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Professional Alienation of Academics: Qualitative Analysis

Silvia Rogošić

Abstract: In recent decades, neoliberal ideology has increasingly shaped the systems of science and higher education in many countries worldwide and is often the cause of professional alienation of academics (e.g., Gachago et al., 2023). Deriving from Seeman's theory (1959; 1976) according to which social conditions create one or more dimensions of alienation and related behaviours, this paper examines whether and in what ways academics in Croatia may be alienated from their profession. Therefore, group interviews were conducted in five focus groups with a total of twenty-one academics (employers at 5 scientific/higher education institutions that participated in this research). Participants in the study have various associate, scientific, teaching, and scientific-teaching titles in the social, humanistic, and interdisciplinary fields of science. Research findings indicate the presence of different dimensions of professional alienation of Croatian academics (powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and self-estrangement) but it also provides insights into the positive aspects of working in the field of science and higher education. Participants often emphasized the link between the features of academic capitalism and dimensions of professional alienation of academics in the field of social sciences and humanities. The possible long-term consequences of these trends are discussed herein.

Keywords: academics, academic capitalism, neoliberal ideology, professional alienation.

Introduction

Over the last three decades, universities and research institutes have been influenced by neoliberal capitalism (Anderson, 2006; Troiani, 2021). Under the influence of neoliberal ideology, market logic is being promoted in the system of science and higher education; universities and research institutes are increasingly perceived as business entities, and students as consumers of educational services; there is an increasingly frequent race to rank educational institutions; there is an increased focus of professors and researchers on quantitative performance indicators (number of published research papers or approved research projects in which there is often a lack of original scientific contributions); there is growing pressure on academics to commit to profit-generating research; working conditions are similar to those in the corporate sector; there is increasing uncertainty as more jobs related to the science and higher education system have the characteristics of precarious employment; the engagement of researchers and university professors outside of standard working hours is becoming commonplace; academics devote less time to research and teaching due to increased bureaucracy; the autonomy of universities in decision-making is being compromised; the sense that universities and research institutes are places of critical thinking, freedom of research and creativity is almost lost (see Liesmann, 2008; Münch, 2011; Alvesson, 2017).

The perspectives of some academics diverge from the logic and new priorities within the science and higher education system (see, e.g., Poutanen, 2022) contributing to the professional alienation of academics as suggested by numerous studies (e.g., Gachago et al., 2023). Professional alienation of academics is a concept that refers to the perception or sense of separation, exclusion, or distancing from learning processes, research, and other academic activities and is often associated with the subjective states of the individual (feelings of dissatisfaction, social isolation, lack of motivation, anxiety, etc.). Professional alienation of academics, among other things, is a consequence of the demand for publishing as many research papers as possible, which is why the quantity of production, for example in the field of social sciences and humanities, becomes more important than the quality of papers i.e., their meaningfulness (according to Alvesson et al., 2017). The rationalisation processes imposed on universities and research institutes, especially the transition from *essential* to *formal* rationality (characterised by predictability, control, calculation, and efficiency) contribute to the spread of meaninglessness in academic work as shown by the findings of research conducted in Poland by Finkielsztejn & Wagner (2023). Some of the factors that could contribute to professional alienation of academics are illustrated by Graeber (2018, para. 5):

In most universities nowadays — and this seems to be true almost everywhere — academic staff find themselves spending less and less time studying, teaching, and writing about things, and more and more time measuring, assessing, discussing, and quantifying the way in which they study, teach, and write about things or how they propose to do so in the future.

In addition, many scholars and university teachers believe they cannot influence current policies and *rules of the game* (Alvesson et al., 2017) suggesting they feel helpless. The pressure to adapt the system of science and higher education to the neoliberal imperative of profitability and efficiency increases workloads (Kuntz, 2012), which elevates the level of anxiety and stress among members of the academic community (Shin and Jung, 2014). Kinman & Wray (2014) indicate that academics in Great Britain are more stressed than the average British worker. The findings of the research conducted in South Africa (Gachago et al., 2023) suggest that all academic staff who participated in the study have experienced some form of professional alienation (although they have experienced it differently). Researchers explained professional alienation of academics as a direct consequence of the neoliberal (entrepreneurial) approach at universities in South Africa (Gachago et al., 2023). Similarly, some university teachers and researchers in Finland are dissatisfied with the management of universities and feel alienated from their professional identities as a consequence of academic capitalism (Kuusela 2020; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013). Although these influences are far more serious in countries such as the United States or Great Britain, neoliberal ideology and market principles are slowly penetrating the Croatian system of science and higher education. The impact of these policies on higher education in Croatia is manifested in the growing presence of private educational institutions, the removal of economically unviable content from educational curricula (Beroš, 2018), the restriction of university autonomy, a high degree of bureaucracy in the science and higher education system and more.

