



Similar exercises, different consequences: An examination of tourism research in national research assessment frameworks

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the status quo of tourism research as embodied in the Excellence of Research in Australia (ERA) 2010 report and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008 report in the UK. It was found that while the two national research assessment exercises, ERA in Australia and RAE in the UK, share similar purpose, rating scale and indicators, and review and evaluation process, the tourism research profiles in the two exercises are significantly different. As indicated in the two national research assessment reports, tourism research in Australia is more visible and enjoys a much higher profile than that in the UK. Such a stark contrast is mainly due to the structure, or the metric frames used in the two exercises. However, when applying an alternative measure to compare contributions of Australian tourism researchers to three leading tourism journals with those of UK tourism researchers, no significant differences could be found.

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1. Introduction

Modern higher education, as a social institution, has been increasingly under the state surveillance, driven by neoliberalism and managerialism adopted by most state governments (Ayikoru et al., 2009). The influence of governmentality on higher education is characterised by the notions of competition, markets, performativity and quality assurance. As *research* is one of the essential functionalities along with *teaching* as its twin brother in universities, quality assurance evaluations of research performances in universities are increasingly sought by neoliberal governments. Research assessment exercises have been regularly conducted in the UK since 1986 (Geary et al., 2004) and recently adopted in Australia by the Labour Government (Australian Research Council, 2010). There has been criticism that the RAE favours some traditional disciplines in research but marginalises relatively new and less established research fields like tourism and hospitality (Botterill, 2002; Page, 2003; Tribe, 2003). Tribe (2003) argues that the RAE2001 in the UK marginalised tourism as a legitimate research field in the RAE evaluation structure and made tourism research virtually invisible in the RAE system. Similarly, Page (2003) reviewed tourism research performances in the 1992, 1996 and 2001 RAEs and concluded that “tourism research has not seen the academic leadership nationally in the UK to make major inroads into the RAE, to raise the status of tourism research and to generate a number of international rated research groups” (p. 622).

Despite the gloomy nature of tourism research disclosed by previous RAEs in the UK, the Australian ERA story sounds a trumpet for tourism

research. The first ERA national report released in January 2011 indicated that the average national rating for tourism research in Australia was 2.5, well above other research fields like marketing (2.2), business and management (2.2), and commercial services (2.4) within the field of research (FoR) category “Commerce, Management, Tourism and Service”. With such a contrast between RAE and ERA regarding tourism research, one may wonder: a) why similar research assessment exercises in two culturally and politically similar countries result in different ratings of tourism research nationally; and b) whether tourism research in Australia indeed excels that in the UK. To probe for the answers, this paper aims to: a) identify the status of tourism research in the ERA2010 and RAE2008 exercises in Australia and the UK, and run an analytical comparison between the two national research assessment frameworks, and b) to compare publication contributions to the three leading tourism journals by Australian and UK tourism academics as an alternative way to compare tourism research performances in Australia and the UK.

2. Literature review

Tourism researchers have been interested in the scientific status of “tourism” as a research field. It is argued that the development of such a research interest within the tourism academic community reflects the maturation of tourism research (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). Evaluation of research performance in tourism has been the core of such type of research (Law & Chon, 2007). Basically, two approaches can be identified within this research stream: evaluating or ranking academic journals, and rating/ranking individual tourism scholars and institutions.

Academic journals serve as an important platform for researchers to disseminate and exchange academic knowledge; they also provide means of evaluating research and scholarly work for funding allocations

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as well as informing academic appointment and promotion (Weiner, 2001). In the tourism literature, following Sheldon's (1990) pioneering work examining researchers' perceptions of journals in tourism and hospitality, there has been attentive examinations and discussions on ranking and rating tourism journals after the turn of the century (Cheng et al., 2011; Hall, 2005; McKercher, 2005; McKercher et al., 2006; Ryan, 2005). While general methods used in rating and ranking journal are diverse, the most commonly used journal ranking method in tourism is peer assessment (McKercher et al., 2006; Sheldon, 1990). Apart from cross-sectional survey assessment in ranking journals, Cheng et al. (2011) examined the evolution of tourism journals development from a historical perspective. Researchers also attempted to examine different academic features and characteristics of tourism and hospitality journals such as the scientific identity and empirical demonstrations of selected journals (e.g., Svensson et al., 2009a; Svensson et al., 2009b).

Tourism researchers also show their zeal in ranking the performance of individual scholars and institutions. This thread of research could be traced back to Sheldon's work in early 1990s on an authorship analysis of tourism research (Sheldon, 1991). Jogaratnam et al. (2005) did a study replicating that of Sheldon (1991), examining both institutional contributions and leading individual contributors to the three major academic tourism journals *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Tourism Management* from 1992 to 2001. The publication of the Jogaratnam et al. article led to heated discussion in the tourism academic community (Hall, 2005; McKercher, 2005; Page, 2005; Ryan, 2005), which reflects the interest level of such a topic among tourism academics. Zhao and Ritchie (2007) presented another significant work to investigate leading tourism scholars' contributions in tourism research. They expanded their examination scope to eight journals in the field and a period from 1985 to 2004. Recently, Severt et al. (2009) analysed scholarly contributions to 11 hospitality and tourism refereed journals for the years 2002 to 2006 and presented top 100 hospitality and tourism programmes as ranked by instances of publication across the journals in the five-year period. The study also updated and extended a previous study published in the same journal by Jogaratnam et al. (2005) for similar information over the period 1992 to 2001.

