



The Centre For Business Relationships,  
Accountability, Sustainability and Society

## Comment and Analysis

The ABS rankings of journal quality: An  
exercise in delusion



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## **The ABS rankings of journal quality: an exercise in delusion**

**Peter wells**

### **Challenging the orthodoxy**

When the idea of journal quality rankings was first explored it seemed like a classic piece of academic introspection and self-concern, of no particular relevance or significance beyond mild curiosity as to the value and significance of some publications compared with others. Over the years, however, the number of rankings has proliferated and the Association of Business Schools (ABS) list (Harvey, *et al.* 2010) has become transformed from an approximate and highly idiosyncratic guide to what might be considered the important journals in business school academic life, to an unequivocal and definitive statement that determines individual careers and university department futures. This short paper is therefore intended to provide reasons why the ABS list is both inadequate on its own terms, and why it does extreme violence to the full range and type of activities that constitute the working life of an academic in a business school. The criticisms of the ABS list should be understood in terms of its role in the Research Excellence Framework (REF). If the REF did not exist, the ABS list would be little more than a coffee-time amusement for academics. Unfortunately, because the ABS list pretty much determines REF performance, it has become a matter of great significance. The argument here is that the ABS is not robust enough, accurate enough, or broad enough in scope to justify such a pivotal role. The ABS list has been elevated beyond its competence, and is now exercising a malevolent distortion of academic life in the realm of business studies.

### **The ABS 2010: inadequate even in its own terms**

The 2010 version of the ABS 2010 journal quality rankings is interesting because it provides a reasoned explanation over 11 pages of how and why the ranking is constructed. This is useful, as it provides a good starting point for a critique. There is of course a veritable industry of navel-gazing with respect to academic papers written on the concept of academic journal rankings, and there is no intention here of joining that list or of citing such papers. The purpose here is to expose the failings of the ABS list, although it is reasonable to say that by extension all the other lists purporting to achieve the same task may be similarly criticised. The approach taken here is simply to go through the document, and highlight the problems.

### *Cover page*

The item that stimulated the production of this paper, and the reason why it is posted on the BRASS website, is there right at the top of the first page. Scattered randomly about are all the keywords for those interested in sustainable business:

- Rising sea levels
- Global warming
- Renewable energy
- Peak oil production
- Business ethics

- Corporate responsibility
- Climate change
- Greenhouse gases
- Sustainability
- Carbon footprint
- Sustainable design

Well, the team at ABS certainly know how to leap on a bandwagon when they see it, but what consequences flow from this laudable inclusion of the sustainability agenda? None at all. Despite lobbying by interested parties, sustainability still does not count as a category of activity in terms of business research, and many of the (inevitably new) sustainability journals do not appear in the list or are accorded a low score. The confusion is illustrated by the placement of the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* as a ‘Social Science’ journal (with an ABS score of just 2; see page 31), somehow ignoring the industrial content or indeed the fact that the journal was established by an editorial team based in MIT and Yale. Equally, the *Journal of Environmental Management* is accorded a 2, but classified as a ‘Sector’ journal, as is *Environmental Management* (also given a 2; see page 28). So apparently to the ABS team sustainability or environmental issues count as a discrete sector – presumably producing ‘green’ products and services. This is an archaic perspective of the penetration of sustainability issues into business studies and, more importantly, business practice. Furthermore, those who publish on say climate change and business but do so in a climate change journal will of course not be on the ABS list. So, at the very outset the ABS has demonstrated both that sustainability issues are important in business studies, and that its own list is unable to recognise this fact. Curiously, tourism does gain the accolade of a separate category; it is obviously more important to the compilers of the ABS list than planetary collapse.

