








How does research performativity and selectivity impact on the non-core regions of Europe? The case for a new research agenda

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Abstract

Higher education systems are caught between two dynamic processes, one referring to economic value and the other to status value. Although these political rationalities are presented as part of a coherent programme of reform and ‘modernization’, they pull higher education systems and the actors within them in contradictory directions. Their impact can collectively be referred to as research selectivity, since these rationalities encompass both research performativity and institutional practices of recognition and reward and subjective strategies. In this paper, we first aim to map the dominant orientations of higher education studies research and how they reflect the relationship between neoliberalism and the restructuring of higher education systems and research infrastructure. Our reading shows that this is a significant context for inquiring into research selectivity as it is enacted and, at the same time, suggests that we need to pay attention to the privileging of existing centres of higher education research and the relative absence of sustained focus on research selectivity in the non-core regions of Europe. Secondly, the paper puts forward the case for a sustained research agenda that focuses specifically on the identification of the differential impact of processes of research selectivity in non-core regions of Europe, organized around three intersecting themes – linguistic, epistemological, and disciplinary impact. Arguing for the importance and relevance of this research agenda for empirical research in Europe and globally, the paper emphasizes that its main objective is to create a critical space within which we can, collectively, think higher education otherwise.

Keywords Research selectivity · Performativity · Europe · Periphery

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Introduction

Research performance, and its measurement, has become a significant feature of increasingly globalized systems of higher education. Performance management generally, and research performance management specifically, have grown in prominence as systems of higher education become more closely aligned with national economic objectives in the context of economic and cultural globalization, as well as the emergence of international comparisons of higher education performance (Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Rauhvargers 2013; Zgaga 2014, 2015). Higher education systems are therefore caught between two dynamic processes, one referring to economic value and the other to status value (Marginson 2016). Demands that higher education produces discernible economic benefits for national economies (economic value), and high positions in global university rankings and publication metrics (status value), are translated into models of governance and funding priorities at the systemic level; performance management, recruitment, and progression systems at the institutional level; and individual strategies to negotiate between personal and institutional objectives and work-life balance at the subjective level. Collectively, these can be referred to as research selectivity since they encompass both what is often regarded as research performativity, as well as institutional practices of recognition and reward and subjective strategies of negotiating academics' positions within higher education institutions (HEIs). This also includes the forms of institutional exclusion experienced by academics in highly competitive research funding regimes such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), as discussed by Watermeyer and Olssen (2016). Although these political rationalities (Rose and Miller 2010) are presented as part of a coherent programme of reform and 'modernization', they pull higher education systems and the actors within them in contradictory directions. While the rationality of economic value emphasizes research and educational activities that produce applied forms of knowledge that can be commercialized and graduates who are 'work ready', status value is less concerned with the content and direction of research activity, and does not necessarily privilege market readiness, instead prioritizing continuous improvement in university rankings and citation indexes.

These rationalities and the various mechanisms they generate work to frame higher education systems, institutions, and academic workers as particular kinds of objects amenable to audit and measurement, and as oriented towards market concerns (Rose and Miller 2010). This involves the conversion of higher education as a public good into sets of economic activity concerned with the production of private forms of capital in terms of outsourcing of services and casualization of employment, marketization, and advancement of individual interests over public benefits (Brown 2011, 2016). Research becomes transformed into grant capture (economic income), while knowledge generation and production are converted into objects of competitive status value, both institutionally and individually. Busch (2017) articulates clearly why wider society should be concerned with these transformations of higher education. He argues that, faced with existential threats we need not just individual technical solutions, but to think our collective values and concerns otherwise, since these challenges cannot be met by a market logic. The extension of market principles to the knowledge work of higher education narrows down the range of knowledge that can be drawn upon to address the pressing existential crisis. That is, Busch contends, higher education has to be (re)thought as a public good.

