someone needs to decide where to enroll, in addition to the question, “What would I like to study,” an important question a prospective student (or their parents) will ask is, “What are you going to do after you finish?” Universities, and disciplines, that will give you better labor market perspectives will be targeted more intensively than others. However, perception on how a degree will affect your performance in the job market is largely influenced by the prestige of a university, which is often resulting from its ranking in research performance such as its visibility in the media or by the number of Nobel Prizes winners teaching there, regardless of how good the teachers are, or how often they are replaced by their assistants because they are traveling the world to present at conferences here and there.

Of the two main criteria used to allocate funds, thus, one is research performance and the other, at least partly, is an indirect result of research performance.

Research performance becomes thus crucial at the macro (which universities to fund more) and micro (which department, or scholar, to support more) levels. When funders need to agree on criteria to decide whether to give money to this or that university, to that or this discipline, they will look at the “quality” of research outputs. Universities, or disciplines, that deliver “better quality,” or that have more impact on the society, deserve more money. But how to objectively measure quality? And also, what happens with the universities, or disciplines, that do not make it into the hall of fame of state-funded universities?

The quest for academic quality and the Scopus fetish

How to measure quality? As a general rule you need a controller or evaluator, a benchmark and some indicators, be these qualitative or quantitative. However, at the pace the higher education sector is developing quality control is indeed a challenge. Academia was born as a small circle of people working on things that were unintelligible for the rest of the world. Controlling quality was more of a basic exercise, done by word of mouth, perceptions and a number of simpler criteria than we have now. However, quality control in a community where you know virtually everyone by their name is easier than controlling quality in an imagined community of several hundred thousand academics, even more if there is an expectation that a single standard can be theoretically applied to all disciplines.

There are, of course, widely accepted qualitative criteria such as being awarded a Nobel prize, national scientific awards and other kinds of acknowledgements. But this is for a restricted minority of academics that distinguish themselves and bring a visible and tangible contribution to the world. What about the others (common mortals and non-Nobel prize winners)? And what about these disciplines whose contributions to the world are crucial but not so visible and, let alone, tangible? Philosophy helps people to think and be critical but there is no Nobel prize for philosophy or a proper job market for philosophy graduates.

We are talking here about a situation where we have to measure the output of masses (more educated but still academic masses) and find a reason to say “A is better than B.”

In many cases, the answer has been one: Scopus (or Web of Science, most of the logic I use to understand Scopus here can be applied to Web of Science).

Scopus is a scientific database of academic journals that are, at least officially, peer-reviewed and that deliver the highest scientific quality in the world. Until recent times, the only database available was Thomson and Reuters Web of Science (WoS but also known as ISI). Scopus has, however, gained consensus among a number of circles for being more inclusive and has filled a niche that ISI had left, for some reason, uncovered. Humanities and Social Science journals are under-represented in the ISI database if compared to Scopus. As a result, a number of national authorities have

turned to Scopus, or use Scopus in conjunction with ISI, as the indicator of quality as a complementary database to measure the quality of academic outputs.

The principle is simple: if a journal is in Scopus, it means it has passed a quality examination. This allows us to pledge that future publications in a given journal are likely to keep a similar scientific standard and thus be of good quality. If a scientist publishes in a Scopus-indexed journal, it is reasonable to assume that their output is of good quality. The better a journal is ranked in Scopus the higher the (alleged) quality of its article. Therefore, if you publish in a top journal (according to Scopus rankings), you are publishing a top article. This is an assumption endorsed sometimes without even reading the article.

The immediate and logic response of countries wishing to enhance their scientific profile has been simple: they have asked their scientists to prioritize Scopus journals. This may be acceptable for younger scholars who are growing up with this myth and can be defined as the “Scopus generation.” But what about the scholars who have not prioritized Scopus for 20 or 30 years, constructing a career on other principles? How to redirect your career choices in the short delays that you are given by your national authorities?