*Page ii*

The membership of the panel that defines the ABS list is also rather interesting, not least for the relative scarcity of people from what is generally recognised to be the leading business schools in the UK. Each of the main sub-disciplines of a business school is listed and an advisory panel member assigned to each. Hence, ‘Tourism and hospitality management’ is represented by Prof. Chris Cooper of Oxford Brookes Business School. Nobody represents sustainability, as it is not a category. Neither, interestingly enough, is a major discipline like logistics or transport (presumably it is subsumed under ‘Operations, technology and management science’ but then again there are a few relevant journals listed under the ‘Sectors’ category). This is an interesting point because in Cardiff Business School the ‘Logistics and Operations Management’ section is one of the largest, most successful sections in the school both in terms of income (it attracts a great many MSc students) and research (a recent study put the section in the top five in the world for logistics and transport studies). Yet, when one examines the list of journals transport and logistics titles are frequently accorded a low status. Several business schools do not have a logistics and operations management capability; perhaps it is not surprising then that the ‘consensus’ process conveniently underplays the significance of these areas despite a huge trend towards outsourcing, global logistics systems, just-in-time delivery and many other physical distribution issues over recent years.

*Page 1. The ABS Academic Journal Quality Guide is a hybrid based partly upon peer review, partly upon statistical information relating to citation, and partly upon editorial judgements following from the detailed evaluation of many hundreds of publications over a long period.*

So, the ABS list is essentially a 'judgement'. That is, there is no quantifiable measurement of quality that is sufficient to the task. Put more bluntly, it is subject to all the biases, prejudices, misconceptions and errors that we all have - with a process that is frankly not much more transparent than electing a pope.

*Page 1. The Guide should be designed primarily to serve the needs of the UK business and management research community.*

This is not the case. The ABS list is used ultimately by government to determine funding levels and arrangements. It is as much a tool to manage the UK business and management research community as it is a tool to serve that community.

*Page 1. The Guide should classify journals into four categories (grades 1 to 4) plus a new category of 4\* which recognises the quality of those journals ranked as a 'top' class journal in at least seven of ten international listings consulted.*

This is a classic case of grade inflation. In an effort to accommodate all those pressuring to increase the 'value' of their outputs, there is inevitable pressure on the expansion of the higher score segment of the rankings. Creating a 4\* category effectively re-establishes an elite segment, and of course devalues everything else underneath. Outrage would follow if a whole new category 5 was created, and all other rankings 'downgraded' as a result, so the 4\* strategy is a nice sleight of hand.

*Page 1. '...the number of times a journal was cited in the submissions to the 2008 RAE'*

The methodology for creating the ranking is described, including this item as one way of assessing the value of a journal. This is of course an act of genius, because it is entirely self-reinforcing. Journals are given a ranking score, with high scoring journals needed for an REF (or 2008 RAE) submission. Hence of course academics seek to publish in those journals and the ranking becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. At the same time, it also increases the barriers to entry for new journals, thereby helping to ossify the subject and increase the 'gap' between the 'in' journals and those that are definitely 'out'.

*Page 1. The Guide should be comprehensive in the coverage of research conducted in Business Schools in the UK and internationally covering a wide range of disciplines, fields and subfields within the social sciences and taking an inclusive approach to what constitutes business and management research.*

This is a laudable statement to which we can all subscribe, but it is by no means clear that the ABS list achieves this aim. First, as already indicated, its coverage of research appears less than comprehensive, and indeed strangely distorted. Even widely recognised leading journals outside the field, which may publish research by somebody in a business school (such as the British Medical Journal), are simply excluded from the list and hence do not exist for the purposes of quality assessment or ranked very low indeed. Secondly, by its very nature the focus only on academic journals means that the approach is less than inclusive because much business and management research relies on other sorts of output.

*Page 2. Academic journals are one of the most important means of publishing and disseminating the results of academic research and scholarship.*

The crucial word here is 'one'. There are other means of publishing and disseminating results of course, and even the ABS list recognises this fact. Unfortunately, in the context of the REF and related matters (such as staff recruitment and promotion, see below), the approved journals are rapidly becoming the only means of dissemination that has any value.