We would add that part of the task of thinking higher education otherwise is to attend to the social processes and the politics of knowledge production. Connell (2013), in an analysis of

the hegemony of neoliberalism in Australian higher education, notes the neo-colonial nature of research selectivity and the way this can undermine and suppress local research cultures through reliance on rankings and impact factors. In order to think higher education otherwise, aimed at tackling the existential challenges in front of us, we also need to be concerned with the broad ecology of knowledge (de Sousa Santos 2014). Below we argue that the dominant narrative in the study of higher education is based on one generalized from the particular experience of Anglo-American academia. As we highlight, this leads to certain omissions. To summarize, we draw attention to the way higher education studies do not adequately address how the impact of research selectivity might be changing the concepts and languages we think with and through, and therefore what is available for us to meet the existential challenges of climate change, food insecurity, war, social inequalities, racism, etc. The dominance of a particularistic perspective can mean the intellectual landscape is limited because the epistemological and linguistic dynamics of research selectivity define what issues receive attention, funding, and publication. As was shown for various disciplines of social sciences and humanities (Demeter 2019; Heilbron et al. 2018; Wallerstein et al. 1996), these epistemological and linguistic concerns are of importance to those positioned in the more peripheral zones of Europe and the world, and too often marginal to those in the centre.

The following part of the paper begins by outlining how the policy driver of the knowledge economy in Europe has generated regional, national, and institutional interventions in the structure, financing, and focus of higher education. This is a significant context for inquiring into research selectivity as it is enacted. Next, we map the dominant orientations of higher education studies research and how they reflect the relationship between neoliberalism and the restructuring of higher education systems and research infrastructure. We draw attention to the privileging of existing centres of higher education research and the relative absence of sustained focus on the impact of research selectivity in the non-core regions of Europe. We then highlight how processes of research selectivity impact on some non-core regions of Europe in order to, finally, based on our review of the literature to date, present an alternative research agenda organized around linguistic, epistemological, and disciplinary questions, and argue for its importance and relevance in Europe and globally. This article is aimed at encouraging a discussion about these issues and to stimulate feedback on the proposed agenda.

Defining the issues

Europe in global higher education

The European Union is committed to the goal of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world, evident in the European knowledge triangle of education, research, and innovation. Higher education is therefore positioned as contributing directly to increased research and development capacity, innovation, and the development of human capital, as well as economic competitiveness (EC 2010). While higher education has traditionally played important roles in the production of knowledge and the training of professional elites (Shattock 2009), this new responsibility for adding economic value has resulted in higher education becoming a focus for sustained reform related to funding, governance, and research (Amaral et al. 2009; Musselin 2005). While these are global trends, within Europe they converge with the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). Academic work generally is therefore increasingly framed by

government steering of research priorities and the need to produce data for institutional performance indicators and benchmarking exercises, as well as reorient academic practice in line with these measures. There are increasing concerns about the distorting effects of this kind of research performativity, especially national and institutional responses to rankings and the publication metrics (Busch 2017; Hazelkorn 2015; Rauhvargers 2013).

One key challenge is to assess how such institutional responses structure academic practice, impact on academic identity and the historically formed modes of knowledge production and dissemination in a number of disciplinary fields, and transform the nature of knowledge production itself. Furthermore, these processes reinforce academic stratification globally. However, as we shall argue next, the non-core areas of European higher education are often absent from dominant critiques of research selectivity practices, and this is what this paper and the proposed research agenda aims to redress.

Tendencies and omissions in higher education studies

The more general move in higher education towards an emphasis on the knowledge economy provoked research interest in how HEIs were being developed as entrepreneurial enterprises. This has been variously characterized as the emergence of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ (Marginson and Considine 2000; Shattock 2009) or ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). This scholarship detailed the way institutional managers sought to more closely align research activity with intellectual property rights, and research commercialization. To a lesser extent, they also focused on the way such strategic developments impacted on academic identity and practice. Similarly, the shift from professional or collegial regulation to managerial regulation has been a focus for sustained examination. This has tended to conceive of changes in higher education governance and management in terms of New Public Management and the related micro-systems of evaluation closely associated with the emergence of forms of interventionist management practices (Deem et al. 2007; Fanghanel and Trowler 2008; Lynch 2010). This research has stressed the intensification of academic work and the increase in quality assurance systems that impact on academics’ work practices.