To better understand this paper, it is necessary to highlight some important characteristics of the Croatian system of science and higher education¹. The holders of scientific activity are public research institutes, higher education institutions, and other legal entities such as the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, state institutes, museums, archives, etc. (a total of 191 scientific institutions according to the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, 2024). There are a total of 117 higher education institutions in the

¹ More information about the Croatian system of science and higher education is available on the official website of the European Union: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/croatia/higher-education> and on the website <https://www.euraxess.hr/croatia/research-croatia>.

Republic of Croatia: 10 public universities, 4 private universities, 72 constituents of public universities, 13 public polytechnics, and 18 private polytechnics (European Commission, 2024). The functioning of institutions in the science and higher education sector and the work of employees in the system are regulated, among other acts, by the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity (OG 119/2022) and the Act on Salaries of Civil and Public Servants (OG 155/2023). The Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity (OG 119/2022) is often criticized by academics for reducing the autonomy of universities. The abolition of university autonomy is reflected in power distribution (institutions of higher education on the one side and the governing ministry on the other). According to the mentioned law, the governing ministry proposes the largest part of the institutional financing in the system of science and higher education and has a large impact on (re)shaping their institutional goals. In addition, according to the new Act on Salaries of Civil and Public Servants (OG 155/2023), the research institutes' directors, rectors, and deans will evaluate professors and scientists once a year. Those who receive the lowest evaluation grade are threatened with termination of employment contracts. The Ministry of Science, Higher Education and Youth will prescribe the procedure and criteria for evaluating university professors and scientists (although the advancement to higher scientific and teaching titles is regulated by other acts), threatening the autonomous position of university teachers and scientists. Accordingly, it is assumed that the current legislative framework could be an important factor influencing the satisfaction of those employed in Croatia's science and higher education system.

However, there are no recent studies on the professional alienation of Croatian academics. Therefore, this study aims to examine whether scientists and university professors in Croatia experience professional alienation and how it manifests. To gain a broader understanding of academics' perception of their professional identity, we also examined the positive aspects of working in the science and higher education system. The discussion revolves around how academics' experiences and attitudes are linked to the features of neoliberal academic capitalism.

Seeman's theory and its application in the analysis of professional alienation of academics

In many studies examining the alienation of individuals, authors often use Seeman's theoretical framework (e.g., Fischer 1973; Middleton 1963) which is partly based on Marx's theory of alienation (1844/2007; 1867/1976). According to Marx, alienation must be defined objectively, and he does not hesitate to talk about alienated labour even in the absence of real dissatisfaction among workers (Schacht 1971 according to Wallimann, 1975). Seeman

(1959; 1967; 1972; 1975) partially relies on Marx's works when explaining the concept of alienation, but to a greater extent emphasises the role of perception and individual experiences, which will also be addressed in this research.

Seeman (1959) believes that alienation has five dimensions: feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Seeman (1959) aimed to determine the social conditions that produce these five dimensions of alienation or their consequences. The assumption is that social conditions create one or more dimensions of alienation and related behaviours.

According to Seeman (1959, p. 785) powerlessness is the first dimension of alienation and is defined as *the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his behaviour cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks*. Blauner (1964) offered a similar definition whereby powerlessness is a dimension of alienation that arises because of the lack of control over the immediate process of work. Powerlessness, therefore, refers to the perception of individuals about their environment i.e., experiencing themselves as puppets governed by external factors who, instead of regulating their own time, turn into their victims (Augusto, 1996). Researchers and university teachers may feel helpless within a hierarchical structure in which making essential decisions is concentrated in the hands of politicians or economists for whom profit or other goals are often more important than scientific achievements. This aspect of alienation is examined by considering the extent to which academics believe they can influence important decisions in the sphere of science and higher education.

The second dimension of alienation according to Seeman (1959, p. 786) is meaninglessness, defined as a situation in which *the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe the individual's minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met*. In this case, the worker does not see the connection of his work with a larger system of work (Kanungo, 1979) i.e., he cannot see how his work contributes to the common good. The need for meaning is an innate human need, and frustration over not meeting the need for meaning can cause deep anger, self-hatred, and resentment of life (Diamond 1996, 29 according to TenHouten, 2016). An increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes can diminish the real value of knowledge and learning, so academics may feel that they are conducting meaningless research and authoring meaningless papers. Academics may consider their work to be separate from broader intellectual aspirations.

