Rank and guile

Debate has long raged over journal rankings systems and their sway over academic careers; here, a panel assembled from across the seniority spectrum gives arguments for and against the status quo and discusses strategies for success.

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Whether it is for hiring, promotion, allocating scarce grant funds or any number of other purposes, there is a need to assess the quality of academics' published research. There are other ways of allocating such rewards in academia – by family connections or friendship networks, for example – but these do not meet meritocratic criteria.

From the inception of the Howard government's Research Quality Framework until shortly before the 2012 Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) round, journal rankings were used for this purpose. These rankings aroused much controversy at the time and since, but I believe they are a reasonably fair and objective way of assessing our scholarly research, relative to the available alternatives.

This 'relative to' proviso is important. Academics will and should be assessed on their research, the question is how.

The old system in Australia, which continues in some aspects of the funding formula, was simply to count the number of publications (books counting for five articles or chapters). This system was crazy and destructive in creating strong incentives to produce a large volume of mediocre work. It doesn't pass the laugh test overseas, nor should it in Australia. Critics of journal rankings should think about whether they really want to go back that system. In the absence of citation measures and journal rankings for many fields, ERA essentially leaves everyone (including the assessors) guessing as to what counts as a good, bad or indifferent publication. As a result, where we should have assessments that are transparent, replicable and accountable, we instead have one that is opaque, ad hoc and unaccountable.

Internationally, academics are assessed according to informal journal rankings. In the US, at least in my field (political science), academics at leading universities must publish with a few top journals and book pressies to get tenure. europe and this charmed circle count for nothing, or perhaps are even a net negative. The UK has the Research Evaluation Framework, which ostensibly depends on a committee in each discipline reading nominated publications in order to score departments. In practice, however, it is a fairly open secret that both nominating departments and assessors use journals as a proxy of quality.

People will inevitably use shortcuts in assessing the quality of academics' publications. Given this fact, we should strive for those that are public, produced by deliberation within the field, and can be applied to all equally. The alternatives encourage mediocrity, or serve to entrench the power of privileged insiders in a position to dispense patronage.

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For the first few years of my academic career, I largely ignored journal rankings. My approach was simply to publish in the journals I read and respected without much regard for how they ranked. In retrospect, I did this to my own detriment.

Rankings and metrics cast a disproportionate influence over an academic's career prospects. In some ways, where you publish has become more important than what you publish. This is particularly the case for early-career academics. One of the first things a hiring committee will do is assess an applicant's publication track record against journal metrics. How many A1 or G1 publications does the applicant have? Conversely, how many of the applicant's publications are placed in unranked outlets? Even at non-G08 universities, which have traditionally emphasised teaching over research, rankings and metrics are increasingly used to reward and punish staff.

But playing the rankings game comes with its own frustrations. For instance, anyone familiar with the now-defunct ERA journal ranking, SCImago's journal rank or the Journal Citation Reports will know that rankings tend to fluctuate, sometimes yearly. Journals can be ranked as G1 or A one year only to be classified as B2 or C the following year. Researchers are now encouraged to place publications in appropriately ranked outlets. Yet this becomes tricky when what's
deemed appropriate can change, without warning, from one year to the next.

The other problem that’s often raised is this: Journal rankings are inherently conservative. They promote uniformity and stifle creativity. Publishing in the top-ranked disciplinary journals means, more often than not, running the gauntlet of gatekeepers whose job it is to maintain a discipline’s conventions. Research that challenges this, or fails to speak the right language and use the favoured methodologies, will find itself unlikely to pass the supposedly objective peer review.

Innovative research that does not fit into neat disciplinary moulds becomes collateral damage in a system that pegs rankings to quality. However, frustrating rankings become though, it’s important researchers don’t abandon them. There are ways to play the rankings game and still publish what you want, how you want and where you want. A key strategy in this regard is adopting what’s known as triple publishing. The idea behind this concept is that any piece of research should ideally speak to more than one audience. Researchers should be engaging not just with their sub-disciplines but the entirety of their discipline. This of course means publishing one’s research in specialist journals, even unranked ones. But it also means revising that same research so it does speak the language favoured in the top-ranked disciplinary journals. However, triple publishing goes further than speaking to ‘a very small audience of hyper-knowledgeable, mutually acquainted specialists’, as Joshua Rothman put it (last February) in The New Yorker. It asks researchers to think seriously about how their research might or should engage with public debates. For the philosopher John Armstrong, this is perhaps the most regrettable by-product of the rise of rankings and metrics: that university research no longer seeks to influence what goes on in the public realm. Whilst contemporary academics probably can’t live on op-eds and non-fiction alone, particularly if they want jobs and promotions within the university, triple publishing might help provide a way to satisfy university administrators and, with any luck, one’s own intellectual integrity.

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As early-career researchers and journal editors, we have a unique perspective into how journal rankings – which are not without their merits – have created a host of problems. Some of these are well-known enough. Take bandwagoning: the practice of encouraging research on subjects where the highest-ranked publication outlets are found. Or jingoism: where certain journals are elevated for reasons other than their content. Or gaming: the practice of encouraging scholars to write into journals or subject areas the rankings favour. All of these practices work to narrow the possible knowledge claims within research. Despite this, research that’s published in A* journals, which most often favour conventional approaches, continue to be encouraged and rewarded – with tenure, promotions and funding. But at the other end of the scale, the reverse is true. Research published in C or even unranked journals is disregarded, irrespective of its actual quality or contribution to knowledge. Some researchers have even been forced to disseminate their work via other means, for example blogs. Denigrating forms of knowledge in the name of some [supposedly] objective standard is the most dangerous thing we can do with ideas.

It’s good to recall the warning sounded by then-tertiary education minister Kim Carr in abandoning the ERA rankings system in 2012: “There is clear and consistent evidence that the rankings were being deployed inappropriately within some quarters of the sector, in ways that could produce harmful outcomes, and based on a poor understanding of the actual role of the rankings. One common example was the setting of targets for publication in A and A* journals by institutional research managers.”

We see no reason why this frank yet damning assessment no longer holds.

Nor can any revised journal rankings system – such as those discipline associations have devised – be considered objective. The criterion of assessment continues to be opaque, leading to vast differences in how individual journals have been assessed. Take the 1606 and 1605 codes for example. Most journals were ranked according to their impact factors, but also their editorial boards or other subjective factors. Journals were elevated or demoted sometimes due to very arbitrary concerns. A look at the discrepancy between the ERA 2010 list and the Australian Political Studies Association list of 2013 shows, for instance, the demolition of certain critical journals or the disregard paid to multidisciplinary research (only six journals out of 122 are listed as multidisciplinary).

Of course, we must have a basis to assess research quality. But journal rankings have moved from being an indicative measure to a fetish. Performance metrics divorced from an individual’s actual academic output and public engagement are insufficient and misleading.

Committing to a genuine plurality of research outlets, resourcing the peer-review process, having a number of indicators of research excellence (rather than just rankings), and ensuring search committees actively engage a candidate’s work rather than just glancing at a CV for their rankings, are far more robust means of assessing research excellence than a deeply politicised list of journals.