*Page 2. A stamp of quality. Publication in a journal should indicate that an article can be read and is worth reading. The editorial review processes of all journals in the ABS Guide involve blind peer review of articles submitted by two or more researchers active in the field.*

The ABS list goes on to describe four main purposes behind academic journals. This is the first one. The point is valid enough, but there are plenty of peer reviewed journals that do not appear on the list. By implication, if they are not on the list, they are not worth reading, or writing for, or indeed acting as a reviewer for. Neither is it the case that articles that are not peer reviewed are of poor quality, or hard to read, or of no influence or significance. A great deal of 'journalism', particularly feature writing or column writing, is of very high quality with the added bonus of immediacy and relevance.

*Page 2. Provide an indication of where best to publish. This is particularly important for early career researchers or for researchers transferring between disciplines/sub-fields or embarking on cross- or inter-disciplinary research.*

The ABS list then discusses four functions for the list itself. This is the first one. It is not clear what is meant by this statement beyond the usual 'publish or perish' dictum. Anybody in a leading business school that aspires to a high REF score knows that they have to publish four articles with an average score of 3 or above. In view of this simple metric, it is not clear what purpose journals other than those with a score of 3 or over have. As noted previously, actually the ABS list is a useless guide for those doing sustainability research (surely a case of cross-disciplinary research) because it misses many of the relevant journals, and because it does not cross-reference to those journals that might often carry sustainability research papers (e.g. California Management Review). The ABS list is no longer an 'indication'. On the contrary, the

ABS list is now an imperative. The statement above provides the illusion of choice and gentle guidance for what is rapidly becoming an intellectual and professional straight-jacket. Indeed, it could be argued that the opposite case applies: the creation of sub-discipline centred lists such as this one from the ABS largely serves to encourage a retrenchment into separate disciplines when all the available evidence suggests that major, complex socio-economic issues require interdisciplinary research. Apparently, having completed the research, the academic is supposed to 'translate' the findings or disassemble the research so that it can be made available once again to the core or traditional disciplines.

*Page 2. Inform staffing decisions. In the USA, journal quality lists often inform the decision making processes of tenure, promotion and reward committees. In the UK, they are increasingly used by appointment, promotion and reward committees.*

This is the second use of the ABS list. This sort of blind reductionism is doubtless apparent, and has a grim logic, but it is a travesty of the breadth and diversity of contributions that academics make in general, and in research in particular. Again, it would not matter so much if decisions on staff were taken in a more rounded and comprehensive manner, but the linkage with the REF and funding gives the ABS a massively undue weight in the entire process. In Cardiff University it is stated policy that a member of staff need NOT be considered research active in REF terms (i.e. having published in the ABS approved list in category 3 journals or higher) in order to be promoted, but it is equally the case that in academic institutions around the world promotion and appraisal systems are increasingly being linked to ABS publishing 'success' at whatever cost to other activities. It is particularly unfortunate in business studies, which by tradition is an extremely broad subject that should in theory provide a home for much diverse, interesting and useful work. The problem is that any research active individual can find their particular specialism excluded because it does not fit into the approved journals, and then their career stops.

More profoundly, the danger of the ABS list when linked to the REF, promotions, etc. is that it creates a two-tier academic community: research active and non-research active. Hence, the ABS surely does inform staffing decisions, but is part of the system that creates teaching as a second-rate activity and privileges those deemed research active with promotion pathways.

*Page 2. Inform library purchasing decisions. A growing number of higher education institutions and their purchasing consortia are using journal quality lists to determine which journals and aggregation services to buy.*

This is an interesting justification for the ABS list, and one that might be coming to pass. I actually suggested this years ago to the Economics section of Cardiff Business School when it was mooted that we needed to make savings on the library budget. The logical course was to eliminate any journal of category 2 or under; if the journal is not worth writing for then it cannot be worth reading either. The suggestion was facetious, but now seems to be coming to pass. A key problem is, how does this reconcile with the proliferation of journals? The growing range and diversity of journals is in some important respects an indicator of the health of the subject area

and its continued expansion of theoretical and empirical boundaries, yet all those new journals are inevitably of low ranking or do not even appear on the list. It might be argued that for many staff and students the high ranking journals are too esoteric, complex and discourse-specific to be of any use outside a narrow coterie of specialists.

