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In Defiance of Folly: Journal rankings, mindless measures and the ABS Guide

Dennis Tourish^{a,*}, Hugh Willmott^{b,1}^a Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX, United Kingdom^b Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Aberconway Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff CF10 3EU, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we challenge the defence of the ABS Guide offered by its authors (Rowlinson et al.). We direct critical attention to its various uses, including as an inappropriate surrogate for assessing the quality of published work without it having to be read; the taking of decisions about which staff to include in research quality assessments, such as the UK's REF; and, its use by promotions and appointment panels within business schools. The Guide offers a one size fits all formula for estimating the quality of journal articles and journals. This approach disadvantages emergent journals and areas of interest. It contributes to a wider debasement of academic culture whereby business schools and academics are encouraged to over-focus on issues of status and league table positioning for their own sake, rather than address important issues of concern to our wider society. Consequently, we urge its withdrawal. Failing that, we suggest that it should be ignored by business schools, and regarded as a quaint but dangerous experiment that it would be wise to consign to our past.

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1. Introduction

Journals rankings lists, such as the Association of Business Schools (ABS) Guide, have been paraded and applied as a tool for managing processes of selectivity – for appointments and promotions as well as for selecting those submitted to national research quality assessments (e.g. Research Assessment Exercises). As Rowlinson et al. (2010: 159) unashamedly acknowledge, the scale used in the ABS Guide was adopted 'in anticipation of the rating system to be used in RAE 2008'; and its authors elsewhere extol the Guide for its assistance to managers seeking 'a reliable means of assessing the achievements of their academic staff' (Harvey et al., 2008: 1).

Our purpose here is to reflect upon how such tools are defended in the face of hostility to their practical application. In the case of the Guide, it is relevant to note that it has gained widespread influence in the UK and beyond (see Harvey et al., 2010; Todnem By et al., 2013; Willmott, 2011), and so has become an influential force in shaping the research and publication activities of many academics. In this regard, we welcome Rowlinson et al.'s (2015) instructive intervention where they revisit the Guide in relation to the series of research selectivity exercises that have been conducted in the UK every 5–7 years since 1986.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1784276684.

E-mail addresses: Dennis.Tourish@rhul.ac.uk (D. Tourish), WillmottH@cardiff.ac.uk (H. Willmott).

¹ It is relevant to note that Hugh Willmott was a 2008 RAE panel member and will be serving on the 2014 REF panel.

The thrust of 'Accounting for Research Quality' (ARQ) is that critics of the ABS Guide, of which Rowlinson et al. are its architects and guardians, have 'distracted attention from the results of successive exercises' (in press: 1).² Had it not been for this diversion, Rowlinson et al. invite us to believe, critical attention would have been directed at the research exercises themselves (e.g. Currie, 2008; Harney and Dunne, 2013), rather than the ABS Guide. An obvious, initial response to this charge is to ask: why, instead of lavishing their time on the construction, refinement and defence of the Guide, have its authors not focused *their* attention on the 'results' of the successive exercises? If the ABS Guide (hereafter the Guide) has been such a woeful source of distraction, then surely this deleterious effect provides a further compelling reason for abandoning or withdrawing it – as has been repeatedly urged by its numerous critics, ourselves included.

Beyond its designers and managerial users, conspicuously few commentators have spoken up for the Guide. That might strike its creators as surprising since they promote it as a benevolent instrument of enlightenment – a Guide for academics who would otherwise be ignorant of the reputational status of business and management journals (Rowlinson et al., 2011; see also Mingers and Willmott, 2013, note 2). They appear to believe that this knowledge is such a closely guarded secret that it can be prized open only by constructing and disseminating a journals ranking list. Other justifications of the Guide are hardly more credible, such as the contention that, in its absence, an MBA rankings list (p. 5) would be used to assess research quality; that the Guide deserves support just because it is produced by academics, rather than commercial agencies (p. 5); and, that its reliance upon citation metrics makes the assessment process more reliable than evaluation of research quality by research selectivity panels (p. 6).³

