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Research paper

Research performance as a quality signal in international labor markets: Visibility of business schools worldwide through a global research performance system

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ABSTRACT

Attracting talent with international capabilities is critical for the internationalization of business schools and other knowledge-intensive service-industry organizations. However, limited coverage beyond the top cohort of business schools in existing research-based rankings does not allow the majority of institutions to use these rankings as global signaling systems of their research performance. This is particularly detrimental to the development of younger research fields, such as International Business (IB). Our Global Research Performance (GRP) system affords visibility to 1029 institutions that publish in seven prominent IB journals and to a broader cohort of 3352 institutions that publish in 149 high-impact business and management journals. GRP empowers IB and other scholars to demonstrate their contribution to their organizations' legitimacy and promotes a data-driven approach to international talent recruitment.

1. Introduction

The globalization of the world economy has put pressure on business schools to deliver an education experience that prepares students for global markets and mobility (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016; Hertig, 2016). Achieving this goal is facilitated by the internationalization of knowledge workers (i.e., faculty) who serve as “service providers,” and are the key source of competitive advantage in knowledge-intensive service industries (Brock, 2012; Thomas, Lorange, & Sheth, 2013). International faculty, returning academic expatriates, and academics who actively engage with the international business (IB) research community are particularly suited to creating and disseminating such international knowledge (Pherali, 2012).

Harvey & Moeller (2016) identified global labor mobility as one of six key themes in future IB research. Awareness regarding potential employers is a key prerequisite of global labor mobility and a key challenge for both employers and workers. Most global service-industry firms tend to hire locally for geographically dispersed branches of an organization, while business schools often attract faculty and PhD students directly from the international labor market. Direct cross-border hiring involves high degree of information asymmetry, with employers and employees alike struggling to make sense of unfamiliar information cues.

Signaling theory (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Spence, 1973) is a useful conceptual lens for understanding the matching process between mobile labor and employers in such an environment. How can business schools compete in a globalized market and how can they signal their reputation to potential employees? Research productivity is one of the most institutionalized sources of visibility and legitimacy in higher education (Baden-Fuller & Ang, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that the research performance of business schools, as indicated by global and national rankings, largely determines their reputation (Wedlin, 2011). This presents a challenge for the majority of business schools worldwide, because traditionally only a small cohort of top-tier institutions enjoys global visibility (Hommel & Thomas, 2014).

We argue that the existing research-based rankings serve a narrow audience of signal senders and receivers; namely, already globally prominent institutions. By using a narrow list of journals to gather research performance data and focusing on a limited number of already prominent “world-class” institutions, these rankings fail to create international visibility for the vast majority of business schools, essentially signaling that they “do not count.”

Our article offers a global research performance (GRP) system to serve the need of business schools to signal and build legitimacy in international markets. GRP presents the most global and comprehensive research information system to date, covering 3352 higher education

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Table 1
Empirical applications of the Global Research Performance (GRP) system.

Stakeholder group	Application of the GRP system
IB researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate the contribution of their research to their institutions' legitimacy • Facilitate international networking by revealing a broad range of institutions producing IB research • Highlight the “emerging” IB institutions that might need support from the IB community
Faculty and PhD students	<p>In the international job search:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calibrate expectations in relation to research environment in a potential workplace^a • Signal the quality of their academic pedigree to prospective employers, particularly for early-career researchers
Academic managers (e.g., deans, department chairs, and other decision makers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support hiring and retention of international talent • Provide a foundation for resource claims at the department and university levels • Demonstrate research excellence in relationships with external stakeholders, such as alumni and corporate partners
Science foundations and other funding agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the impact of funding regimes and science policy at the organizational, national, and regional levels

^a For users of the GRP system who are interested in assessing the individual-level productivity of a given school, it is advisable to control for the size of the school, for example by normalizing the absolute output by the number of research-active faculty.

institutions in 127 countries that have published at least one article in 149 business journals during the 2007–2015 time period. Moreover, our IB¹ dataset, which is a sub-set of the GRP system, includes 1029 institutions from 75 countries that published in seven highly-recognized IB journals. We provide the entire GRP system to readers.²

We focus on the field of IB specifically because, for the IB scholarly community, the visibility challenge is particularly acute. The field of IB is often considered a sub-field within the field of general management (Adler & Harzing, 2009) and most IB journals are relatively young compared to many management journals (Tüselmann, Sinkovics, & Pishchulov, 2016). This has resulted in their slow inclusion in global research rankings. Low visibility of IB journals has a knock-on effect on visibility of institutions supporting IB research and their ability to attract IB scholars in international labor markets.

