



## AT THE SHARP END

Journal ranking

# Journal ranking and the dreams of academics

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to review and comment on the Australian Government's entry into the journal ranking domain.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A review and reflection on the approach and potential impact of the direction taken.

**Findings** – This project is arguably the largest of its type and the effects on academic publishing and the survival of journals could be far reaching.

**Originality/value** – The article draws together current material on the Australian Government's activities and provides details of the scope of the journal ranking project.

**Keywords** Australia, Serials, Publishing

**Paper type** Viewpoint

There's probably no topic within academia that generates such universal passion as academic freedom. During the twentieth century and since, the greater role in funding by governments, along with the catch cry of fiscal responsibility, has lead to steadily increasing demands on academics to justify and compete for the use of resources. However, once undertaken, academics can pick and choose their place of publication. To be sure, there are preferred journals, some with higher prestige than others – an issue to be considered when tenure or promotion is talked about. Other journals might be smaller or less prestigious, but are icons within particular disciplines. Actual journal rankings are probably limited to faculties or disciplines and not a major metric.

Journal ranking is something that has probably been with us, in one form or another, since there was more than one journal. Until the twentieth century, most of these arguments took place in the context of some form of learned discussion by eminent people. This led to the propounding of various views, the authority for which boiled down to "I think . . .", or where there was more than one individual involved, "my friends and I think . . .".

In 1934, Bradford, motivated by a concern over the adequacy of coverage of topics by abstracting services, published his investigations into statistical analyses which could be used to determine the degree of coverage of a discipline by a particular journal collection (Bradford, 1934). From this initial work Eugene Garfield developed the idea of an impact factor in 1955 and began to use it in the 1960s to select journals for the *Science Citation Index* (Garfield, 2005), now subsumed into Thomson ISI. Over the years, much work has been done to understand this measurement and to enhance and fine tune it in many ways. Yet it has always perplexed me that a measurement intended to determine the lack of coverage of a particular collection developed into a reason for excluding material from consideration.



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The debate on the adequacy of the impact factor as a tool for judging the worth of academic endeavour has also grown over the years. As *OIR* readers are undoubtedly well aware, there are many arguments for and against the use of the impact factor in this way (see for example, Seglen, 1997; Gorman, 2008) and even Eugene Garfield has expressed reservations about the way it has been used (Garfield, 2005).

The Australian Government has now entered into the arena of journal ranking with one of the most ambitious projects so far. As part of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative (ARC, 2008a), the Australian Research Council is attempting to rank journals used by Australian academics within the fields of research in which they publish.

The ERA journal ranking exercise began with input from Australian learned academies and other peak discipline bodies being used to create an initial journal listing as input to consultation leading to a final list. The initial list was released in June 2008 and contained over 19,500 journals allocated among 181 field-of-research codes. By comparison, Thomson ISI and Scopus each contain approximately 15,000 indexed journals (ARC, 2008b). While a single journal could be allocated to more than one field of research, it has only a single excellence ranking of A\*, A, B or C. The ERA fields of research are based on the four-digit Australia and New Zealand Research Classification (ANZSRC) Fields of Research (FoR) codes but have differing levels of granularity, so that if a journal covers more than three four-digit codes, it may be allocated to a more general two-digit code. There are also two meta-categories: "Multidisciplinary – Science" and "Multidisciplinary - Social Sciences/Humanities". Use of these more general categories allowed the initial list of journals by fields of research to be limited to just over 21,500 entries.

ERA staff are now working their way through the submissions received. Given the number of interested organisations and the number of journals, it can be expected that there would be about 100,000 individual comments on the journals. The consultation process allowed for the suggestion of additional journals as well as comments of proposed rankings. As a result, the final number of ranked journals could exceed 23,000. The first results of this exercise covering the physical chemical and earth sciences have just been released.

The process has intensified the debate on the value and use of such journal rankings within Australia, and has also attracted substantial interest from overseas. The ARC distributed the data as a spreadsheet. I converted it to database format and made it available on the internet (Lamp, 2008). In the intervening six months that web site has been accessed over 64,000 times, principally from Australia, but users from the USA, New Zealand, Germany and the UK are also significant visitors.

But what is the point of this exercise? How will it impact on the publishing behaviour of Australian academics? The ERA web site states, "The ERA initiative will use a range of indicators and other proxies to support the evaluation of research excellence. One of these indicators is discipline-specific tiered outlet rankings" (ARC, 2008c, online). From this statement, the clear implication is that a contributor to research being assessed as excellent is publication in an ERA ranked journal – the higher the ranking the better.

The ARC has specifically stated that the ERA initiative "will not determine the allocation of research block grants". It has also stated that the ERA initiative "will

provide a framework that gives government, industry, business and the wider community, assurance of the quality of research in Australia's higher education institutions and guide future investment in that research effort" (ARC, 2008b, online). Despite these statements it would be naïve to expect that it will not be taken into account, if not by the ARC, then certainly the academic institutions themselves will want their research to be assessed as excellent and will exert pressure to publish in highly ranked journals. In my opinion, the investment of effort by the ARC into creating and maintaining this list will compel them to get maximum return on that investment by expanding its use. Either way, a change in publishing behaviour by Australian academics can be expected.

This behavioural change will extend well beyond a decision on choice of a journal in which to submit an article. Academics fill many roles in journal publishing – as authors, reviewers, editors, even as publishers. In 2000, the *Index of Information Systems Journals* (Lamp, 1998) kept track of 115 journals. As we enter 2009, it is keeping track of 647. This increase in the number of journals has also taken place in other disciplines, largely fuelled by innovations such as online journals, which have dramatically lowered the entry costs. The ERA has set a notional benchmark of 5 per cent of listed journals at A\* ranking and has similar percentage benchmarks for the other ranking levels (ARC, 2008d). The final distribution will be driven by the category descriptions, but a major shift from these benchmarks would be surprising. Niche journals are likely to attract lower rankings, simply because of the influence of the benchmarks distribution. New journals will not be on the ERA ranking list. Such journals in Australia will no longer attract institutional support. Australian academics will participate less in smaller and newer journals. This could have a negative effect on emerging disciplines.

The ERA journal ranking exercise has the potential to dramatically change the landscape of academic publishing in Australia. The precise nature and extent of those changes are yet to become apparent. The process is being watched keenly in other countries and the mere existence of the journal ranking list is significant and could have wider effects. All of which brings to mind Yeats (1991) – “Tread softly because you tread on my dreams”.

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