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Rebuilding Higher Education by Combating Researcher Isolation

Abstract

To build new and better higher education systems, it is vital to consider all aspects of systems in the recent past. Measures should be taken to identify and address deficiencies, of which academic isolation and the prevalence of a silo mentality is a prominent example. The central question of this paper to be answered is how to effectively combat academic isolation. While an individual in solitude has a positive experience when alone, isolation resulting in loneliness is an uneasy feeling of being unwillingly detached from others. Education institutions, faculties, colleges or communities of practice as well as individuals can experience isolation, whether it is self-imposed or enforced by discriminatory measures. Highly specialized groups may isolate themselves, and so can experienced academics be unwilling to share ideas and so deny others to benefit from their expertise. During an analytical literature survey, which generated valuable observations and findings from scholars worldwide, some of the most prominent reasons for and effects of this phenomenon emerged. The analysis, into which personal experience was also factored, lead to proposing cooperative research and interdisciplinary research as effective ways to breach harmful silo forming amongst researchers, and combat academic isolation.

Keywords: isolation, silo mentality, cooperation, interdisciplinary research, rebuilding higher education, thought leadership, ageism, intellectual property

Introduction

The post-Covid era is characterised by both realising the necessity of restructuring and taking active steps towards rebuilding most spheres of life. The pandemic, however disruptive, was seen by many observers as a timely opportunity of eradicating some well entrenched ailments and deficiencies of the past including that of higher education systems and institutions (Mintz, 2021, para. 29). Outdated practices and intolerable traditions were scrutinised by change agents, and in several countries there was an appeal to higher education authorities to make the most of this opportunity once the disruption of the pandemic has subsided (Saracco, 2022, para. 31). However, given humankind's tendency (at least the conservative ones) to cling to and be comfortable with the past, it cannot be taken for granted that the new normal would not move back to the old normal, unacceptable practices and regulations included.

Central to this paper stands one of the most notable characteristics of the pandemic: social distancing leading to isolation during the hard lockdown period of 2020. This paper explores the nature of and reasons for academic isolation and the implications of a silo mentality. A literature survey combined with personal experience formed the data set for the discussion that follows.

Strategies are offered to combat this not-so-new phenomenon of isolation and silo forming that has been hampering researchers' lives for decades. These may serve as building blocks towards rebuilding higher education.

While the coronavirus ruled the world a lack of collaboration, at least on interpersonal, "physical" level in the world of university staff, was the order of the day. Most academics did break through the barriers of isolation by means of technology that made virtual contact possible. Despite current indications of a looming new wave of the coronavirus, direct personal communication is the order of the day again. Even before the pandemic Sibai et al. (2019, para. 11) warned that feelings of isolation are and have been one of the most common threats to researchers' healthy and productive work lives and needs scrutiny.

Conceptualising isolation

Isolation and solitude should be carefully distinguished. An individual in solitude experiences a "pleasant and fulfilling feeling of enjoyment" (Enago Academy, 2022, para. 2), therefore a positive emotion when being alone. Many academics crave for solitude, "alone-time" (Jandric, 2022, para. 1), and therefore make use of academic retreats whenever possible. It is regularly heard amongst hard working professionals such as researchers that they seriously look forward to retirement, when they will not be caught up in other faculty commitments and responsibilities anymore (Nowak, 2019, para. 1). Jandric (2022, para. 1) maintained: "I develop my best ideas, and write my best texts, in solitude. My fragile attention is all too easily disrupted; peace and quiet help me gather my thoughts into a meaningful form…".

Filho et al. (2021, p. 3) nevertheless argued that "humans are fundamentally a social species: it is in their nature to interact and form various types of relationships with others…". With most of us being social in nature, loneliness is per definition an uneasy feeling of being "involuntarily separated" from others (Sibai et al., 2019, para. 2). In the context of academic work, "isolation is the feeling of being cut off from social network, friends, and family" (Enago Academy, 2022, para. 1).