Research selectivity, specifically, can be seen as a sub-category of this wider transformation in higher education. A more recent iteration of the focus on the management of academic practice has drawn on concepts of audit (Power 1997, 2000, 2003). Research on the audit culture in higher education has paid attention to how performance management systems both determine academic practice and become internalized practices whereby academics manage their own behaviours in line with the demands of rankings and publication metrics (Craig et al. 2014; Sauder and Espeland 2009; Shore 2008; Wright and Shore 2003). This work echoes that of Henkel (2000) and Marginson (2000, 2006). An important implication of the effects of institutional and self-management is the way it may lead to changes in the nature of knowledge production itself. There is some evidence that the management of research selectivity in relation to publication indicators has effected behavioural change such as the proliferation of new journals to meet an increased demand for publication, and the production of short-term research publications designed to meet the timescale of the audit cycle rather than any natural gestation of knowledge production (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013; Elton 2000; Linková 2014; Wouters et al. 2015). As Bernstein (2000, p. 63) has predicted, an effect of research selectivity was that long-term, basic research which takes many years to complete and whose outcome is risky has been replaced by short-term applied research ‘with low risks and rapid publication’.

An illustrative example concerns the distorting effect of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) on economics teaching and research publications in the UK. The RAE was the research performance system that preceded the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK. As Harley and Lee (1997) (see also Lee 2006) have argued, the RAE has resulted in the increasing dominance of neoclassical economics in British universities. The key mechanism for this is decision-making around promotion, recruitment, and research priorities. Decisions about research priorities in light of the RAE have, these authors argue, led to hiring and promotion practices aimed at meeting the performative requirements of the RAE. In turn, this has resulted in a decline in non-neoclassical economics being offered in the university curriculum. These institutional behaviours are driven by the dominance of a small set of high-impact publications which appeared in journals that tend to privilege traditional or neoclassical economics and which became the basis by which performance was measured. Bias towards neoclassical economics is therefore built into the assessment process, affecting both teaching and research in economics. If such behavioural change is observable in the core of global and European higher education, we need to ask what are the effects in smaller and more politically peripheral higher education systems?

Research selectivity has also been critiqued for producing distorting effects in academic practice and knowledge production more generally. This includes the underrepresentation of the arts, humanities, and some areas of the social sciences, and the almost invisibility of non-English language publications, in rankings and publication metrics (Duszak and Lewkowicz 2008; Giannoni 2008; Hultgren 2018; Medgyes and Kaplan 1992; Rauhvargers 2013; Waltman and Van Eck 2012), the encouragement of instrumental behaviours whereby scoring high against research performance indicators becomes an objective in its own right, influencing choice of research topic, what to write, and where to publish (Elton 2000; Linková 2014; Wouters et al. 2015); and a methodological tendency to privilege elite institutions (Marginson 2016; Rauhvargers 2013). It seems clear that research selectivity is having a transformative effect on the practice of knowledge production and dissemination. Accordingly, the research terrain has been organized around an effort to trace the relationship between neoliberalism as ideology, economic rationale, and form of governance and the restructuring of higher education systems and the research infrastructure (Busch 2017). As highlighted by the review of research above, research selectivity privileges existing centres of power within higher education, particularly elite Anglo-American universities. Rankings reflect a certain hierarchy of regions and institutions. Rankings and publication metrics also have a reductive effect whereby all regions, institutions, and categories of practice become equated with each other regardless of differences in economy, historical development, value, or purpose (Hazelkorn 2015; Rauhvargers 2013). This ignores the substantial differences in resources and established reputational capital between higher education systems and HEIs, for instance between the UK and Central and Eastern European states (CEE). The specific qualities of systems or institutions are transformed into quantities, and so differences between systems and institutions are reduced to intervals in a zero-sum game.

