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ScienceDirect

Sociologie du travail xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

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Dossier-débat : le gouvernement par les indicateurs

## Ranking Academic Research Performance: A Recipe for Success?

*Classer la performance en recherche : une bonne solution ?*

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Received 10 August 2016; accepted 14 September 2016

### Abstract

Using the example of a governance system that allocates public funding for research on the basis of rankings of research quality and impact (as has been developed in the UK over the past three decades), this paper explores three conditions needed for such rankings to be effective as a basis for genuine performance improvement over time. First, the underlying metrics must be capable of meaningfully distinguishing the performance of the institutions being ranked. Second, the basis of assessment must be stable enough for changes in performance over time to be identified. Third, the ranking system should avoid perverse consequences arising from strategic responses by the institutions being assessed. By means of a hypothetical example of a series of research assessment exercises, this article demonstrates the difficulty of fulfilling all three conditions at the same time, and highlights the dilemma between reliability and validity that assessors face. This analysis is relevant to governance by indicators more broadly, because any comparative assessment of institutional performance faces similar issues.

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**Keywords:** Research Assessment Exercise; University rankings; Governance; Metrics; Validity; Reliability; Research impact

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.soctra.2016.09.020>

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## Résumé

En s'appuyant sur l'exemple du système anglais d'allocation de fonds publics à la recherche qui, depuis trois décennies, est basé sur des palmarès établis à partir de critères d'impact et de qualité de la recherche, on explore ici trois conditions d'efficacité de ces classements en termes d'amélioration réelle de la performance des institutions de recherche. Tout d'abord, les mesures sous-jacentes doivent permettre de distinguer de façon significative la performance des institutions évaluées. En second lieu, la base de l'évaluation doit être suffisamment stable pour qu'il soit possible de suivre l'évolution des performances au fil du temps. Enfin, le système doit pouvoir éviter les effets pervers des comportements stratégiques d'adaptation des institutions évaluées. À travers l'exemple hypothétique d'une série d'évaluations formelles d'universités, cet article démontre la difficulté de remplir ces trois conditions en même temps. Il souligne aussi le dilemme entre la recherche de fiabilité et celle de validité auquel les évaluateurs sont confrontés. Ce cas éclaire les problèmes que posent toutes les tentatives d'évaluer de façon comparative la performance des institutions.

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*Mots clés* : Évaluation de la recherche ; Classement des universités ; Gouvernance ; Métriques ; Validité ; Fiabilité ; Impact de la recherche

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## 1. University research rankings

If you can rank Olympic sports teams and restaurants, what could be the objection to doing so for university research? What could be wrong with replacing the tacit or implicit qualitative knowledge about the performance of scholars, research units, or academic journals that everyone worked on forty years ago with a modern system of precise performance metrics based on clear criteria? And who could object to a governance system that bases public research funding on such indicators?

After all, we rank many things other than sports teams and restaurants today. The “governance by indicators” phenomenon highlighted in this issue has even extended to rankings of “governance” itself over the past four decades by bodies like the World Bank and Transparency International, and if we can meaningfully rank something as complex as that, what could be the objection to applying the same method to the quality and impact of academic research? Aren't rankings a proven way to harness the power of competition to raise effort and reward success, keep everyone on their toes, and make researchers work ever harder to out-do their peers? Doesn't such competition make the whole society better off as a result of the higher quality, higher-impact research universities produce? And don't rankings go particularly well with the grain of the hyper-competitive culture of the world of academic research, where (almost) everyone loves to rank everyone else in their field, and gossip endlessly about who's up, who's down, and who's better than whom?

That is the thinking behind the official rankings of academic research units that have been produced in recent decades in several countries, to supplement media rankings of universities based on surveys or other data. The UK has been prominent in the research rankings field ever since it was the first country to produce, three decades ago, an official ranking of the research quality of every department in every university or higher education institution (HEI) in the country, and link public research funding to research rankings on the “best to best” principle. Over the subsequent thirty years that rankings exercise has been conducted some seven times with apparently increasing

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