

The past, the future and rankings

I thought it opportune to produce an “Editor’s Editorial” as I have been in post since late 2015. This time has involved me in being “trained-up” on the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of Scholar One and Emerald’s operations and processes and has given me the space to consider the structure and membership of the journal’s boards. The period has also allowed me to reflect on the reasons I was appointed to take over as the Editor-in-Chief. I will now set out my views, ambitions and vision for the direction I hope to take the journal. This relates to both the journal’s direction of travel and rankings, which are obviously inter-linked. I wish to share and encourage useful and constructive feedback on this.

Direction

The direction I aim to take the journal in has a strategy with five inter-locking elements, with the ultimate aim of gaining listing on rankings such as SCI, ABS, ABDC, etc. over the long term:

- (1) *Breadth*: One aim is to broaden our scope. Obviously, there will be continuity in terms of HRM broadly defined and conceptualised while bringing in, to a greater extent, cognitive areas and the social sciences. These could include relevant elements in employee relations, sociology, history, organisational behaviour, etc.
- (2) *Comparative*: Another aim is to broaden our comparative nature spatially and organisationally. I would encourage submissions that not only cover the core area of broadly conceptualised HRM in China, both local and indigenous as well as via inward investors, but also the situation of Chinese outward investors abroad and explicit comparisons and interactions with indigenous forms, organisations and business systems.
- (3) *Inter-disciplinary*: The third aim is to examine and answer, in meaningful fashion, important questions in society that are ever more complex and inter-related. This may require authors to look outside the traditional silos and is related to (2) above and increasingly cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research and publications.
- (4) *Impact*: The final aim is to enhance impact via the research published. This involves increasing not only rigorous research but also covering important topics and problems as well as having practical relevance and implications.
- (5) *Content*: Another new aspect will be some change in the type of content. This includes the encouragement of Special Issues and also literature reviews.

Rankings

In light of the above strategy, it is interesting and important to locate our aims in the following context. Ranking systems emerged in a limited number of US universities but spread and proliferated globally (Ozbilgin, 2009; Adler and Harzing, 2009). Many universities, departments and countries have their own rankings, not only in the West but also in Asia, such as the ABDC list.

However, in the UK, ranking has narrowed down to just the ethnocentric ABS list as *primus inter pares* in the search for a “pseudo-scientific”, “objective” and “agreed” list. The ISI of Thomson Reuters continues for the UK and much of the rest of the world. Interestingly, although there is some correlation between lists, this is not always so. For example, several journals ranked highly in the ABS, but do not even register in the ISI. Then, there is the obvious accusation of producer bias, as the ISI creator is simultaneously a publisher of journals itself, which other journal publishers are obviously concerned about. Indeed, one, Elsevier, responded with its own way to evaluate the impact of journals using the h-index with Scopus in 2004.

The ranking area has even produced its own publications field, with a growth of articles on various aspects. These include “prolific” authors and institutions in areas such as international business (Xu *et al.*, 2008a; Trevino *et al.*, 2010), in turn generating debate (Harzing, 2009; Xu *et al.*, 2008b), as well as business schools in Asia (Mudambi *et al.*, 2008) and rankings themselves (Adler and Harzing, 2009) and their consequences in terms of the resultant types and foci of research (Mingers and Willmott, 2013 and examples in Ozbilgin, 2009 and Nkomo, 2009). The numerous biases and arbitrary nature of decision criteria have been cogently detailed (Adler and Harzing, 2009) and range from the choices of types of publication, journals, language, timeframes, quality and influence to weighting data. In short, ranking is seen to have produced distortions, not only regarding types/locations of research and output but also the resultant “gaming” of the system.

The pervasiveness of journal ranking and lists can be analysed and seen in various ways, such as via a range of prisms and lenses, from the institutional theory (Adler and Harzing, 2009) and inequality regimes (Ozbilgin, 2009) to critical perspectives on power and resistance (Nkomo, 2009). Thus, lists can be seen as a form of discriminatory practice (Ozbilgin, 2009) of multiple, self-reinforcing and inter-locking factors *a la* other “inequality regimes” (Acker, 2006) and part of a wider and deeper audit culture and managerialism in universities. The focus on rankings and their prominence is driven by a trio of factors with people’s mind-sets, amnesia and disconnection from the world causing competition and redefining and reducing the meaning of success to “[...] succeeding within a metrics-based reality, a *metricality*, where quality is narrowly and artificially defined” (Giacalone, 2009, p. 124, original emphasis).

Most attempts to justify lists are implicit, naïve and insipid, involving the defence of the status quo with connotations of “we have to do as others do” or “we do not have time to do anything else”. There have been some explicit attempts to defend lists (Worrell, 2009), but they are weak and generally simply ignore or miss the point on multiple levels.

So, the clarion call of Adler and Harzing (2009) is to create new systems. These should better support the advancement of knowledge by encouraging the types of contributions that matter to society – something the fetish of naïve narrow number counting ranking is weakening.

My take on all this is that, like too much in the management research and practice area, there is a distinct, deep and wide rhetoric versus reality chasm. On the one side, lip service is paid by journal editors and institutions to the need for greater heterogeneity in topics, methods and perspectives and even inter-disciplinary work. On the other side, journals are actually increasingly “silo” based, producing “product” with ever greater assumed knowledge, style and lexicons and resulting in ever taller and thicker silo walls

and authors talking to just a few. This can often be seen in the “revise-reject” phenomenon, whereby authors of non-typical articles are asked to revise and resubmit with extra work along the esoteric and biased lines ploughed by the particular subjective editor/reviewer only to be rejected. Even worse, authors are left holding articles that are now a very long way from the original content and intentions and not suitable for easy submission to another journal, given the predilection for quirks.

My own personal view of this is firmly in the sceptical camp, but tinged with a realist streak. So, we need to operate with the “rules”, however obviously flawed they are. Otherwise, we will not even get into the “game”. I encourage comments on these ideas as well as thoughts on how to take this forward.

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