*Page 2. Application in reviews and audits. Lists are frequently used in the UK and other countries to aid internal and external reviews of research activity and the evaluation of research outputs.*

This delicate understatement does not do sufficient justice to the reach and growing significance of the ABS list, which seems to do so much more than ‘aid’ internal and external reviews of research activity. Once again, the connection to the REF is the key factor here, where to all practical purposes it has become the only way to review research activity by business schools. Obviously, such a stance helps to discourage any academic from venturing beyond the confines of the list, and the upper echelons of the list at that.

*Page 3. The most commonly perceived problems of compiling journal quality lists...*

The ABS document then goes on to discuss what it defines as the four most common complaints about the use of journal quality ranking lists. This is a particularly interesting section, both for what is admitted and for what is excluded. The problem of what is omitted by a focus on academic journals is not discussed. Of course, the compilers of the ABS list (or other such lists) may couch their discussions in terms such as the list ‘may’ be used as ‘part of’ an assessment of quality or a ‘guide’ to research quality. Would that it were so. Politicians, policy-makers, and academic administrators alike have shorn the use of the ABS list of all subtlety and finesse such that it has become a crude and simplistic device, a simple metric of such brutality as to brook no discussion. Hence, the biggest single problem with the ABS list lies not within the list itself, but in its pre-eminence as the metric of quality.

The second problem with the list is that there is no discussion of or allowance made for productivity. Again bearing in mind the question of the REF process, the current acceptable rate of ABS publication is approximately one category three journal article (or higher category) per annum. Yet this focus on low output quantity has never been sufficiently or convincingly justified. Is occasional excellence always and irrevocably better than frequent competence? The problem of course is that the ranking scores are not equivalent in any meaningful way. So an academic cannot count two category two publications to be equivalent to one category four.

A third problem is that the compilers of the list do not acknowledge inherent bias towards US publications and to quantified studies over qualitative studies.

*Page 3. Wheat and chaff. One of the most commonly voiced criticisms of journal quality lists is that highly rated journals occasionally publish poor pieces of work and that high quality research sometimes finds its way into lesser ranked journals. There*

*may be some truth in this, but neither situation is commonplace, and journals that consistently publish high quality research invariably rise up the quality rankings; equally, when editorial standards lapse, journals move downward in terms of both citation and quality rankings.*

It is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated what a bomb is loaded into the above statement, which the ABS list gives as the first ‘problem’ with quality lists. The point made might be valid, but consider this: what happens when a journal moves ‘downwards’ in the list? What happens to the academic who, in good faith, targets and succeeds in publication in a journal in, say, category 3 only to discover that come the next round of ABS list compiling a committee over which he or she has no control has just demoted the status of the publication to a 2 or a 1? This could be a personal and professional disaster, despite using the all-knowing guide to target research and publications output – as is claimed to be a primary use of the guide in the first place.

*Page 3. New journals. Lists tend to give the highest rankings to journals with an established readership and as a consequence tend to rank newer journals, whatever their aspirations or intrinsic quality, lower down the scale. This may be the case, but the process of new journals proving themselves is a necessary one that leads ultimately to quality improvements across the board. Reputation ultimately can only be established through the quality of the articles published.*

No time frame is offered for this assessment that new journals must go through a ‘process’ to prove themselves of sufficient quality to be on the list and get a score. Certainly it would appear to be measured in decades, and far too long for most academics seeking to establish a viable career path or for departments anxious to do well in the next REF. It is not clear how people who are not necessarily experts in a field are able to come to a judgement on the quality or otherwise of journals that they do not read, with papers on subjects that they either do not understand, or have an interest in, or value. I recall a previous senior academic highly respected in his field saying to me (some twenty years ago) that sustainability was a passing fad of no significance to the business community and no interest for academic research in business schools. It is reasonable to say that time has proven this assessment to be in error, but then again the subject was not an area of expertise for the person concerned. In the meantime, taking research outside the acceptable areas is a very high risk strategy for any academic – which is surely the antithesis of the purpose of a free-thinking, innovative higher education system?