The third dimension of alienation i.e., normlessness (Seeman, 1959). Seeman (1959, p. 787) stated that this occurs when the social norms governing an individual's behaviour are *weakened or no longer effective as the rules of behaviour*. To evaluate ourselves, our abilities, and our opinions we depend

on group norms (Festinger 1954 according to Sarfraz, 1997). If the group does not provide clear information about the standards of behaviour, individuals are not perceived as part of the group and, as a result, perceive the situation as the absence of norms (Sarfraz, 1997), which contributes to the individual's sense of alienation. Norms related to the science and higher education system (e.g., laws, ordinances, documents regulating the work of academics and academic institutions, etc.) change rapidly, are unstable, and often do not serve scientific objectives, which is why scientists may consider them ineffective. Frequent changes in professional norms are often driven by market forces and external demands, leading to ambiguity regarding the values academics should strive for. Such a situation can lead to confusion and insecurity about academic goals and priorities, which can also be one of the causes of professional alienation among academics.

According to Seeman (1959), self-estrangement is defined as *the loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work*, i.e., work is an instrumentalised activity because it is not rewarding but is considered a means to achieve some other ends. Marx (1959/2007) associated self-estrangement with the activity of the worker other than his spontaneous activity. Fromm (1955/2008) estimated that an alienated person does not express creativity through the production process in which he participates. Thus, the pressure on academics to adapt to external standards and expectations (such as publishing as many papers as possible – of questionable scientific contributions) can lead to a sense of detachment from personal interests and intrinsic motivation. In this case, the academic's job is not to acquire new scientific knowledge; it serves the achievement of other goals, such as advancing to higher teaching and scientific positions. Such conditions reduce intellectual autonomy and negatively affect creativity, and this type of work is not a self-fulfilling experience.

According to Seeman (1959, 788-789), isolation is experienced by *those who, like the intellectual, assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in a given society*. Brooks, Hughes, & Brooks (2008, p. 48) also point out that isolation is not a physical separation but an emotional experience i.e., *one may feel isolated in the middle of a crowd if one does not share the cultural values, beliefs and/or norms of the group*. If an individual considers group norms to be too restrictive and conflict with his personal goals, the individual becomes isolated from the group (Sarfraz, 2019) i.e., alienated. Personal disagreement with the goals and new priorities within the science and higher education system, the competitive nature of the academy, inefficient professional norms, and high workload can contribute to a sense of isolation among university teachers and researchers. Collaboration and collective learning can be eroded, leading to a fragmented and individualistic academic environment.

Objective and research questions

This study aims to examine whether and in what ways academics in Croatia may be alienated from their profession, what are the positive aspects of working in the science and higher education system, and whether the attitudes and perceptions of academics are linked to the increasing influence of neoliberal policies. Many studies (e.g., Kuusela 2020; Gachago et al, 2023) suggest that in Western countries, professional alienation of academics is becoming more frequent and is largely caused by academic capitalism. Accordingly, it is assumed that research conducted in Croatia will result in findings that point to various aspects of professional alienation of academics as a consequence of the increasing influence of neoliberal policies.

Methodology

Data collection process

In 2023, employees of five academic institutions in Croatia were invited to participate in qualitative research. In total, there were five groups (each included between 3 and 6 respondents) who participated in semi-structured focus group interviews. Before the interview, the respondents signed an informed consent form which emphasised that interviews would be recorded, that audio recordings would be available only to the principal investigator and that the respondents' data would not be publicly disclosed.

Sample

The research included researchers/teachers at the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies in Zagreb; the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb; the Faculty of Croatian Studies, University of Zagreb; the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split and the Faculty of Law, University of Split. The sample was made up of 21 respondents with various associate, scientific, teaching, and scientific-teaching titles in the social, humanistic, and interdisciplinary fields of science. The respondents were between 30 and 64 years of age at the time of the interview. A total of 5 men and 16 women were interviewed.

Research instrument

A protocol has been prepared for conducting semi-structured group interviews by the theoretical concepts of Seeman (1959), including questions about the perception of the meaningfulness of research in the social and humanistic field, the level of influence of university teachers and researchers on making important decisions in the science and higher education sector, attitudes on currently applicable norms (regulations governing the advance-

ment of researchers and university professors, Collective agreement on science and higher education (2019), and similar documents), level of intrinsic motivation and adaptability (fitting in) to the work environment. Furthermore, teachers were also asked about the positive aspects of working in the field of science and higher education. Responses to these questions reflect whether the respondents experience professional alienation, and they include explanations of the causes of their subjective states.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of group interviews were transcribed, and QDAa Miner Lite v. 2.0.9. software was used for qualitative data analysis. After a detailed reading of the transcripts, certain codes were associated with the parts of the text. Codes briefly describe, or summarise, the content of the respective text and allow categorisation and organisation of the text, which facilitates the analysis. Thematically related codes are linked to each other and grouped into broader categories. At the end of the analysis, there were 9 such categories which included a total of 29 codes. This enabled more comprehensive and precise answers to the question of whether academics experience professional alienation and the factors associated with their perceptions.

Research findings

All categories and codes are presented in Table 1: Results of qualitative analysis of group interviews.

