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Demystifying the academic research enterprise: becoming a successful scholar in a complex and competitive environment

Having worked in academia for a longer time than I care to remember and in more different academic environments than is healthy for a sound research career, I was interested in this book about demystifying of academic research as a competitive environment. I would not say that the book has made it easier to understand the academic life. Quite the contrary, it presents a complex picture of many elements that one needs to understand. Nevertheless, the book definitely presents a rather clear framework of academic research in a logical and pedagogical way. The limitation that one has to remember and that the author presents at the very beginning concerns the fact that this is a very particular system of academic research in the USA. There are some elements that are of more universal nature, such as general understanding of research roots, process and even dissemination of its results, but also quite specific chapters pertaining to American research funding, legal and ethical demands, organisation and evaluation rules. Thus, the primary audience of the book includes young researchers and doctoral students in the United States, however, others may benefit as well, not only from the texts pertaining to general research issues, but also from understanding the whole academic system that so far produces the most successful research outcome.

The book consists of fourteen chapters devoted to different aspects of academic research and career. It explains individual reasons of doing research and societal reasons of supporting this activity. It presents an overall picture of the research process and the elements that are necessary for an individual academic career. The issues of seeking funding and funding system in the US takes a significant place in the book and is discussed from various perspectives.

The chapters on using previous research, application of general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, information on general research methods, are quite extensive and can be easily absorbed. A reader also finds the basics of conduct in the process of critical assessment, such as peer-review, recognising bias and differentiating it from different views, complying with the rules of research ethics and security, but also building one's own genuine research integrity. A whole chapter is also devoted to recognition of research outcomes and intellectual property mechanisms in the US.

This book would not be comprehensive without putting emphasis also on the dissemination of research results to both professional and lay audiences and to peers. With regard to the latter, the chapter on collaboration and multidisciplinary inquiry is also useful both in terms of providing main concepts and practical understanding of the process.

One needs to emphasize that this large book is in fact a comprehensive textbook on academic research in the US. Each chapter begins with learning outcomes and ends with questions for self-evaluation of acquired knowledge as well as exercises for deepening understanding. This is a pedagogical approach that is highly commendable and makes the book useful for doctoral and masters programmes in many universities.

The author uses not only relevant literature, but also his own vast experience of academic research. This is an advantage, but also a certain shortcoming. Being a professor in atmospheric science Kelvin K. Droegemeier represents the natural sciences. This part is the strongest in his book. He also adds to this creative activity in humanities and avoids speaking clearly of social sciences. Thus, research methods in chapter 4 are divided in three main categories of scientific, historical and indigenous methods, which looks quite unusual. As the book lacks a more extensive introduction to the philosophical issues of research methodology, this part, especially, the explanation of “indigenous methods” misrepresents the approaches used in social sciences and humanities significantly.

Another interesting omission that was quite visible to me is the absence of any chapter related to information support and scholarly communication. The elements of scholarly communication are inevitably scattered over different chapters and especially those on peer review, dissemination of results, and different access modes. However, the information support and supply of research information to academic institutions and individual researchers is mentioned very rarely. Even the chapter on “Becoming a detective” explains how to deal with research literature without ever mentioning where to find it. University libraries and the National Library of Medicine are mentioned in relation to different access modes. However, this is a view of an information science researcher and may be biased.

All in all, the book is a reasonable and comprehensive textbook, which may be interesting to our audience for several different reasons: having a good overview of research system in the US, using it as a textbook for young researchers, or acquiring it to the university library as a useful resource for academic researchers.

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