Whatever the purpose originally intended for the Guide by its sponsors (that is, the ABS which is effectively the trade association for UK business school deans (the ABS-D), it has been deployed as a potent weapon of managerial control that widens divisions and revises the rules of academic life (Sangster, 2011). A distinguishing feature of the Guide is its privileging of *the place of publication* as the prime indicator of research quality, thereby automating, and aspiring to replace, a peer review process in which account can be taken of authors' broader contributions and the future potential of their work. Application of the Guide intensifies established forms of discipline and punishment in the pursuit of career advancement and promises to deliver the best possible grade point average (GPA) in selectivity exercises.⁴ In what follows, we explore some of the perverse effects that arise from this dangerous liaison of ambitions (see also Tourish, 2011; Willmott, 2011).

2. The wider context

In UK business schools and beyond, the Guide contributes to what Collini (2010) has described as a 'mania' for constant assessment within modern Universities. Increasingly, University managers keep a running total of how many 3* and 4* papers are published by academics, as defined by the Guide, rather than that criteria publicized well in advance by the business and management assessment panel (see Mingers and Willmott, 2013). These grades are nonetheless intended to mimic or predict those scheduled to be determined in the 2014 research selectivity exercise, renamed the 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF), perhaps to signal, deliberately or inadvertently, a more explicit emphasis upon 'excellence' rather than mere 'quality'. The number of publications that tick the 3* and 4* boxes is taken to indicate progress towards key institutional goals – usually defined by the league tables that are constructed in the aftermath of such assessments, such as a 'top 10' position out of the 90 or so units of assessment that are expected to submit a selection of staff to the exercise. The use of the Guide in this fashion can be seen as an example of Foucault's (1977) notion of 'disciplinary practices'. Its application exemplifies the way in which routine aspects of organization become normalized and taken for granted, and so shape the behaviour of organizational actors in terms favoured by those who are most active and influential in institutionalizing them. Consistent with this view, in the UK and elsewhere, the Guide is used to inform calculations and career-defining decisions about the allocation of teaching and administration duties as well as those concerning appointments, probation, promotion and retention.

Of course, the ABS Guide is by no means unique, and the use of such rankings as performance management tools, is hardly confined to the UK. There are numerous examples. In late 2010, the University of Queensland in Australia, one of the country's leading research intensive Universities, announced a 'Q index' (Tourish, 2011). This measures individual research income, research publication (weighted by reference, of course, to journal lists), higher degree completions and research degree advisory loads. A Q index – down to two decimal points – is then produced, and compared to average scores at University, faculty, and school levels. It is also compared to all staff within an academic's faculty at the same appointment level, and is open to inspection by managers. An email to staff from the University's Deputy Vice chancellor for Research helpfully explained that 'Heads of School can view the indices and profiles of all staff in their School. Executive Deans and Institute Directors can view the indices and profiles of all staff in their respective Faculties or Institutes, and the organizational units within them'.

² Research selectivity exercises were introduced in the UK in 1986 and have been repeated every 5–7 years since then.

³ On this issue, Rowlinson et al. (2015) are inclined to face simultaneously in opposing directions as they also observe that 'citation counting is at least as questionable as a measure of quality for individual articles as the citation impact factor is for ranking journals' (p. 17); and they imply that variability in the assessment of articles appearing in the same journal is attributable to panel members' (undeclared) use of citations as an indicator of research quality (p. 7).

⁴ The point is acknowledged by Rowlinson et al. (2015: 16), seemingly as a valued contribution of the Guide, although if Mingers et al.'s (2012) analysis is to be believed, using the Guide to select faculty and publications for submission to the 2008 RAE resulted in a sub-optimal outcome as the panel's evaluations confounded the rankings given to journals, and the articles published in them, by the Guide.

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