All the interviewed teachers mentioned the issue of being overburdened with administrative tasks, which, according to Seeman's theory (1959), can be considered an aspect of meaninglessness, one of the dimensions of academic alienation (as it prevents them from being committed to scientific work and teaching). The respondents, for example, stated:

What bothers me in this job is hyper-bureaucracy and content administration. It is impossible to break through the piles of papers, obligatory and data entry tasks, and do what we really need to do. Another component that contributes to the dimension of meaninglessness, as named by Seeman (1959), is the hyperproduction of research papers. This is how the respondents describe it:

The papers that are being published have very low value, they don't offer any novelties because it's very difficult to produce something new, obviously if 500 people write 200 papers, the odds are there won't be many quality papers among them. That is what we have in science today, thousands and thousands of new papers that keep rehashing the same thing.

Table 1: Results of qualitative analysis of group interviews

Categories	Codes
Meaninglessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the meaninglessness of numerous administrative tasks and the increase of bureaucracy - the meaninglessness of hyperproduction of research papers (emphasis on quantity, not quality) - the meaningless of publishing papers that are socially useless because policymakers often overlook the findings of scientific research in the field of social sciences and humanities
Powerlessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - feeling powerless due to the inability to solve problems in the system of science and higher education at the national and institutional level due to global tendencies that go in the opposite direction - feeling powerless because of lack of time to engage and contribute to the introduction of certain changes in the system of science and higher education
Normlessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - institutions themselves may interpret certain parts of the Collective agreement on science and higher education (2019), so there is a substantial difference between certain institutions and inequitable distribution of individual responsibilities within the same institution - norms grant more authority to institution leaders and less to scientists - frequent changes in promotion regulations.
Self-estrangement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no space for creativity - no time for professional development (reading, writing, etc.) - considering a job change - job as a means of ensuring subsistence
Towards isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - individualistic academic environment - pragmatic colleagues - the selfishness of colleagues
The influence of neoliberal ideology on the perception of jobs in science and higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - dominance of market principles in the system of science and higher education - marginalisation of social and humanistic disciplines at universities - universities and research institutes as dwindling places for critical thinking, freedom of research and creativity - extreme working hours - public funding of research projects is insufficient
Positive sides of working in the system of science and higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - working with students - flexible working hours - engaging in research work and topic of your choice - dissemination of scientific findings that can be practically used
Personal responsibility (versus powerlessness)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the ability to learn from the occurrence of negative phenomena (such as hyperproduction in science) and responsibility for changing the current situation - directing research topics that would be more socially and scientifically useful - by reviewing, prevent the publication of low-quality scientific papers

Table 1 extension

Researchers and university teachers often publish research results that are potentially socially useful, but a significant problem is that policymakers rarely consider these findings, which could serve as the basis for introducing changes in certain social subsystems (e.g., in education). This indicates one of the causes of academic alienation related to the dimension Seeman (1959)

refers to as *meaninglessness*. Below are some of the statements that support the findings:

It started to bother me, the fact that I'm doing something which isn't put to use, that I'm doing something for the sake of us who read each other's papers or don't read them at all.

We can say that our data, our studies, and our results are not read or referenced by anyone, at least not by those who should be doing it.

Graeber (2018) and other scientists have noted similar problems in the academic sector. Excessive bureaucratisation and inability to be seriously engaged in scientific work lead to what Graeber (2018) terms the “bullshitization” of academic life. By this term, Graeber (2018) depicts some characteristics of today’s science and higher education system which is related to academic alienation, resulting in similar subjective states for individuals, such as dissatisfaction.

This research also confirmed that powerlessness is the next important dimension of alienation, which is in line with Seeman’s theory (1959). Some respondents indicated that they feel powerless to change negative trends in the system of science and higher education when it comes to social sciences and humanities. The statements below substantiate this position:

From our experience, when we tried to sort some things out (...) we approached the Ministry, the MPs, and the judiciary, we wrote to them, and it was to no avail. I don't believe that anything can be changed in our country, and since we know that the situation is similar in other countries in Europe, etc. (...) social sciences and humanities are losing their status and significance, people are beginning to feel frustrated there etc., I think that the odds of us as researchers to change this are slim, in our lifetime.

Similarly, many academics around the globe have noticed that the social sciences and humanities have faced a crisis in recent decades. Al Qawasmi and Zweiri (2022) stated that there is a growing perception that the social sciences and humanities are witnessing a steady decline in their presence in academia. This observation applies not only at the university level but is also evident in earlier stages of education, with a clear shift in schools away from courses in the social sciences and humanities and towards more science-based subjects.

In addition, the feeling of powerlessness stems from the lack of time for engagement that would be aimed at changing the existing legislative framework, which is confirmed by the following quote:

So, every engagement to change the system takes a lot of time and that is why a lot of people don't get involved, and we tacitly get to the point

where you complain about it to someone over coffee, but you're not going to do anything about it.