It is not advisable to generalise when it comes to feelings of isolation amongst individuals. Studies on extroversion and introversion point out significant differences between extroverts and introverts when it comes to their respective reactions when being alone or between people.

> *Extroversion is a personality trait typically characterized by outgoingness, high energy, and/or talkativeness. In general, the term refers to a state of being where someone "recharges", or draws energy, from being with other people; the opposite—drawing energy from being alone—is known as introversion.* (Psychology Today, n.d., para. 1)

On the expected reaction to being alone, "someone who is highly extroverted will likely feel bored, or even anxious, when they're made to spend too much time alone" (Psychology Today, n.d., para. 3).

Isolation manifests in numerous forms. It can entail a real physical separation between an individual and others, or a feeling of loneliness, even amidst a crowd. A higher education institution as entity can experience isolation, and so can faculties, colleges or communities of practice within the institution. They either have the perception of being marginalized, or actively, purposefully isolate themselves from potential collaborators for some reason or another, called the silo effect.

Small highly specialized groups may create or experience isolation because of their own unwillingness to participate in an interdisciplinary context, which may develop

due to a perception of others' ignorance. Various other reasons for the development of a silo mentality have been identified (Kolowich, 2010; Linton, 2009; Capener, 2015; Friedlander, 2022). A silo mentality is detected amongst individuals, groups or institutions in a large number of spheres of life, and typically entails a purposeful separation. Using the term insularity (Latin: insula – island), Kolowich (2010, para. 2) described this phenomenon as an isolation from the surrounding environment:

> The "strong college" model — which emphasizes the individual brands of different colleges on a campus — ... can also reinforce insularity and make it less likely that scholars from different colleges on the same campus will come together and tackle a subject from an interdisciplinary angle.

While many universities are structured according to the college model, and many universities structured in other ways, for instance different faculties or research entities, isolation due to the silo effect may manifest anywhere. Capener (2015, para. 3) referred to the unwillingness to share knowledge or skills. He states that, typical of such a silo mentality,

> learning is considered one's own IP or "proprietary" and should not be shared or openly discussed with colleagues in other areas for fear others will use it without the credit going to the originator. It can ruin the culture company and university.

Reasons for isolation

One reason why individuals or research entities tend to develop a silo mentality, is to protect their work from intellectual property theft. This phenomenon is specifically prevalent in the corporate world, where billions of dollars are lost to IP theft (StudyCorgi, 2022, para. 3). A significantly negative and costly impact of IP theft in the higher education context in the US was also reported, primarily due to internationally stolen concepts and patents (StudyCorgi, 2022, para. 4).

A decade ago, Vogel (2013, para. 2) pointed to IP theft that leads to significant losses when researchers share ideas during interdisciplinary or inter-university activities: "The trouble starts when those ideas are taken without acknowledgement". Despite significant effort that goes into the stringent measures to control ethics of research projects, many researchers have the experience of their ideas being unscrupulously taken over by a less creative researcher who are in the position to proceed faster, beating them to the finishing line of a publication and thus unethically garnering all the recognition. In the light of this problem, which is a reality in many universities, it can be understood that some researchers tend to embrace the silo effect and rather isolate themselves in order to successfully develop certain idea or project. Isolation is nevertheless detrimental to good research practice and researcher development.

Other reasons for academic isolation concern interpersonal relationships. Sibai et al. (2019, para. 6) found that "… some educators feel geographically isolated, while others feel socially isolated when they cannot make meaningful relationships with others in their fields". Academic isolation, sometimes based on social inexperience or other circumstances, is specifically prevalent amongst early career academics. Sibai et al. (2019, para. 1) reported that 64% of PhD candidates experience such feelings. It is also a well-known fact that postdoctoral fellows, who are often engaged in research projects in foreign countries, express feelings of isolation and being marginalised. This can happen when supervisors do not find the time to properly integrate them into a community of practice. Some supervisors merely regard postdoctoral fellows as useful sources for the research entity for increased research outputs, without any

acknowledgement of their personal needs or the necessity of wider academic and professional exposure.