Second, and perhaps more important: Scopus is certainly an excellent attempt to classify quality in academic production but is more likely to produce fetishes than career advice. The career of an academic, their reputation and their satisfaction cannot possibly depend solely on Scopus articles. There are journals that are not in the database but that everybody from your field reads. Shall we stop targeting these ones at once to devote time to Scopus articles? Science is also made of dissemination activities and sometimes a non-academic article is likely to bring more attention than an academic article. Further in this direction, Scopus is a database for journals. What about a book or book chapters that count close to nothing in some countries now? Shall we, at once, stop writing chapters? In some cases, a chapter is a contribution to a collective book that may contribute to significant advancements of scientific knowledge. In many other cases, it is a way to be part of a team, to work with people you have always wanted to work with, to work under an editor who is one of your references in your field. If my academic guru invites me to contribute to a volume edited by a

first-class publisher, shall I respond, “Sorry, it’s not in Scopus?” Also, think about the situation where you are asked to contribute an article to a young academic journal that is committed to quality, innovation and is in line with the way you see scientific progress. It is likely that the journal is not (yet) in Scopus but needs to survive, develop and gain credibility. You have a moral choice now: to do what you are asked to do or to do what you believe in? Many people mention working in academia to be able to keep a certain degree of freedom. But if Scopus becomes your main fetish, is this real freedom?

As a friend commented when reading this book, “only dead fish go with the flow.” Make your own choice but remember one thing: academia was born to produce people who are capable to think autonomously and contribute to shaping the world, rather than being shaped by bureaucratic rules.

How much is too much?

What this book is about and about a life-career balance

This is a book exploring academic career strategies. I have conceived it as answers to questions that have been in the air for a while and to which only standard (and politically correct) answers have been available so far.

My goal is to help you to think of your own career strategy while remaining healthy in your mind. This, in spite of the zillions of things that you are supposed to do to get academic recognition. However, instead of telling you what you should be doing, I will provide you with a cost-benefit analysis of some of the available choices, or ways to carry out the tasks that you are supposed to engage in and most of the things you are supposed to do to enhance your academic careers.

We all know that academics need to publish, and peer review, articles; they need to look for funding, attend conferences, establish collaborations, engage with public dissemination activities. But how much is too much? What is the amount of effort one should put into each of these activities? What is the ideal input-output ratio? How much should you work for an article? Are 5 articles a year a good target? Shall you try to publish in the No.-1 journal in the world in your discipline or are middle-range journals enough?

The obvious answer is that only you are in the position of assessing this and that all of this depends on your attitude, and motivation, to complete a given duty. Only you can know how much time, nerves, efforts and sleep deprivation you need to complete a given task. Only you know how much stress you can handle. Hence, your main task is not to publish a given article but to remain healthy in your mind, or at least to avoid burnout, so to be able to keep on working, and publishing, more over the space of several years.

We are constantly under pressure from a variety of directions. Our university, our ministry or other quality-controlling institutions, our line manager. We also have other obligations: towards colleagues inviting us to participate in projects, towards that nice journal editor that is leading a project we like so much, towards those nice people who paid for our travel and accommodation for that great conference at a hotel near the beach and are now trying to pull together a collected volume to which they kindly ask you to contribute to, even if publishing with them will bring no benefits to your career. A general understanding of academia is that, in the payback for the limited amount of money you can earn (with some exceptions) is a degree of freedom that other jobs do not grant you, it grants you a lot of freedom and allows you to do what you would like to do. But how many of us take advantage of this freedom?

Eventually, academic careers are stressful not because of the pressure you get from your line manager but because of the pressure you put on yourself. Because of targets, often unrealistic or overambitious, that you set for yourself willingly, all the times that you say yes to an invitation, and from the frustration, you get for not meeting your objectives that seemed realistic when you chose them.

Much has been written about what one has to do to progress their academic career. My problem with these approaches is that it simply puts extra pressure on emerging academics who are parachuted into “you should do this, this and this,” without revealing the hidden (and sometimes dark) mechanisms behind a number of practices. Failing to understand a dynamic, to grasp some of the open secrets of academia, can delay your work, or even make a task impossible to complete. This book is an attempt to look with a critical, and sometimes cynical, eye at the elements considered crucial to academic careers but on which we often get standard, and

standardized answers. For instance, sessions on “How to publish in a peer-reviewed journal,” usually consist of suggestions on how a standard, or a good, reviewer would look at your article. My problem with this is that things rarely happen in the standardized way they are described. There is much distortion in a peer-review process: reviewers are usually late, some of them criticize you destructively, the journal gets too many submissions to deal properly with your article and you might end up with useless comments accompanied by a rejection letter some twelve months after submitting. You do it all right, according to the books, and it goes all wrong. How would you cope with that? How would you avoid this situation?

