Taylorizing business school research: On the "one best way" performative effects of journal ranking lists

Abstract

The paper critically examines how work is shaped by performance measures. Its specific focus is upon the use of journal lists, rather than the detail of their construction, in conditioning the research activity of academics. It is argued that an effect of the "one size fits all" logic of journal lists is to endorse and cultivate a research monoculture in which *particular* criteria, favoured by a given list, assume the status of a *universal* benchmark of performance ("research quality"). The paper demonstrates, with reference to the Association of Business Schools (ABS) "Journal Guide", how use of a journal list can come to dominate and define the focus and trajectory of a field of research, with detrimental consequences for the development of scholarship.

Keywords

performance measurement, work culture, journal lists, Taylorization, knowledge development, research evaluation, performativity

Introduction

The creation of `journal quality lists' in the field of business and management in the UK has coincided with the growing importance and formalization of national research evaluation exercises (Geary, Marriott and Rowlinson, 2004; Keenoy, 2005; see also Gendron, 2008). The compilers and advocates of these lists say that their intention is to provide an objective measure of the comparative esteem of journals using a standardized quality metric, thereby overcoming information asymmetries associated with the use of 'insider' knowledge (e.g. Rowlinson et al, 2011)i. Their use, it is further suggested, can correct the biases ascribed to evaluators of research quality (see, for example, Taylor, 2011). However, when the lists are used as a standard to calculate the equivalent of an exchange value of outputs (e.g. journal articles) and authors on the academic hiring, promotion and transfer markets, such justifications largely disregard the extent to which lists contribute to, and have further potential to promote, a commodification of academic labour and a narrowing of scholarship (Bryson, 2004; Willmott, 1995; Harley and Lee, 1997; Van Fleet et al, 2011).

The pressures upon business school academics are particularly intense where these schools have become amongst the largest of University departments, with corresponding implications for institutional funding and reputation. The significance and influence of journal lists increases as competition between institutions for resources, symbolic as well as material, intensifies. As journal quality lists (e.g. those created by the *Financial Times* and the *Association of Business Schools*) become influential for processes of recruitment, promotion and the selection of staff/outputs for submission to evaluation exercises, they come to shape the nature, structure and conditions of academic work (Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Sauder and Espeland, 2009). Such performative effects are, of course, greatest when they weaken or marginalize alternative criteria and processes of evaluation. Examining the use and effects of

journal lists is therefore important not simply for better understanding, or refining, how such metrics are devised (see Truex *et al*, 2011 for a critical review) but also, and more significantly, for appreciating and questioning their constitutive role in defining and policing the focus and direction of research activity.

Regardless of the particular methodology or algorithm used to compute journal lists (see Morris, Harvey and Kelly, 2009 for a typology), their design shoehorns horizontal diversity of research and scholarship into a single, seemingly authoritative vertical order. By valorising the 'research agenda' institutionalized in the topics, methods and perspectives favoured by 'A' category journals, the use of journal lists to assess the quality of research sends out a strong 'market signal': it privileges the research agenda pursued in those journals; and, conversely, it devalues research published elsewhere, irrespective of its content and contribution. When an article's place of publication, as indicated by its ranking in a journal list, becomes more significant or valued than its scholarly content, faculty find themselves increasingly in receipt of the following kind of 'advice' from Deans, research directors and senior colleagues. "If you wish to be counted as 'research active' and so be submitted to the XXX evaluation exercise or to improve your promotion prospects, your work should be designed, shaped and honed to emulate the genre of research published in journals most highly ranked in the prescribed journal list. Failure to demonstrate this competence risks staying on probation / not being counted as research-active / not being considered for promotion/ being moved to a teaching only contract". Whatever its intended purpose, the journal list has become a potent instrument of managerial decision-making whose use, we will argue, has the performative effect of homogenizing, in addition to commodifying and individualizing, research activity.

This concern complements a number of other objections levelled against journal lists which range from issues about the technicalities of their construction, through criticisms of their neglect or devaluation of other kinds of publication (e.g. monographs), to their exclusion of "research that matters" and their obsessive or "fetishised" use (Őzbilgin, 2009: 113; see also Harzing and Metz, 2012; Worthington and Hodgson, 2005; Keenoy, 2005; Clarke, Knights and Jarvis, 2012; Knights, Clarke and Jarvis, 2011; Willmott, 2011). Our focus here, in contrast, is upon the performative effects of a "one size fits all" logic of research evaluation. (see also Nkomo, 2009). To illustrate these effects, our analysis examines in some detail the development, justification and application of the *Association of Business Schools'* (ABS) Academic Journal Quality Guide. Our example is taken from the UK context where the use of journal lists is probably most widely and deeply embedded. But, of course, their use has been widespread, and seems set to become more influential. Downloads of the `Guide' from the ABS website are reported to have been, in one year (2010), `90,000…from nearly 100 countries' (Rowlinson et al, 2011: 443).