Isolation may be the unintended consequence of certain faculty regulations or prescriptions in grant applications. Such regulations may encourage, even force, interuniversity collaboration, or require international partnerships, leading to a lack of collaboration with fellow researchers close-by in the same faculty. Sibai et al. (2019, para. 9) referred to a national phenomenon in the UK related to Research Excellence Framework, which has the purpose of assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions, according to which "… publications co-authored by two or more academics from the same department (are regarded as) as a single publication". Sibai et al. (2019, para. 9-10) pointed out that this measure promotes "competition between departmental colleagues rather than collaboration. Because of this pressure to perform, academics often feel obliged to disengage from potentially energising relationships with local colleagues and friends."

A last reason for isolation is that of relocation, sometimes associated with promotion, sometimes with retirement. Unfair discrimination, according to the SA constitutional provisions on fairness and equality, can (inter alia) be based on the grounds of origin or age. The effect of ageism and origin-based discrimination is similar to that of a postdoctoral fellow temporarily moving into an unfamiliar environment. Moving out of a well-known and safe environment may lead to isolation, either at the hand of the previous workplace (cutting ties) or unsuccessful attempts to become part of a new environment (cutting out). The resulting feelings of being cut off or cut out can result in a serious challenge to a person's well-being (Sibai et al., 2019, para. 11).

Regarding ageism, Nowak (2019) observed that many academics nowadays rather see retirement as an opportunity to "rewire". Those who successfully rewire, are those who realised the negative effects of isolation, which previously "inhibited creativity and innovative by creating boundaries in how they worked, behaved and thought about things". Nowak added that those who nowadays retire at the age of 65 (or earlier) are well placed to make a successful start to the new productive phase in their lives: "They have been exposed to the brilliance of technology and a new age of thinking which shows that age is not a barrier to entry or exit" (Nowak, 2019, para. 9).

Despite the negative effects of ageism being imposed upon older academics, sometimes at the hands of leadership in a previous workplace, the possibility of academic isolation due to this discriminatory practice can be successfully countered if an appropriate approach or strategy is implemented. "The biggest barrier is the mindset that may be stuck in former belief systems of the past" (Nowak, 2019, para. 9).

Effects of isolation

While it has been stated that many individual researchers and certain entities or institutions willfully and purposefully isolate themselves into silos, sometimes for a good reason, isolation most often has a negative effect, both on professional development and psychological level. Sibai et al. (2019, para. 11) found that "40% of academics, and more than half below the age of 35, view isolation at work as the main factor affecting their mental health. In universities, isolation pushes academics into distress, with many abandoning their research careers. Early career academics are particularly affected by isolation, because their jobs are not secure."

In a certain sense the opposite of academic isolation is collaboration, which is normally seen as an important factor leading to quality research outputs. Researchers

working in silos may well lack the encouragement and intellectual stimulation that go with collaboration with one or more peers. Interdisciplinary work normally leads to findings that, when implemented, can make a significant change to practice.

Isolation prevents a research community to be exposed to academic leaders. Capener (2015, para. 1) referred to the value of thought leadership, which is "the expression of ideas that demonstrate you have expertise in a particular field, area, or topic". Experienced, innovative but isolated scholars do not share their ideas openly and refrain from becoming thought leaders in their respective fields. They might disseminate their insights and findings through publications, but being physically or mentally isolated from their closer colleagues effectively deprive these potential collaborators or mentees from benefits.

One of the leaders in the field of thought leadership, Brosseau (n.d., para. 2) defined thought leaders as follows:

> *Thought leaders are the informed opinion leaders and the go-to people in their field of expertise. They become the trusted sources who move and inspire people with innovative ideas, turn ideas into reality, and know and show how to replicate their success.*

From this definition it is clear that academic isolation and the adoption of a silo mentality makes the development of thought leadership relatively impossible, because such people have to be approachable, available, trusted and inspirational.