Research agendas on research selectivity need to avoid reproducing and reinforcing these institutional, regional, and linguistic hierarchies. The non-core areas of European higher education are often absent from dominant critiques of contemporary research selectivity, and limited recognition is given to issues of the linguistic impact of rankings and publication metrics (Duszak and Lewkowicz 2008; Zgaga 2015, 2018). Also, limited attention is given to the impact on modes of knowledge, theories, and intellectual traditions in the non-core regions of Europe (Buchowski 2004; Warczok and Zarycki 2014). There is a need to examine how

these processes interact with systems of academic recruitment and promotion, gender, and linguistic and ethnic equality, as well as internal institutional hierarchies and tensions within particular national academic systems and disciplinary fields (Demeter 2019; Warczok and Zarycki 2018). In particular, the literature recognizes that although research selectivity tends to drive policy convergence, it interacts with local traditions and recent histories of higher education (Erkkilä 2014). The increased importance of international comparison in higher education, and the European Union's policy response to this, has problematized the idea of European higher education as a unified area of academic activity, as research selectivity is likely to differentially impact on academic work across different regions of Europe and different categories of HEI. However, as already argued, this problematization is limited by the fact that the research terrain reflects the empirical experience of the core regions of global higher education. Therefore, our concern is to investigate how research selectivity impacts on the more peripheral regions of Europe, and what the consequences are of this. This paper puts forward the case for a sustained research agenda that focuses specifically on the non-core regions of Europe, essential if we are to have a proper understanding of the impact of research performativity on academic practice and identity.

Taking account of the whole of Europe

In this part of the paper, we want to highlight particularities of how processes of research selectivity are impacting some of the non-core regions of Europe as a basis for arguing for a relevant research agenda. The notion of core–periphery relations stems largely from world-systems analysis that points to unequal economic exchanges, dynamics of development and underdevelopment, and interstate rivalries within the capitalist world economy (Wallerstein 2004). This perspective links the formation and transformations of social sciences' epistemologies, disciplinary divisions, and stratification from the nineteenth century onwards with patterns of hegemony and inequalities within the world system (Wallerstein 2001). Its application in studies of knowledge production and distribution, led authors to note global asymmetries in terms of academic collaboration, recognition, and circulation of ideas, as well as the economic and linguistic hindrances for non-core researchers and their institutions to gain greater visibility and acknowledgement internationally (Demeter 2019; Griffiths and Knezevic 2010; Heilbron et al. 2018; Ploszaj et al. 2018; Schott 1998). The notion of non-core encompasses not only peripheral zones but also semi-peripheries as those being 'in the middle' and striving to achieve more central status (Wallerstein 2004, 2008). Some authors also single out semi-core or semi-central states that are not hegemonic but possess capacities of regional influence (Lane 2016; Morales Ruvalcaba 2019). Such a problematization of non-core zones seems useful for the European academic sector. Despite a number of integrative forces, Europe exhibits diversity of national systems of higher education and research traditions, as well as disparities in economic potential (research infrastructures and financing, salaries and employment conditions), recognized 'high-impact' outlets, and status in terms of international outreach of intellectual production in local languages. Therefore, as discussed further, some regions – Central-Eastern and Southern Europe most notably – can be seen as rather peripheral or semi-peripheral. Some regions of North-West Europe might exhibit a combination of core-like capacities (high economic standing that translates into better financing) and certain periphery-like features (linguistic marginality). Moreover,

particular disciplines or research fields within both semi-peripheral and semi-central countries might differ in terms of positioning, integration, and recognition vis-a-vis core zones of knowledge production.