Research worldwide confirms the large proportion of overtime work in academia. For example, it was found that 37.9% of research participants (university professors in Brazil) work more than 46 hours a week (de Paula and Boas, 2017). Working overtime could negatively affect the quality of academic work and make it difficult for academics to actively participate in decision-making regarding changes to the legislative framework (due to a lack of time), reinforcing their sense of powerlessness.

The respondents indicated that research institutes and higher education institutions may provide different interpretations of certain paragraphs of the Collective Agreement on Science and Higher Education (2019) which leads to numerous problems. The respondents have, thus, stated the following:

Laws are giving greater powers to the principals, deans, and rectors, and you are increasingly narrowing the freedom of researchers.

What we had (...) was a complete misinterpretation of the Collective Agreement on Science and Higher Education (...). We were required to be on a minimum of 3 projects. Which is insane, because you can't, at least I can't, do 3 things at once with the same quality.

You must have 10% of the institutional contribution (referring to the provisions of the Collective Agreement), which should be the same for everyone, but the burden is not the same for everyone. So, someone who attended one meeting of the Research Council in three months deserved the same 10% (of institutional contribution) as I did being the editor of the journal, or as a colleague who was the head of the Department and an editor of the journal for 8 years at the same time.

In addition, there are frequent changes to the ordinance on the advancement of researchers and university teachers. This often puts the respondents in an unenviable position because it creates confusion in terms of the advancement criteria and the need to continuously adapt to new requirements:

There is a certain volatility in different regulations and laws on science (...) but it would certainly be better if these laws were more stable, that they change less often, so to speak, without you having to worry about whether something will change and how something will be evaluated (this refers to evaluating certain types of tasks for higher teaching or scientific titles).

The statements of academics are related to the dimension of alienation that Seaman (1959) refers to as *normlessness*. This situation is similar in foreign universities, where the frequent change of norms confuses the goals that

academics should strive for. This confusion is often related to strengthening neoliberal policies in science and higher education (Alvesson et al., 2017) by encouraging constant changes in quantitatively measurable performance criteria and efficiency measures, thus contributing to academic alienation.

In addition, researchers indicated that working conditions do not provide space for creativity, reading books, and the peace that is necessary to engage in research work, which is supported by the following statements:

Is there anything creative about you assigning me to 5 projects and me running from one to the other, to the third one? This can't be creative; you can only do what you are required.

Research work seeks an optimal temporal dimension in which you retreat into your space, it seeks literature that is available to you (...). I am not satisfied with that because a professor should have one temporal dimension in which to create, work, and produce works that will have a purpose other than the one for the professor's advancement.

A minor number of respondents continuously or occasionally consider changing jobs due to dissatisfaction with their current position. Some of them noted:

We are constantly considering changing profession. But maybe that's the trick because we're not appealing enough, like STEM or some other areas. I think, however, that we are more limited in our possibilities of choice if we want to do something related to our profession, and not dabble in other stuff, or I don't know, do something out of our area of expertise.

Some respondents do not perceive scientific writing as a fulfilling experience but perceive it as a means of ensuring subsistence. For example, one of them declared:

I believe that the criteria, particularly the quantitative ones, are awful and overly stringent. They are pushing us towards a situation where we're merely producing papers, without having the time to think about them. Our doctoral theses are ending up in a way that we don't even have time to reflect on what we're writing, we're just writing, writing, writing to ensure our subsistence.

The statements of the interview participants point to the dimension of alienation Seeman (1959) refers to as *self-estrangement*, which is manifested through a description of academic work that is not intrinsically satisfying. According to Fromm (1955/2008), their alienation is associated with not expressing enough creativity through the production process in which they participate.

The respondents are not tied, but some of their answers suggest that some academic communities have the characteristics of an individualistic envi-

ronment, with a certain number of conformists, and pragmatically oriented and egocentric individuals, which may cause social isolation in the future. University teachers stated:

I would say that there are too many conflicts and a lack of dialogue. In terms of expectations and reality, I thought people were more willing to stand side by side in some situations, but obviously, they are individualistic and pragmatic.

I expected things to be the way they are, with a lack of dialogue and a lack of collegiality, because I realised that this job is associated with a large amount of ego (...). That part wasn't shocking to me.

Graeber (2013) notes a similar phenomenon: *There was a time when academia was society's refuge for the eccentric, brilliant, and impractical. No longer. It is now the domain of professional self-marketers.* In addition to Graeber (2013), an individualistic and competitive atmosphere within the academy is noticed by other authors. Research in New Zealand (e.g., Carson et al., 2013) shows that negative effects, such as a high level of stress, outweigh the potential gains that competitive academic systems bring about and present clear consequences of neoliberal change. These trends are typical for highly developed Western countries and contribute to academic alienation, but we assumed that Croatia is not completely exempt from them either.