To think strategically of your career, at least in my view, means to become aware of the most common distortions in academia (in what way things could “go wrong”) and act accordingly to deliver what you are expected to deliver. Ultimately, strategy for me refers to the capacity to identify a compromise between what you are expected, or requested, to do and what you would like to do, what would make you happy or at least content. This involves, the capacity to take risks and do things for which you will receive no money, or formal recognition from your employer, but because you feel you will gain something else from it. Personal satisfaction, friendship, extra time for yourself or your family, sleeping are also part of your career inasmuch as they allow you to better concentrate on what you do and do it with love. You could work less and work better if you understand what it is really worth working for and investing time in. But, to do this, you should be able to discern what you have to do to survive, and thus to keep your job, and what you think you need to do but in fact is not mandatory or bringing anything into your professional development at this stage, so you would be better off skipping it, at least this time.

How to read, and use, this book

I assume that most readers will be academics, or people familiar with academia and its standards in terms of references, style and format. Well, this is not an academic book but a book about how to strategically think about your academic career. You can, of course, read it from the beginning to the end but you can also pick any question (or topic) you find interesting and start reading from there. Then move backwards, then forward, until you do not need it anymore or simply get tired of us (the book and me).

I have divided the book into the following sections that are, in my view, some of the most important aspects around which one needs to think about one's academic career:

- **Writing** deals with the actual process of writing and the approaches you might want to use to write something that becomes easily readable by people from your academic community.
- **Publishing** is the further logical step to writing but in a different world. It explains why “good” articles may get rejected while “less good” articles may effortlessly make it into a journal quite easily.
- **Growing** explores the way you can boost your profile and move from a junior to a more senior academic status.
- **Shining** acknowledges the existence of two distinct processes. One is the production of a written or other kinds of work. The other is the efforts that you need to make it known and become visible and appreciated as an academic.
- **Niching** highlights the fact that you cannot always be famous everywhere but need to identify, and conquer, your public. To do this you need to become aware of your selling points and use them to come to occupy a given place in the academic “Olympus”.
- **Networking** acknowledges the fact that you will not be able to advance much in your career by simply sitting in your library, or lab, and writing about your results. You also need to connect with people, start collaborations and engage with stakeholders.
- **Funding** singles out possible strategies to deal with fundraising activities, a thing that is increasingly required when you are an academic and deciding whether you really want to do that and how to, just in case.

Each section hosts a number of questions (or topics) about which I share my experience and position. I have tried to develop each topic, and its answer, within the space of about one A4 page. However, some topics are inevitably longer. Each question is self-standing in that you do not need to have read any other questions to understand the answer. Some topics are mentioned more than once and answers are provided in more than one section. This was done when I thought that a question could be answered from different angles and that each angle could help you understand one

aspect of a given topic. For instance, publishing can be used to grow professionally, or to network but with other ends and an answer encompassing all the possible implications of publishing would be too complex, or long.

I have no reason to hide that, during my career, I have mostly mingled with scholars from the social sciences, broadly defined. After a first degree in economics, I completed an M.A. in European studies and a Ph.D. in anthropology. I have no experience in publishing in science journals or in patenting new discoveries. But in my free time, I read biology, genetics and psychology. I have also been a Scottish Crucible Fellow and a Global Young Academy member. Both organizations select scientists from many disciplines to consider research, and science, as one, not as composed of many disciplines. They suggest, and I believe, that research policy is one and that scientists have a lot to win if they unite, regardless of their discipline, when seeking a dialogue with funding and policy institutions, as well as with the general public. Thanks to these experiences, I have had the chance to work, back to back, with chemists, nutritionists, ICT, biologists, medical doctors and colleagues from other disciplines, who have shaped the approach I developed in this book.