Irrespective of the fact that some compelling reasons may exist for isolation, whether it is self-imposed or enforced, it is worth looking at appropriate approaches to combat isolation and silo forming.

Approaches to combat isolation

To break isolation starts with a certain approach or attitude towards interpersonal relationships, combined with a suitable view of what the research entails. Unsuccessful combating will be characterised by an unwillingness to share and communicate. Researchers, to break through isolation, must firstly have an attitude of collaboration and a general dissatisfaction with being isolated. They should see the benefits of academic collaboration for all that become involved in such a joint project. Researchers who aim at successfully combating isolation should, in terms of Kolowich's argument, blast academic silos (Kolowich, 2010, para. 2).

Once these two attitudinal traits are in place, approaches such as cooperative research and interdisciplinary research may be considered to prevent isolation or successfully fight existing isolation.

Cooperative research

Few academics are ready from day one to engage in cooperative research, let alone interdisciplinary research. Most early career researchers are still in the process of immersing themselves into the depth and width of their own discipline or field of expertise, which is an essential learning phase towards becoming an accomplished scholar. During this career phase it might be advisable for such researchers to work with a mentor and critical friend in order to master the intricacies and basic principles of their own field or expertise first. This may entail a period of self-directed study and being alone. A prerequisite for this initial phase is nevertheless to prevent a feeling of loneliness and isolation, but rather solitude in combination with regular social contact.

Soon after this phase a novice researcher might be advised to engage in collaboration with one or two peers under the guidance of a more experienced project leader. Surowiecki (in Linton, 2009, para. 7) claimed that "people are not as effective or productive when they work alone as they are when they collaborate with others".

Interdisciplinary research

Interdisciplinary research and multi-authored publications should not be regarded as the ultimate form of research endeavour. Researchers should strive towards a balance between sole authored and multi-authored publications. They should also develop the ability to conduct a quality project in their own discipline as well as making a meaningful contribution towards multidisciplinary academic work. Capener (2015, para. 1) found that "educators and institutions of higher learning can be the least innovative because they build silos and focus on deep learning rather than interdisciplinary problems and ideas".

Linton (2009, para. 7) asked the question: "So how does the professor break through the silo and form networks of relationships across campus and across departments?" One solution he offered is for such an academic

> to participate in a faculty learning community (FLC). FLCs provide an intentional strategy for breaking down the barriers between faculty members and encouraging interaction that will help them improve their effectiveness. (Linton, 2009, para. 7)

Friedlander (2022, para. 1) motivated from research conducted at Cornell University the necessity of interdisciplinary research as follows: "Solving societal problems such as climate change could require dismantling rigid academic boundaries, so that researchers from varying disciplines could work together collaboratively."

In his work on fighting isolation, Sibai et al. (2019, para. 6-14) offered the following strategies and approaches to be considered by either institutions or individuals:

- organise writing retreats, implement policies of office attendance, and set up mentoring structures to counter academic isolation and ensure that scholars are more connected;
- work actively and consistently towards better integration into research communities and do not stay "stuck in the lab";
- network "wildly" and attend regular social events to ensure visibility;
- encourage other scholars to connect and present during online workshops initiated and facilitated by themselves;
- join large research teams working on interdisciplinary projects;
- do not limit interaction to the sphere of the institution or academic work, but engage socially in hobbies and other interest groups.

Conclusion

In the wake of Covid-19 it is time for rebuilding societies worldwide, including higher education systems and institutions. Every measure should be taken to use the opportunity to its fullest. One prominent characteristic of pandemic related lockdowns was that of isolation and social distancing. Yet, isolation and silo mentality have been obstructing researchers' professional development and even healthy work lives for decades and hindered maximising research projects.

Two prominent approaches to combat isolation are that of cooperation (valuable especially for early career researchers) and interdisciplinary research, which

simultaneously breaches detrimental silo forming amongst scientists, maximises career development of those involved, and results in the most valuable research findings for the benefit of the wider society.

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