Along with the research in rating and ranking journals and individual/institutional contributions, there have been debates and criticisms (Hall, 2005; Jamal et al., 2008; Page, 2005; Ryan, 2005). Besides critiques over rating/ranking methods or methodologies, the dominating national research evaluation systems such as the United Kingdom's research assessment exercise (RAE) or New Zealand's performance based research fund (PBRF) were frequently referred to in the criticisms (c.f., Hall, 2005; McKercher, 2005; Page, 2005; Ryan, 2005). There appears to be a need to examine how these national research assessment frameworks, as a critical discourse, influence tourism research development in parallel with the ranking and rating studies in tourism.

Little research has been attempted to investigate how national research assessment exercises influence tourism research development, despite the importance of the topic. Existing publications are mainly based on research assessment framework in the UK, taking the format of critical commentary (Page, 2003), discussion and perspective papers (Botterill, 2002; Littelljohn, 2004), among others (Hall, 2011; Tribe, 2003). The general consenting remarks in these interrogations tend to be that the UK's research evaluation system does not benefit research development of tourism and hospitality as a nascent academic field. However, focusing on only one country's research evaluation system may not be able to develop an overall understanding of the issue because the unique research traditions in the country may have exerted more influences on the current research assessment exercises. A comparative analysis involving more than one country may shed a new layer of understanding in the issue. On the basis of such an observation, this paper adopts a comparative approach to understand the issue by comparing the research evaluation systems in Australian and the UK and examining the current tourism research status in the two systems.

3. Methods

Archival analysis was adopted as the major method in this paper. The Australia Research Council (ARC) websites were visited to seek information about ERA. Relevant reports and documents were downloaded as archival data for later analysis. In addition, media reports regarding the ERA results after the release of the 2010 ERA National Report were collected and later fed into the analysis. As for RAE exercise, data were collected by visiting the RAE2008 website (www.rae.ac.uk), searching, and downloading relevant reports and documents.

Following Page's (2003) approach, in order to better understand the situation under investigation and provide a complementary analysis on the tourism research status as disclosed by the two national research evaluation systems, a further comparison was conducted by looking into the contributions of tourism and hospitality researchers to the three leading tourism journals— *Tourism Management (TM)*, *Annals of Tourism Research (ATR)*, and *Journal of Travel Research (JTR)*. All the research papers published in the three journals from 1 January 2003 to 31 December 2008 were browsed and authors' information was checked. Authors with Australian or UK affiliations were counted and coded.

4. Results

4.1. Overview of RAE and ERA

RAE has undergone 6 rounds of assessment since its commencement. The RAE2008 was conducted by four higher education funding bodies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, to serve the purpose to allocate funding for research in the UK higher education sector from 2009 to 2010. The RAE2008 designated 67 units of assessment (UoA) covering the whole spectrum of academic subjects. 159 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK made a total of 2363 submissions in the RAE2008. HEIs were able to choose which of their staff to include in the submissions and which UoAs to enter. Core data in submissions included overall staff summary, research active individuals, research output, research students and studentships, external research income, instructional research environment and esteem indicators, and researcher categories. As for the research output, up to four items of research output produced during the RAE2008 data collection period (1 January 2001 to 31 December 2007) were required from each individual researcher included in submissions. It should be noted that although the HEIs decide which researchers/research groups to be included in a specific submission, researchers themselves may play a role in nominating the four research output items representing their works in the UoA during the evaluation period.

The assessment was done by panels with their members selected based on their expertise in different subject areas. The RAE2008 had 15 main panels and 67 sub-panels covering all the UoAs one-to-one. Each of the main panels worked closely with several sub-panels to provide leadership and guidance in producing criteria for assessment and working methods. Panels assessed the research outputs, research environment, and esteem indicators in each submission and developed a sub-profile for each of these three areas. The sub-profiles were then weighted and aggregated to create an overall quality profile for the submission. The results were reported by describing the overall quality profile of each submission in blocks of 5%, in terms of the proportion of the submissions judged by the panels to have met each of the quality levels ranging from "world leading" (4*), "internationally excellent" (3*), "recognised internationally" (2*), "recognised nationally" (1*), to "quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work" (unclassified).

Upon close examination, the ERA2010 in Australia does not seem to be different from the RAE2008 in the UK in its stated purpose, process, evaluation criteria and methods. The Minister of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Senator Kim Carr stated in the foreword of the ERA2010 national report, that "It [ERA] is the culmination of the

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