I suggest here that, although some dynamics might change across different disciplines, and countries, the mechanisms behind the publishing industry, and the long-term goals of each scientist, are very alike:

- To keep doing research and progress in career.
- To have some kind of impact on the academic community, and possibly society.
- To balance work-related activities and personal life.

How each of us does it depends on our own strategy. And so, it is the balance between the above three goals. Ultimately, some scholars might sacrifice one or more aspects to work on other ones at some stage of their career. Some short-term goals might emerge at some point for personal ambitions (i.e., become famous, make more money) and means of achieving an objective might differ, depending on the strategy one chooses.

In addition to one's objectives, the must do of an academic is very alike cross countries, regions and disciplines. We all work in a given environment that is shaped by the goals and values of the institution we work for and we are

all regularly evaluated by national authorities controlling academic performance of our institutions. What is required from us is, therefore, simple at its basic level:

- To carry out quality research and publish in the best possible journals (where the definition of the best possible journal changes depending on where you work).
- To contribute to teaching activities depending on your position and role in the team you are integrated into.
- To engage in a set of professional service activities. This cluster is the most unclear one since it mostly depends on the position of your national evaluation institutions on a number of activities. It also depends on the ambitions of your university, and department. I have thus tried to elaborate on what I thought were the most common ones.

As a result, my claim here is that this book can be useful to scholars from a wide array of disciplines, and approaches, who want to reflect on their career, on what they do, on how they do it, and get a different view on the dynamics of the academic world. As a friend said, most of the things written in this book are known intuitively by most scholars. However, I took time to systematize this knowledge, add my personal experience, and reflect on the meaning of what we do, why we do it in a certain way and whether it could be done in a different one.

Acknowledgements

The core idea of this book was developed during a 3-day workshop on academic publishing strategies at the Regional Studies Center in Yerevan, which the Academic Swiss Caucasus Network generously provided funding for. The workshop, organized by my friend Mikail Zolyan, was recorded and then transcribed into a long document that remained forgotten on my computer for some time. A further boost of the idea came when I was asked to deliver a series of lectures for the Social Innovation Lab at the Mykolas Romeris University in Vilnius, and I have to thank Andrius Puksas, who offered to invite me using a grant from the Lithuanian visiting professor funding scheme.

In an effort to find a topic that was not already available, and thus offer the students something new, I came to develop daily workshops based on the topics that have built this book. A further series of seminars on publication strategies was organized by my friend Amiya Kumar Das at Tezpur University and permitted me to reflect further on the idea.

However, the turning point was a talk at Vinnitsa Medical University, organized by my good friend and colleague Tetiana Stepurko in 2016. After the lecture, Oleg Vlasenko, the local vice-rector for research approached me and gently asked for a copy of my book, the book that I had just presented at his university.

There was no such book in my list of publications, or even in my pipeline. But there could be one. I went back to the original transcripts to make the document more readable. The initial idea was to do some basic editing and then publish it. The advice contained in these pages had been praised by most participants from my workshops, so I thought that minimal editing was needed. However, the more I was doing this the more I realized that, to have a better impact, I had to de-contextualize the examples, widen the public I was talking to, take more cases from my professional life, and publish it in the form of a manual.

This was tremendously boosted by the positive and enthusiastic response I received from Chris Schoen at ibidem Verlag. He was positive from the very first interaction and, which was extremely important for me, agreed to sell the book at the minimal possible price, making it affordable for virtually anyone. He even granted his permission that some parts could be kept available online for free, a thing that increases the visibility of the project and allows undecided people to read it and then decide whether they want to buy it.

The number of books, and initiatives, on academic strategy, is growing. However, apart from freely available blog posts and conferences, most books I have seen on how to live your academic career are sold at exorbitant prices. What is the point of targeting a public of young scholars, or scholars from lower performance regions, since they are less likely to get exposed to such knowledge, and then sell at a price they could not afford? I believe a great advantage of this book is its affordability and my main goal is that people, and colleagues, learn to navigate the system a bit better.