*Page 3. Citation Impact Factors are sufficient to measure journal quality. Citation Impact Factors do provide a standardised measure of the extent to which the articles published in a journal are referenced elsewhere, but as a standalone proxy measure of relative journal quality or performance in research (Mahdi et al., 2008) citation impact factors are problematical.*

The document devotes a further page to a detailed analysis / justification of why citation rates or impact factors are insufficient as a measure of quality. The discussion is suitably detailed and nuanced, and rather sits in stark contrast to the assertiveness of the rest of the document. The sudden primacy accorded to journal citation factors is

partly, it may be suspected, the result of having the metrics available easily. Citation rates for books are rather more difficult to trace than journal articles. Yet it is interesting that the pieces of scholarship that really score the highest in most citation rates are books. Just take a look at the citations for one of the most famous business academics of his generation, Michael Porter. Using Google Scholar, four of the top five citations are books; as are seven of the top ten. The most cited book gets 18,590 citations; the most cited journal article (in Harvard Business Review) gets 4,675. Two of the journal articles in this top ten citations list are in fact from HBR, a journal which some may consider of lower quality because it does not conduct traditional 'double blind' reviewing.

The other major points raised with respect to citation impact factors (on page 4) could with equal validity be applied to the entire listing project. The concerns over incomplete coverage, non-recognition of different epistemological traditions, herding, content bias and game playing or differences between maturity in the fields could apply with equal force to the ABS list as a whole.

#### *Pages 5-7 Compilation and Quality Assessment Procedures*

At this point the ABS document goes into further detail as to how journals are awarded a certain status, how new journals might be included. This discussion is useful for illuminating the process for many perplexed academics standing on the outside looking in. Again some key problems are raised.

*Page 5. The ABS Guide is intended primarily to serve the needs of the UK business and management academic community. However, we know from feedback that the Guide has currency and is used extensively in many countries across the world.*

Herein is a further fundamental problem. There are plenty of narrowly instrumentalist and ambitious academics or academic administrators in the world and it is clearly the case that use of the ABS list or something very closely approximating to it is becoming increasingly widespread. What is the logical conclusion of this? It is simple. First, the overall number of suitably high scoring journals is not growing very fast, notwithstanding the re-grading issues noted above. Second, the number of papers submitted to those journals will grow as more individuals and institutions adhere blindly to the list. The consequence is that worldwide competition to be published in the leading journals will increase. The inevitable result is that the % share claimed by UK academics (individuals and departments) will fall. Hence, in REF terms the quality of UK academic performance will fall. Ironically, the quality of the actual journals at the top of the list may indeed increase, not least because of the positive feedback loops established by the construction of the list in the first place; but for UK academics who are claimed to be the primary beneficiaries of the list, the consequences are likely to be dire.

*Page 5. The ABS Guide is essentially a consensus list and its authority rests upon general acceptance of the fair and balanced view of relative quality taken by the editors and advisory panel members. The ABS Guide is not comprehensive. It does*

*not include all the journals in which business and management academics might be drawn to publish their research.*

Again, it is not possible to fault the sentiments here, but is it a reality? Such qualification statements are readily lost when the list is used in practice, even if the statements are evidently true. Still, it is difficult to see how this 'consensus' is arrived at. No evidence is offered on this point, or the 'fair and balanced' view of relative quality that is claimed. Over time, this too may become more of a self-fulfilling statement because academics that do not fit this particular vision will be squeezed out of the system and expunged to other disciplines or, worse, be determined to be non-research active.