We begin by considering the *squeeze on heterogeneity* by the "one size fits all" philosophy enshrined in the compilation of journal lists – a restrictive process that is increasingly reinforced by reliance upon citation counts and impact factors. To underscore the homogenizing influence of journal lists, we draw a parallel between the "one best way" design of industrial production advocated by Frederick Taylor (see Kanigel, 1995) and the "one size fits all" design philosophy enshrined in journal lists. Detailed consideration is given to the establishment and use of the ABS 'Quality Guide' before we assess claims that its use brings cultural and economic benefits.

Measuring scholarship

The UK has been in the vanguard of national assessments of research quality. The first assessment was undertaken in 1986 and it has been repeated every 5-7 years with the most recent exercise completed in 2008 (see Gillies, 2008). The development of business school journal lists has been associated with increasingly selectivity in these exercises and the rapid expansion of such schools within Universities. Before the exercises and the appearance of journal lists, academics in UK Universities were expected to publish where they found a receptive audience; and if their work appeared in a widely read and respected journal so much the better. An *initial* effect of introducing a formal system of research quality evaluation, we submit, was to make the playing field of business and management research more level (see Morris, 2011:39-40) as it was self-defeating to exclude heterodox or questioning scholarship (e.g. critical accounting or `soft OR/systems') on ideological grounds. During the 1980s and 1990s, the national assessment exercises tended to raise the profile and expand the space for innovative and heterogeneous scholarship, and so nurtured the development of comparatively diverse research cultures across UK business schools.

Without succumbing to misty-eyed nostalgia, management and business scholarship during the late 1980s and 1990s pushed the boundaries of disciplines, and substantially opened up the intellectual landscape (e.g. Jackson and Keys, 1989; Hopwood and Miller, 1994). Subsequently, in many areas these tendencies have slowed (see Piercy, 2000 for a trenchant critique), aided *inter alia* in recent years by the use of journal lists to evaluate the quality of research (and researchers) (see Hopwood, 2008). This slowing of innovation has coincided with increasing pressures to 'game the system' (Macdonald and Kam, 2007; 2008; Lee, 2011) as national research exercises have become both more critical and more divisive in their distributional effects[ii]. Central to such game playing are efforts to define and legitimize preferentially rewarded research space (see Marsden, 1993; Bedeian, 2004). So, for example, to the extent that a list elevates an established, North American-dominated, set of journals as

the benchmark of `top-notch' research, a particular, neo-positivist research agenda is deemed to yield the highest `quality' publications (see, for example, Lee and Elsner, 2008).

One size fits all: the citation and impact metric

A distinguishing feature of journal rankings is the application of a "one size fits all" logic. They necessarily assume a single, shared basis for specifying and comparing the quality of different journals[iii]. Each ranking metric comprises elements of (i) measures of impact derived from numbers of citations in selected journals and (ii) some moderation of (i) by forms of peer evaluation which, as Peters *et al* (2012) note, can be a mixed blessing. The resulting rank order is often then hierarchically divided into "top" (A/world elite) "middle" (B/international) and "bottom" (C/national) categories. For illustrative purposes, we take up the ABS `Quality Guide', but a comparable analysis and critique is, in principle, applicable to other journal quality lists.

Citation indices, it is widely assumed, provide the most reliable indicator of journal quality as they are blind to any specific values or criteria that may `bias' processes of peer review. Yet, arguably, reliance upon citation counts and associated indices necessarily privileges particular kinds of journals, irrespective of their distinctive contents: namely, journals that are long established, which publish topics that are widely researched, use methodologies that are frequently deployed and/or engage familiar theoretical frameworks, etc (see McWilliams *et al*, 2005 Parker and Thomas, 2011; Mingers and Xu, 2010). Journals with high citation indices tend to be well resourced and benefit from influential sponsors. For example, members of the (American) *Academy of Management* receive the equivalent of a season ticket, in the form of subscription to a selection of its journals. Like globally branded sports teams, these journals are best placed to attract star players - the editors and board members

who command the greatest intellectual capital, and who act as a magnet for authors whose work is already well known, and which is therefore more likely to be cited. This is significant because journals with high citation scores tend to rely upon a few 'big hitters' (Baum, 2011). Their citation counts effectively enable others who publish in top-tier journals, but whose work is infrequently cited, to "free-ride on a small number of highly-cited articles, which are principal in determining journal Impact Factors" (Baum, 2011: 465). Reliance upon citation indices in the construction of journal lists conceals the `big hitters' effect and it also marginalizes journals dedicated to less popular / emergent areas of research and methodologies.

