



Accounting for research quality: Research audits and the journal rankings debate



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ABSTRACT

The question of whether and how research quality should be measured, and the consequences of research audits such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) – formerly the RAE – are considered in relation to the role of journal ratings such as the *Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Quality Guide* (the *ABS Guide*). Criticism of the *ABS Guide* has distracted attention from the results of successive RAEs, where the panel for Business and Management has been one of the most selective in its allocation of the highest grades, especially when compared with the neighbouring field of Economics. If the *ABS Guide* had been used to grade outputs submitted for Business and Management in the RAE 2008 then many more outputs would have received the highest grades, especially in accounting where outputs from journals such as *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, which are highly rated in the *ABS Guide*, appear to have been downgraded by the RAE panel. The alleged bias against accounting in the *ABS Guide* rests on a particular interpretation of citation impact factors for journals, and a narrow definition of subject fields. Critics of the *ABS Guide* would be better advised to direct their attention to scrutinizing the results of the REF and considering whether it provides an adequate research ranking for UK business schools. 15% of all full time students in the UK study business and management, including accounting and finance, but only 6.7% of the full time equivalent research active staff submitted in the RAE 2008 were in business and management, or accounting and finance. Research audits are therefore forcing the separation of teaching from research in UK business schools. With an estimated ratio of 71 full time students per research active faculty member in UK business schools, it may be time to consider a more appropriate, inclusive, and economical form of ranking for research in business and management.

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1. Introduction

There is an important debate to be had over whether and how to measure research quality, and the consequences of research audits such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), formerly known as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The debate in UK business schools has focused on the use of a particular journal ratings list in preparation for the REF, namely the *Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Quality Guide* (Harvey et al., 2010: henceforth the *ABS Guide*). The purpose of this paper is to use the debate over journal ratings as the starting point for considering the possible effects of using alternative measures of research quality and the overall effect of the REF and RAE research audits on research selectivity and teaching in UK business schools.

The first part of the paper sets out the UK context for the development of the *ABS Guide* in relation to the RAE. The next part of the paper gives an overview of the journal rankings debate, and the third part identifies four main critiques of journal lists: first, critics maintain that expert peer reviewers are able to discern the quality of journal articles without reference to citation metrics or journal rankings; second, critics argue that variations in the level of citations for articles in leading journals mean that citation based rankings are unreliable as a guide to the quality of individual articles; third, according to critics subject field bias in the *ABS Guide* suggests that an overall rating list for journals in business and management is problematic; and finally, the critics believe that the construction of journal lists leads to an obsession rankings which distorts the REF as a research audit whose primary purpose is resource allocation rather than ranking. The fourth part of the paper briefly sets out the nature of the data available from the RAE 2008 and the feasibility of comparing the journal ratings in the *ABS Guide* with the gradings for journal outputs by the RAE. The data is then used to consider a series of propositions that follow from the critiques of journal lists. In the discussion three alternative measures of research quality are assessed: individual citation metrics; journal ratings; and peer review. In conclusion it is argued that since research audits in the UK have become more important as institutional rankings for business schools rather than resource allocation, it is likely that the REF will lead to increased selectivity and a detrimental detachment of research from teaching.

1.1. Background to the UK REF/RAE

The proliferation of journal rankings and ratings needs to be understood in the context of increasing pressure from research audits and accreditation. The United Kingdom's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is by far the most institutionalized research audit in OECD economies (Barker, 2007), and it provides a template for considering alternative forms of research audit. There have been six RAEs in the UK so far, in 1986, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001, and finally in 2008. The RAE 2008 was officially described as "a peer review exercise to evaluate the quality of research in UK higher education institutions." The 2008 assessment informs "the selective distribution of funds for research by the UK higher education funding bodies" until the results of the next assessment, renamed the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is due in 2014, with the final submissions to be made in 2013.

For each subject area, known as a Unit of Assessment (UoA), there was a separate panel of peer assessors in the RAE 2008. There were 67 Units of Assessment in the RAE2008, each with a panel of experts nominated by relevant subject associations and other stakeholders. These Units of Assessment were grouped into fifteen Main Panels to ensure consistency between them. The Business and Management Studies Unit of Assessment was grouped in a Main Panel with Economics and Econometrics, Accounting and Finance, and Library and Information Management. Every government funded Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the UK, which includes almost all universities, is eligible to make submissions to any of the Units of Assessment.

To give some idea of the scale of the exercise, there were 2344 submissions from 159 Higher Education Institutions for the RAE 2008. Each submission listed the 'research active' staff selected for assessment by the institution. It should be noted that institutions could decide how many research active staff to submit, and the proportions of staff submitted varied widely between institutions and departments. Extreme selectivity could therefore make it appear as if only the highest quality research was carried out an institution.

The "primary purpose of the RAE 2008" was "to produce quality profiles for each submission of research activity made by institutions" (HEFCE, 2009a). The research profile consisted of three elements: research outputs, which accounted for 70% of the overall quality profile; with 20% made up from the research environment; and 10% from evidence of esteem, such as editorships of major journals and policy advice. The most important part of each submission was therefore the list of up to four of the best research outputs produced by each 'research active' member of staff during the relevant period, from the beginning of 2001 to the end of 2007. It should be noted that these outputs were selected by the institution, not the individual research active academic. Every output submitted was graded by the RAE 2008 panel according to one of four quality levels unless it was unclassified, as set out in Table 1, but these individual gradings were not published. Instead they were aggregated to produce a graded profile for all Research Outputs in each submission. Table 2 shows the overall profile and its components for Warwick Business School, the third largest submission with 130.7 full time equivalent (FTE) staff submitted. The table also shows the so-called GPA, or average ranking, which is the figure that was used to rank institutions when the RAE 2008 results were published. The REF will operate along similar lines to the last RAE 2008, with each submission given a quality profile (HEFCE, 2009b).

The 1996 and 2001 RAEs worked differently, with panels awarding each submission a single numerical rating on a seven-point scale, from 1, the lowest rating, through 2, 3b, 3a, 4, 5, and 5*, the highest, according to how much of the work

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