In their responses, the researchers linked the influence of neoliberal ideology to negative trends in science and higher education. Thus, the respondents associated global trends in education with the goals of capitalist neoliberal economics:

If the market dictates development, we have completely lost the battle in this context, primarily because no one (...) of the companies wants to develop thinking people, but people who will perform certain tasks, who are oriented towards the increasing capital. Especially not people who think critically and question the settings of the current world, the direction it is going and how it is organised.

Furthermore, the respondents inquired whether people today are educated for anything other than the needs of the labour market:

We are a society overpowered by economics, we have economised all the subsystems in society, and that is why we are talking about the labour market. Is there any other subsystem besides the labour market that seeks educational content and educational achievement? The fact that economics has taken hold of all systems, and then constantly, I can't stand that sentence..." that's what the labour market requires". But do we, as the education system, require anything, are we a subsystem in society, can we impose anything?

They noted that universities themselves operate according to market principles:

So, universities are money factories, we live in a consumerist consumption society, today consumption has replaced what was once production, we are actually at the service of consumerism.

As long as we have 500 students, as long as there are so many people in our courses, by definition, as long as there are so many of them, they will be disinterested, and we won't be able to reach them. And they will be dissatisfied, unhappy, and unprepared for what is expected of them. So, reduction is the key to any discussion around the sustainability and efficiency of our processes. This, of course, is an economic issue because more people mean more money for capitations, and the system does not really reproduce itself but eats itself from within. It's better to have less but spend smarter.

Similarly, UK research findings indicate that higher education institutions now treat students as consumers with customer expectations and satisfaction (Brown & Carasso, 2013). Higher education research has focused extensively on what staff and universities should do for their students, rather than what students are expected to do for their degree (Wond & Chiu, 2017) which can potentially undermine academic integrity and rigour and increase academic alienation.

Research participants highlighted the pervasive marginalisation of the social sciences and humanities at the national and global levels:

Neither the ministry nor the agency acknowledges the researchers from the social sciences and humanities, I think that in our country (...) in the public space, but also internationally, social sciences and humanities come second. They promote the STEM field of science; STEM, STEM, STEM... and I think that's something that contributes to our frustration. But it's not just in Croatia, it's the same outside of Croatia, they keep forcing the connection of science with the economy. I mean, there are some things that you just can't connect with the economy, so what does that mean, that these sciences must be annihilated?

The pressure to adapt the science and higher education system to the imperative of profitability and efficiency is one of the most important features of neoliberal academic capitalism. In this system, social sciences and humanities have a significantly less favourable status than STEM fields, which is a source of great dissatisfaction among scientists in the social and humanistic fields. This phenomenon has also been noticed by scientists abroad dealing with the topic of academic alienation (e.g., Kuntz, 2012; Gachago et al., 2023) caused by the expansion of neoliberal values at universities.

One teacher also referred to changes in academic values and mentioned the threats to the freedom of the academic community:

The problem is that this job has lost its reflective capacity and has been reduced to instrumentality (...). The idea is that we must reflect on what we are doing, and not meet the demands that someone on the outside imposes on us. Because the idea of academia is the idea of freedom, and the idea of freedom is at its core the idea of struggle, of non-acceptance. That's the point. If we are going to take the messages from some commercial, political, and ideological arrangements that we must carry forward, then we no longer exist as an academic community.

Extreme working hours have become an increasingly common feature in science and higher education. In only one in five focus groups, the respondents reported working less than 40 hours a week on average. In most other focus groups, they pointed out that they were working a lot more, e.g.:

I don't work less than 10 hours a day. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but it gets compensated the next day, so, it's certainly 10 hours a day.

Given that public investments in science and higher education are insufficient, academics themselves must ensure the funding for scientific projects from different resources. Thus, one of the respondents stated:

We are turning into funding seekers, and now so much focus is on seeking research, now we must constantly look for sources of funding, etc. If I wanted to be an economic manager, I wouldn't have worked in science.

The respondents also indicated the similarity of the science and higher education system with the banking/corporate sector. Accordingly, some of them noted:

For us, things are starting to look like in certain channels, which are quite well-structured, I'm not going to say it's like working in a bank, but it's going in that direction.

Although the respondents noticed many shortcomings of the systems of which they are a part, many academics reported ambivalence towards the work they perform. Employees of the research institute explained their point of view as follows:

I have an ambivalent relationship with my job. I genuinely love this part of the job, the research, the work in the archives, but I try to ignore and disregard its structure, how the work is organised, the lack of concepts, ideas and any sense, and eventually the confrontation of it all, so that I would not be frustrated, which is why I took up this hobby, holding lectures in my free time.

The worst frustration is when you are attracted to something on the one hand, and on the other hand the result repels you, and you want it to be different.