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of visible IB journals in prominent journal rankings (e.g., Tüselmann et al., 2016). However, the research rankings of IB institutions have not as of yet mirrored this positive trend, maintaining the practice of focusing exclusively on a few top institutions only. As argued by Tüselmann et al. (2016), IB researchers' best work cannot be captured by observing a narrow range of journals. Equally, the diversity of contributions to IB research cannot be captured by focusing on a narrow range of institutions, which are often geographically bounded.

Our study makes three interconnected contributions to the IB research community and IB literature. First, for the community of IB scholars, the IB journal subset of the global research performance (GRP) system offers an opportunity to highlight the role of publications in IB journals in overall research performance of these scholars' workplaces and an opportunity to identify the wider range of institutions publishing research in IB journals. Both of these opportunities are central to the development of IB research groups worldwide and collaboration among institutions around IB research topics.

Second, we contribute to the theme of global mobility of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), defined as employees who take the initiative to seek employment in a foreign location (Doherty, 2013), by bringing the hiring of SIEs to the forefront of internationalization processes in business schools. We highlight the importance of signaling business schools' research-based reputation in attracting high-quality talent in international labor markets. We further discuss the structural features

¹ We use the label “IB” for research in international business, international management, and international strategy. While some have argued that these fields are distinct and have defined boundaries (Eden, Dai, & Li, 2010), in practice these boundaries are permeable and journals tend to publish research from multiple sub-disciplines. In addition, IB research is also published regularly in general management journals.

² Available via Journal of World Business website, the website of the Mayo University School of Business, www.heramanaguinis.com, or by contacting the authors for an Excel spreadsheet upon request.

of signaling systems that enable such systems to accommodate global diversity, with specific focus on the academic labor market.

Third, we deliver a conceptual link between the scientometric literature that focuses on research performance-based rankings (e.g., Treviño, Mixon, Funk, & Inkpen, 2010; Xu, Poon, & Chan, 2014) and the literature on internationalization of business schools (e.g., Guillotin & Mangematin, 2015). We discuss the impact that particular methodological approaches can have on the ability of non-globally prominent business schools to internationalize by attracting SIEs. This critical analysis is a necessary step towards integration of what has so far been siloed research around internationalization-related processes in business schools (e.g., Enders, 2014; Erkkilä, 2013; Wedlin, 2011). As an empirical contribution to internationalization practices of business schools, we offer a theory-driven solution to non globally prominent institutions in the shape of the GRP system which significantly improves the efficiency of signaling and increases visibility of potential employers and employees alike.

The aforementioned contributions have implications for multiple stakeholders, including academic managers (e.g., deans, department chairs, and other decision makers), faculty, and PhD students. As a preview and summary, Table 1 describes potential applications of the GRP system for various stakeholders, particularly in IB.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Conceptual approach to signaling in international markets

What makes a signaling system efficient? How does internationalization change established signaling systems? Drawing insights from signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973), we argue that an efficient signaling system relies on four fundamental principles. The first is *signal fit*. A signal should closely reflect the underlying unobservable quality for which it serves as a proxy. This is important for the signaling to be useful for the receiver.

Second, a signal should be observable by the target audience of receivers. This second principle of *signal observability*, usually taken as a given within a single-country setting, may become a challenge in global signaling. Knowledge-intensive service-industry firms often use membership of local professional bodies as a signal of legitimacy.

Third, consider the principle of *signal cost*. In an efficient signaling system, signal cost differentiates between high-quality institutions and lower-quality institutions because, for the institutions of lower quality, it is too costly to imitate the signals of high quality. The fundamental assumption behind this principle is that all organizations in the market have the same access to this signaling system (i.e., nobody is discriminated against or has additional signaling costs that are unrelated to the underlying quality that a signal represents). In the context of

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