CEE countries, as an example, appear to face particular difficulties in relation to greater convergence around research performativity due to historical, economic, and institutional factors (Dobbins 2015; Dobbins and Knill 2009; Shattock 2009). During the communist era, all CEE countries witnessed a loss of academic autonomy, and increased state and ideological control. However, the temporal dynamics, i.e. changes within the system, and differences between individual countries in the Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia outside it should not be ignored not merely in relation to educational and cultural policies but also across academic fields with varying degrees of departure from official ideology and openness towards Western scholarship (Zgaga 2018; Karady and Nagy 2018; Warczok and Zarycki 2018). Following the transition from communism, evidence suggests that higher education in CEE countries is under extreme economic pressures. The relative economic weakness of CEE countries has led to a rapid decline in state funding of higher education. Simultaneously, there has been increasing demand for higher education leading to the development of new public and private HEIs (Kwiek 2012; Scott 2002), increasing institutional reliance on student fees (Kwiek 2014). This can mean that economic survival is a predominant issue at the institutional level, in contrast to national-level concerns about global rankings that lead to an emphasis on research productivity related to status competition. The relatively poor resourcing of research activity generally across CEE countries has meant that they are often not able to effectively attract additional research funding. Despite this, the ‘Bologna Process’ and the impact of rankings are seeing state and institutional leaders seek greater management of systemic and institutional outputs. This is taking the form of strategic state funding that places emphasis on the development of human capital, and applied knowledge and research; and the promotion of performance indicators, including those related to research activity (Dobbins 2015; Froumin and Smolentseva 2014; Kwiek 2014). Furthermore, while there is a marked trend toward compliance with European quality assurance standards (Kohoutek 2009), the particular modalities of this are not uniform (Wodak and Fairclough 2010).

Similar processes are seen in other peripheral zones of Europe. Portugal and Spain have followed similar paths of uneven development and convergence post-dictatorship (Magalhães et al. 2013; Perotti 2007). In Greece, the long-term resistance of academics towards the Bologna Process in the decade of 2000 was followed by a rapid institutionalization of a system of quality assurance (Stamelos and Kavasakalis 2017), with similar processes witnessed in Italy (Rebora and Turri 2013). While there has been significant policy and institutional alignment with Europe, Greek higher education has found it difficult to integrate into the ERA or EHEA (Vogopoulou et al. 2015). In particular, over the last decade, austerity policies have forced the Greek state to implement reforms in order to make its economy sustainable through measures such as reducing costs, saving available resources, and maximizing performance in the provision of public services, including in higher education (Zmas 2015). A recent report by the OECD (2017) on national policies for education notes that the quality assurance bodies in higher education are relatively new, and their implementation is still underway. In fact, little research has been done in Greece, or in the Republic of Cyprus, which has also undergone reforms in its higher education system in conditions of ‘crisis’, about the ways in which European and global policies on research performance management have been responded to at national, institutional, and individual academic levels. Recent research has also focused on the way women are disadvantaged in recruitment, promotion,

and research visibility (Sanchez de Madariaga and Raudma 2012), but less attention has been paid to the intersection of gender and research selectivity in the non-core regions of the EHEA. Moreover, while similar processes of gender bias and discrimination are seen to occur (Coate & Howson 2014), these processes appear to intersect with the high exodus of talented academics from the non-core regions of the EHEA and the so-called brain drain phenomenon (Giousmpasoglou and Koniorodos 2017; Hornstein Tomić and Taylor 2018; Linková and Henderson 2003).

The case for a new research agenda

Based on our review of the literature and identification of the need to specify the differential impact of processes of research selectivity in the non-core regions of Europe, we propose a research agenda organized around three intersecting themes – linguistic impact, epistemological impact, and disciplinary impact. As indicated in the introductory part, these themes can be analysed on multiple levels. The systemic level includes national and international policies and evaluation benchmarks that explicitly or implicitly prioritize certain research directions, themes, and approaches, as well as academic cultures, i.e. established patterns of global circulation of ideas, discourses on internationalization. The institutional level concerns formal and informal rules of particular academic institutions (or groups of institutions), especially in relation to recruitment, assessment, internationalization strategies and modes of operation, and discourses on academic good practice within and across disciplines. The subjective level pertains to academic performance of individuals and collaborating teams, career choices and trajectories, disciplinary attachments and thematic preferences, development of skills for international activity, the sense of autonomy, and recognition, etc. Therefore, our proposal for a research agenda includes sets of issues manifested on each of these levels (Bourdieu 2000).