The people mentioned above have had a direct impact on the life of this book. They have been all extremely useful, at various degrees and in various moments. Some of them have shown me “their way” of doing things and made me discover that there are not two but many ways of dealing with the same issues equally successfully. Some others have provided me with feedback, formally or informally, during workshops, discussions or on the various drafts of the manuscript. However, for having shared with me anecdotes, stories, episodes, frustrations that made us laugh and reflect on the dark, and twisted, sides of academia, and of human nature in general I wish to express my gratitude to also the people below, mentioned in a random sequence since I cannot think of any criteria to rank them (and I am a chaotic person anyway):

Michael Gentile, Hyun Bang Shin, Gul Berna Ozcan, Alena Ledeneva, Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Andrea Graziosi, Vanni D’Alessio, Jeremy Morris, Peter Rutland, John Doyle, Rico Isaacs, Eileen Connelly, Rustam Urinboyev, Tetiana Stepurko, Oleg Vlasenko, Andrius Puskas, Mikael Zolyan, Elena Darjania, Maria Kazakova, Klavs Sedlenieks, Ketevan Kutsushvili, Arnis Sauka, Nicolas De Pedro, Christian Giordano, Nicholas Hayoz, Marcello Mollica, Rob Kevlihan, Amiya Kumar Das, Licinia Simao, Filippo Menga, Raquel Freire, Karolina Stefanczek, Stefano Braghirioli, Rajan Kumar, Adrian Fauve, Vika Akchurina, Alessandra Russo, Francesco Strazzari, Stefano Bianchini, Rodica Ianole, Diana Lezhava, Erhan Dogan, Bruno De Cordier, Heiko Pleines, Ilona Baumane, Denis Volkov, Soso Salukvadze, Rajan Kumar, Erhan Dogan, Filippo Menga, Gina Mzourek, Ruth Neiland, Colin Williams, Giorgio Comai, Valerie Lange, Florian Bölter.

Eventually, this book results not only from my academic reflections but from conversations, and strategic thinking, that arose also when performing non-academic tasks and talking with entrepreneurs, NGO workers, civil servants and whoever I have crossed paths with to share an opinion, a cup of tea, or simply freely talk about life. The number and variety of people who have inspired me informally are so wide that I prefer not to thank anyone in particular. Those who have regularly discussed strategy with me at the four corners of the world know it and I know it. It is to them also that I owe the way my attitude and mindsets have been shaped and many of the reflections you will find in the next pages.

I also wish to thank:

The participants of all the various workshops that have provided this book with their feedback, critical engagement with my words, or simply for patiently listening to what I wanted to share.

The notorious Reviewer 2. We all know why.

Dublin City University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences' Book Publication Scheme through which I received partial financial support to finalize this book.

My children, who are sitting next to me on this plane while I complete this introduction and claim not to know what strategy, or this book, is about. But who have become highly sophisticated strategic thinkers whenever they want to get something they think they need, or simply want and I have been learning from them as well.

Anyone who has despised, offended, betrayed, criticized unconditionally, patronized, attacked, or silently hated me; who has talked behind my back or tried to stab me in the back (fortunately, only allegorically so far). You have acted as great motivators to reflect on my own mistakes, my attitude in certain situations, on why some things did not work the way I wanted and, in general, on my life and career strategy. Sometimes I have blamed myself for ending up in such situations, more often I have understood that your problem was not me but in yourself. I am grateful for every worry, frustration, deception (well, fortunately not that many, but enough to reflect upon) that I have had to face and live through.

I do not think there are bad people but only bad moments and periods that eventually prompt people to act in ways that they might one day regret. I dedicate this book to all the people I have interacted with in the course of my career, regardless of whether the interaction has left me with a sweet or bitter taste. If I am where I am, it is because of these experiences that I have eventually digested. If anyone has ever hurt me in our interactions, that was meant to happen, and I am happy to give a special mention to any face that I remember behind my (fortunately few) bleak moments. I also hope that this book will prompt a reflection on their career and life and that they can eventually find a way to outlive whatever hardship they have been going through and that made them behave, at a certain stage of their life, in a way that did not necessarily match my values and what I believe in.

FOREWORD

Without the negative experience that I have lived with you, I would not have been motivated enough to transform my professional life into a book that is half strategic half autobiographic and that has permitted me to reflect on who I am and where I want to go next.

Bangkok, August 2018