According to Mula-Falcón & Caballero (2022), numerous studies conducted worldwide emphasised that there are many academics who, due to the influence of neoliberal ideology on the educational social subsystem, have mixed emotions related to their work (i.e. they expressed ambivalently) and have similar attitudes to the respondents in this study. We assume that these are mostly employees who have been in the system of science and higher education for a long time since they can compare working conditions in the past and today, which cannot be claimed for their younger colleagues.

The respondents also cited the advantages of working in science and higher education. University teachers, as well as employees of the research institute, who are often external associates at faculties, pointed out that they enjoy working with students, for example:

I am the happiest while working with students, in that immediate work with students. I am especially pleased with working in the classroom, I work as a methodological exercises' supervisor (for students) at two Zagreb training schools; I get to prepare students for the achievement of the methodical process, creating new methodical templates, which is something that fulfils me.

Flexible working hours are perceived by the respondents in most cases as a positive side of this job. For example, an academic noted:

Since I have small children, this flexibility means a lot to me. Our children didn't have to be in the nurseries constantly from 8 am to 4 pm, we didn't have to send them to kindergarten too soon. I can work at home one or two days a week or not work at all if I arrange it that way. So that kind of flexibility, I think, is the most positive thing about this job.

One of the most pleasant aspects of academic' work is the possibility to engage in research work on a topic of one's own choice. However, most academics pointed out that such moments are increasingly rare. One of the answers that substantiated this point is the response of a university teacher about to retire, where she can finally devote herself to topics that interest her:

This enjoyment in science, which was once a privilege, has disappeared ... the fact that I am currently writing a paper of my preference compensates for this frustration.

In addition, academics are pleased when their data are used for practical purposes, although it is not very frequent, considering the respondents' earlier responses. One researcher stated:

I'm happy when I manage to find some practical application for all the data that I produce constantly. For example, recently there have been some professional panels of teachers who deal with minority issues or the experiences with refugees in schools. A place where I can give the data that I've collected, that I have, that I've been "sitting on" for a while, that someone might be using some of it.

The statements revealed that the research participants are still aware of the positive sides of their job, which confirms the presence of internal conflict related to their professional identity. The dichotomy between traditional and new demands in science and higher education contributes to their internal conflict. Many authors tried to identify this conflict as the controversy between what academics want to be and what they are able to be (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Barnett; 2013 according to Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022); what they want to be and what they must be (Saura & Bolivar, 2019 according to Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022); or what they believe they are and what they really are (Angervall & Ustafsson, 2014 according to Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022) due to the policies enacted by neoliberal ideology.

Moreover, there are certain opinions that researchers can learn from the phenomenon of hyperproduction, i.e., focus more on the quality of research work and influence the changes of current trends in science and higher education. Thus, one of the respondents pointed out:

If we've come to realise that hyperproduction is bad, we must ask ourselves: what have we recognised as bad and what have we recognised as good? Let's try to produce the good then. Let's agree that I won't because I don't have to do that anymore, produce 5 papers a year, I'll produce 1, but that one must be 5 times better. But this realisation comes from the quantitative moment; if you work more, you'll learn more. That required hyperproduction, but now our task is to reflect on it.

The researchers were asked if they could affect the prioritising of quality in terms of research papers. Some of the answers have been listed below:

You can have influence when you get a certain paper for a peer review; you should explain why maybe that paper is not of high quality, here we're talking about the reviews that need to be properly performed, not only superficially, but substantiated with arguments.

Reviewers have a dual role; they are also researchers. They know, in a way, everything they criticise in others, this same critique can be directed to them (...). You can suggest some things (as a reviewer), but you can't suggest a change of subject. You get the finished paper, essentially you don't get to suggest the subject to the author. The paper comes as a second step, after a project. Perhaps directing the subject of research is a question for the academic community and those who fund us, researchers.

Discussion

Many responses indicate that academics are aware of the negative changes in the system of science and higher education brought about by the penetration of neoliberal ideology, which affects their subjective views and the emergence of certain types of professional alienation.

They described the gradual implementation of neoliberal principles in the system of science and higher education. Ministry of Science and Education (2020) emphasised that Croatia is at the bottom of the European Union according to the following criteria: *the percentage of papers in co-authorship with the economy, the scope of cooperation between science and economy, the number of research papers, the quality of universities by the ranking in Shanghai Jiao Tong list, the relevance of studies for the economy* and that *comprehensive measures need to be taken to improve this situation*. According to Liessmann's theory (2008), these categories act as deception devices and hide the actual state of the matter, which is the transformation of free science into non-free service activities. Under the described conditions, the researchers argue that there is an increasing marginalisation of social sciences and humanities, and there is a tendency to educate students exclusively for the labour market, thus turning into reckless individuals who do not question the existing social values and the political-economic system. According to the respondents, some disciplines in the social and humanistic field cannot be associated with the economy, but this is not the reason to reduce their content in the framework of higher education. In addition, they declare that universities and research institutes are becoming less and less places for critical thinking, freedom of research and creativity. The working conditions and workload of researchers are starting to resemble those in the corporate sector: jobs are increasingly routine, with most respondents claiming to work an average of 10 hours a day, which is considered extreme working time. Due to insufficient public funding of research, researchers submit competitive research projects and personally seek their funding sources, turning them into managers. In the words of one of the respondents: *if I wanted to be an economic manager, I certainly would not have opted for science*.