Linguistic impact

Linguistic impact concerns the languages with which and through which academic workers think, and therefore the status of local research cultures and traditions and the relations of power with the normative centres of higher education (Connell 2013). An important aspect of the distorted effects of research selectivity is that publication and citation practices maintain the dominance of English. Although the use of a common lingua franca has advantages, it also has effects on equity and access to scholarly publications (Ferguson et al. 2001). There are concerns that English-language research is more frequently cited by scholars than their mother-tongue publications (Grabe 1988). Canagarajah (1996) points out that scholars who do not have access to English-language resources and thus do not include prestigious (English-language) references in their manuscripts are more likely to be rejected for publication. This leads to the marginalization of scholars from the periphery even when writing about their local communities, while their scholar counterparts in core regions become recognized for working on the same issues (Canagarajah 2002). Swales (1990) refers to periphery academic communities becoming ‘off-networked’ which in Canagarajah’s (1996) view results in some scholars being ‘consumers’ of the knowledge produced in central academic communities or mere providers of local empirical content against the background of core-produced theoretical concepts considered universal. An additional result of the dominance of English in scientific

publications is that anglophones are more likely to gain gatekeeping functions through editorial boards and referees (Ammon 2007; Flowerdew 2015). This has contributed to the increased standardization of scientific discourse with concerns being expressed about the importance of linguistic and rhetorical diversity in academic publishing (Mauranen 1994). Swales (1997:374) argues that English may be seen as a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, ‘a powerful carnivore gobbling up the other denizens of the academic linguistic grazing grounds’. Another aspect is a status of academic translations, which have been studied (e.g. Sapiro 2018; Sorá and Dujovne 2018), but which deserve more attention in relation to questions of research selectivity and recognition of translatory work as a form of ‘internationalized’ academic production.

Consequently, there is a need to generate evidence of impact on the linguistic aspects of research selectivity. Further inquiry should include a) evidence of strategic importance, at national levels, given to domestic languages and/or English in relation to academic publication, cooperation, and scientific exchange; b) evidence of the impact on professional advancement, research incentives, and institutional strategy related to English language requirements and/or competence; and c) evidence of academics’ subjective strategies in relation to language or location of publication, participation in English-medium scientific exchange, and developing linguistic competencies.

Epistemological impact

Epistemological impact refers to the concepts and theories through which and with which academic workers think, and the way certain forms of knowledge may be marginalized through research selectivity. For instance, Buchowski provides an account of North American and British scholarship’s shortage of references to local studies and theories in anthropology of Central-East European ‘post-socialism’ resulting in ‘a one-way street in the flow of ideas’ (Buchowski 2004 p.12). This can refer to more indigenous concepts that are not easily translated into English idioms without a fundamental loss of meaning, or the domination of certain theories and concepts taken up in the more powerful centres of higher education research (Connell 2007). Still another example is ‘peripheral’ recontextualizing of concepts developed in core zones, for instance, application of Bourdieu’s critical conceptual framework to express ideas legitimizing a neoliberal vision of the social order (Warczok and Zarycki 2014). The asymmetrical relationship between the core and periphery in the global production of knowledge can mean that academics from the global periphery can feel compelled to use concepts, theories, and methodologies that are seen to comply with the editorial preferences of dominant journals (Larson 2018; Alatas 2003). Such editorial preferences often disqualify non-core empirical cases and theoretical traditions as being ‘parochial’ or ‘unfamiliar’ to ‘international’ readers. A number of studies demonstrate how knowledge production in the global core of higher education is highly self-referential, relying on concepts, theories, and methodologies produced within the global core, whereas more peripheral regions are mostly consumers of core knowledge production (Collyer 2012; Connell 2007; Keim 2011). Krause (2016) illustrates how the North Atlantic dominance of sociological thought has acted as a model for sociology globally suppressing non-core epistemes.

Is there evidence, therefore, of enhancement of or transformation in key epistemological traditions, concepts, and ontologies as a consequence of a) national strategic priorities, including research funding opportunities, the normative practices of academic journals and conferences, and the status of translation work; b) the impact institutionally on professional advancement, research incentives and priorities related to epistemic preferences; and c) how

individual academics orient themselves to concepts, frameworks, and methodologies in the face of regional, national, or institutional research priorities?