Pages 8, 9 and 10 are mostly concerned with the detail of constructing an adjusted score for citations, which mostly goes to show that as the lead system for deciding journal quality and linked via the last RAE, the ABS list has successfully become the definitive source of ranking quality. All this really goes to show is that academics with a healthy sense of self-preservation recognise a game with rules when they see it, and have adjusted behaviours accordingly. The further embedding of the ABS list is only going to accentuate such convergence into an increasingly static list of acceptable output destinations. From the base of page 11 however is a more interesting discussion on why it all matters.

*Page 11. Over the past two decades, academic journal publishing has risen from relative obscurity to become a global industry dominated by big international publishing houses. In business and management alone, the major publishers already have tens of academic journals in their "stables".*

This is an interesting observation. Academics give of their work and their time (to review other papers, etc.) for nothing, and give away the copyright to their work, while businesses are making vast sums of money at the process by selling that work back to academics. It is a brilliant business model, and so it is hardly surprising that publishers have been so keen to pile in. What other media outlet fails to pay the authors of the work, and then charges for them to read it? The fact that it has become a big business does not seem to be a justification in itself for supporting ranking systems however.

*Page 11. '...the growth in both demand and supply seems set fair to continue as more academics around the world are drawn into the game.*

The continued pre-eminence of the academic journal as a measure of quality seems to be assured as this statement suggests, but there is a degree of complacency here, as well as an implicit neo-market assumption that all this competition is a good thing (perhaps unsurprisingly for business studies). The entire edifice is riddled with problems, yet most are ignored by this valedictory tribute. For example, one key problem of growing concern is the time required for publications to appear. The gap between submission, review and acceptance of a paper can easily run to 24 to 30 months. This is a chronic problem, which renders most of this 'elite' research entirely irrelevant to the policy-making or business communities that are allegedly served by

such world-leading work. This is a particular problem in business studies, where technology, policy and strategy change quickly. Work backwards from the date of publication and the problem is compounded. If it takes 24 months from first submission to eventual publication, then add say 6 months to write the paper (recall, academics are expected to average one paper per 12 months), then add say 12 months to do the research the underpins the paper (many research projects are longer, but let us be generous here), then add say 12 months to write the research proposal and get it accepted (again generous in many cases), and it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that the gap between having an innovative research idea, and seeing it published by one of the leading journals, can easily be 54 months – over four years!! Essentially, this cumbersome process results in all academics being historians, and actually undermines the relevance of research.

Quality research, relevant research, and innovative research needs more rapid dissemination than the leading journals can offer. That might mean the less ‘favoured’ journals, or it might mean much else. The academic community is locked into an outmoded form of communication that only slightly benefits from the revolution that is the Internet. The ABS list, wittingly or not, results in a narrow focus and single measure of academic excellence: the journal ranking list. It ignores other outputs such as books, reports to clients, contributions to key policy-making bodies, non-refereed publications of all types, and much more. It is not a sufficient defence any longer to say that the ABS list is not intended as a sole measure of quality, because that is how it is being used.

### **Conclusions**

The search for a clearer understanding of the relative quality of work is understandable, both from an academic perspective and for those involved in the funding and management of academia. If the ABS list were used in a more balanced portfolio of assessments then the concerns expressed above would not be so pressing. Unfortunately, the reality is that lives and the ultimate health of the discipline are at issue here. Of particular personal concern, within the context of BRASS, is the inability of the ABS list to find room for sustainability as a theme. This is part of a wider problem, and one that will become worse with time as the ABS list becomes enshrined as mandatory rather than as a guide. That problem is the systematic exclusion of some areas of work, some journals, and all other types of output as being beyond the scope of the discipline. The result will surely be the atrophy of the discipline and a decline into irrelevance, a retreat in to the ivory towers and a reduced social justification for academic work at a time when public budgets are under increasing scrutiny. We have built a monster, and it will now devour us.

### **References**

Charles Harvey, Aidan Kelly, Huw Morris and Michael Rowlinson (2010) (eds) The Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Quality Guide, Version 4. Copy obtained from <http://www.the-abs.org.uk/?id=257>, May 2010.