Among all the respondents, one or more dimensions of professional alienation can be observed. Academics often convey their professional alienation with words like *worried, dissatisfied, frustrated, a sense of lacking concepts, ideas, and meaning, insane, not appealing enough* and *feeling that work has lost its ability to reflect* and *work has been reduced to mere instrumental tasks*.

As for the meaninglessness of the work they perform, this mostly refers to the administration that has begun to consume so much of their time that they are lacking time for research work or preparation for classes, which causes frustration. In addition, they see meaninglessness in the hyperpro-

duction of research papers resulting from inefficient norms (advancement regulations that force them to publish many research papers, which are often of questionable quality). Furthermore, the currently applicable Collective Agreement for Science and Higher Education (2019) has expanded the powers of the heads of research and educational institutions and limited the autonomy of researchers. The norms have been criticised for enabling differences in the distribution of workload among the employees of different institutions, but they have also caused uneven distribution of jobs within the same institution. The guidelines on the advancement of scholars and university teachers are often changed and usually contain an increasing number of criteria for advancement with each subsequent amendment. This substantiates the volatility and inefficiency of norms, which according to Seeman (1959) leads to alienation. Some teachers feel that they do not have any possibility of influencing decision-making in the science and higher education sector and that they are completely powerless because *global trends are not something they can influence*. Likewise, any engagement in this direction also requires time that they do not have. Responses suggest that work is not a self-fulfilling experience for some academics which leads to self-estrangement: they do not have the opportunity to be creative, they do not have time to read and generally lack time for professional development; several respondents compared their work with the work of assembly line workers; some of them even consider changing jobs and according to a few respondents job only provides for their subsistence. Highly educated employees, i.e., white-collar workers, suffer from the same forms of alienation as blue-collar workers, and in addition to selling their labour, they also sell their personalities, leading to a higher degree of self-alienation than in the case of blue-collar workers (Schneider, 2018). Hence, the consequences of alienation for academics could be very serious. Isolation as a form of alienation is not present in any of the respondents in the study. All of them feel a sense of belonging to a smaller group of colleagues at work with which they share common values, but the characteristics of some work environments (no collegiality, egocentricity, and conformity) indicate an individualistic academic environment and may cause isolation in the future.

Despite all the claims made, most researchers still want to continue with their jobs. As positive sides of their work, they often cited: working with students, working on self-selected research, disseminating research results that have practical application, and flexible working hours. However, this ambivalence in teachers' attitudes is explained by the fact that they continually cultivate a fondness for research work and teaching but are dissatisfied with the organisation and norms in the system of science and higher education. Although there are fewer and fewer moments in research that they truly enjoy, they point out that such moments are the reasons they remain with their

job. In addition, some of the respondents believe that they can somewhat influence the change of trends and that they can improve the quality of scientific production through reviews and focusing on under-researched topics.

Conclusion

The participants' statements indicate that a significant portion of their academic time is devoted to administration and activities focused on writing articles, which are often left unread and primarily aimed at establishing the standing of individuals and institutions in rankings. The norms within the system of science and higher education contribute to the described situation, which, besides causing professional alienation among academics, is becoming a significant societal issue: destroying innovation in science, negatively impacting the quality of higher education, and reproducing the status quo in society.

The paper addresses issues rarely discussed publicly in Croatia, in part due to the conformist attitudes of academics and those who believe that any engagement aimed at resisting the neoliberal trends within the science and higher education system is unproductive. Academics should be reminded they are the ones in control of scientific and higher education institutions, as well as their respective departments. They play crucial roles in advisory bodies that determine the funding of scientific projects, serve on the editorial boards of scientific journals, and participate in bodies that establish norms related to the science and higher education system. Therefore, the resistance against neoliberal dominance in academia can be successful only if academics actively engage as agents of change, rather than passively accepting or conforming to the influence of academic capitalism. Otherwise, academia will completely lose its most crucial roles, which are its emancipatory function, the capacity to resist, and the ability to create new values.

Limitations of the study

Given the small number of respondents, the results of this research cannot be generalised, and it is necessary to conduct quantitative research to determine the reasons and the degree of professional alienation of Croatian academics in a larger sample.

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