Disciplinary impact

Disciplinary impact relates to how practices that often define particular disciplines may be transformed due to the pressure to produce particular kinds of knowledge and research outputs, not as a consequence of debate amongst epistemic communities but as a result of technologies of audit, surveillance, and measurement, as we saw in the case of economics. In peripheral contexts, there is a duality in social science fields of locally oriented ('national') and internationally oriented ('cosmopolitan') research activities as analysed by Warczok and Zarycki for Poland's sociology (Warczok and Zarycki 2014) and political science (Warczok and Zarycki 2018). Similarly, the introduction of strong research assessment regimes, for instance in Spain (Cañibano et al. 2018), produces changes in disciplinary publication behaviour in the humanities towards an increased intensity of publication output, publication outlets with a privilege of English-language journals and book publishers, and an emphasis on journals over books. Mingers and Willmott (2013, p. 1052) note how the introduction of preferential journal lists as a strategic and institutional response to university rankings can negatively redefine disciplinary practice, arguing that this transforms a 'horizontal diversity' in research into a 'vertical order'. McFarlane (2017) discusses a similarly distorting effect on disciplinary practice in Hong Kong. He highlights how the introduction of a research assessment system similar to the RAE/REF has resulted in the dominance of journal articles over other forms of academic publication in the humanities and social sciences, and an orientation towards empiricism over theory-driven scholarship.

Research should detail impact in relation to a) evidence of degrees of visibility/invisibility of disciplines (and subjects) due to research selectivity; b) evidence of disciplinary practices and knowledge being enhanced or distorted by quality assurance practices as component aspects of research selectivity at institutional level, as well as evidence of continuity or change in professional advancement related to research selectivity in disciplines; and c) evidence of individual academics' orientations towards horizontal diversity or vertical order in publication decisions.

While the analytical distinction of the three dimensions of impact seems justified, it is noteworthy that these dimensions intersect and the vital issues might include more than one of them, allowing for a variety of approaches: from policy and management studies to bibliometric and other 'big data' comparisons to biographic analyses of academic careers and ethnographies of international encounters, or their combinations. It is worth noting that the integration of these three dimensions of impact, in combination with their exploration at three levels (systemic, institutional, subjective), helps researchers avoid making simplistic assumptions about the relationship between neoliberal ideology and practice on the one hand and the construction of institutional and individual academic identities on the other.

Conclusion

This paper has used the term of research selectivity to describe transformations of national higher education systems and the emergence of a global field, regulated by standardization of research performance through, for instance, the use of metrics. Mapping the dominant

orientation of higher education studies research we have pointed to the relative absence of sustained focus on the impact of research selectivity in the non-core regions of Europe. Our argument is that the research terrain itself has tended to reflect the hierarchical ordering of global higher education, since higher education studies are disproportionately located in the global centres of higher education. It is important, therefore, to establish how research selectivity impacts in the non-core regions and institutions of Europe and to assess the ways in which they transform the nature of knowledge production itself across Europe. This leads us to ask: if research selectivity imposes a universal standard that reflects the dominance of certain forms of knowledge, and knowledge production and dissemination, how is this affecting the development and dissemination of knowledge locally; and how does this influence systems of staff recruitment and professional advancement?

The objective of this research agenda is not just to gather empirical evidence and critique dominant systems of research selectivity. It is also to create a critical space within which we can, collectively, think higher education otherwise. Normatively, this will also require examining how knowledge work in the form of scientific exchange and publication can give equal value to the diversity of linguistic, disciplinary, and epistemological traditions and practices. This is not only important for Europe, but has implications globally and seeks to address critiques and concerns in the Global South about the epistemological dominance of the Global North (Cupples and Grosfoguel 2018; Grosfoguel et al. 2016). Finally, we contend that this explicitly normative aspect of the proposed agenda does not make the latter scientifically less rigorous. For it is founded on the insight that in late modernity, characterized by normative indeterminacy (too little certainty, too many possibilities), ‘the development and expansion of global governance of education, capable of absorbing more and more elements through (the inevitably reductive) self-referential prism of performance’ (Mangez et al. 2017, p. 7), needs to be interrupted by the action of interest groups, here academic researchers, who by connecting higher education with other points of reference could have a say in the determination of their future orientation (Mangez, et al. 2017 in Mangez et al. 2017, p.11).

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