Compilers of journal lists invariably rely upon journal impact factors (JIF), based upon a two, three or even a five year period. Using this time frame also has implications. It may be more justifiable in fast-moving areas such as the natural sciences, but it is of dubious relevance for the social sciences, including the field of management and business studies. Mingers (2008) study of 600 papers published in 1990 in six well-known management science journals showed that citations for these papers did not reach their peak until six years after publication. Many papers were still being cited fifteen years after publication. And it was not possible to predict the eventual number of citations received by a paper from citations in the early years. Whereas "shooting stars" are highly cited immediately, perhaps because they catch a fashionable wave of work, and then fade into obscurity, "sleeping beauties", may be so innovative that their importance is only appreciated, and is correspondingly influential, much later on.

Subject to the reservations entered above, and within the important exception of articles that are cited ritualistically or repeatedly demonised as examples of unwelcome scholarship, there is a strong case for identifying articles of the highest quality as those that continue to be cited

many years after their publication – that is, the "sleeping beauties", not the "shooting stars". A perverse performative effect of ascribing the highest value to "shooting stars", as happens when JIFs are based upon five or fewer years, is to incentivise the production of comparatively safe papers which contribute to old or fashionable topics and issues, rather than encouraging innovative scholarship that, potentially, has a longer lasting relevance (see also Hopwood, 2008). In sum, in the field of management and business, there are major problems and limitations of relying upon citation counts to determine journal quality (see also Truex *et al*, 2011)[iv].

Heterogeneity at risk

The image of sporting league tables, with their organization into divisions and top clubs, is frequently invoked to characterize and legitimize journal rankings. The aptness of the parallel is, however, limited and misleading. In competitive sports, team managers have broadly the same objective: in many ball sports, for example, the aim is to score goals without conceding. Despite intensifying "isomorphic pressures" (Rowlinson, Hassard and Mohun, 2010: 167), which are compounded by the use of journal lists, the objectives of journal editors are, in contrast, comparatively diverse. That is to say, they have diverse ambitions that are not reducible to an emulation of journals that are in the premier division of the rankings. Across the extensive and variegated field of management and business studies, editors and contributors participate in diverse epistemic communities (Knorr-Cetina, 1999) where divergent views are harboured about what is "the best" or the "most valuable" research. When establishing a new journal, there is often an ambition to address emergent areas, develop new approaches and/or engage innovative perspectives. The "one size fits all" logic of quality assessment does not, and cannot, acknowledge or value this heterogeneity. It can only devalue and/or ignore it.

At the same time, it would be naïve to deny how editors are subject to reputational and commercial pressures that are intensified by the competitive use of citation scores and JIFs as performance indicators which may induce them *inter alia* to emulate the genre of scholarship published in top-tier journals. As Hopwood (2008) comments, editors of new or lowly-ranked journals may bow to pressures to "replicate the biases" of top tier journals instead of seeking to carve out a specialism of their own. And this herd mentality may extend to the more established, second tier journals where editors come under pressure from commercial publishers to `up' their JIFs. Often this deferential strategem has the paradoxical consequence of a journal's lesser status being confirmed by an "almost feudal form of behaviour with the lowly genuflecting to the more highly placed" (Hopwood, 2008: 90). The likelihood of such an outcome is increased when citation scores influence adoption decisions by libraries and when authors seek out highly cited/ ranked journals in which to publish in an effort to raise their personal citation rates (Judge, Cable and Colbert, 2007; Sharplin and Mabry, 1985). These can then be "cashed in" in the promotion and transfer markets, and in the selection process for submission of staff/outputs to research evaluation exercises.

Marginalizing innovation

In this highly competitive milieu, it would be surprising if many journal editors were unable to resist all temptation, including material incentives, to game the system in order to increase their JIFs – for example, by favouring articles that are assessed to have "shooting star" potential (see above), or by inviting authors to consider including reference to articles that have been published in the journal. What happens, then, if a specific area of scholarship, or a favoured approach to a field of investigation, does not share the particular research agenda and associated set of values privileged in the most highly cited or ranked journals? Journals dedicated to peripheral areas and approaches are often marginal, or invisible, to citation

indices. As a consequence, they tend to be poorly rated within, or excluded by, ranking lists. Well-documented examples include the areas of sustainability (see Wells, 2010) and innovation studies (see Rafols *et al*, 2011). But a similar fate befalls a wide range of work that addresses non-mainstream topics and embraces heterodox methodologies and perspectives in journals that lack the profile and institutional support enjoyed by those published by the (American) *Academy of Management*, for example. This disadvantage extends to much multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work that is not readily accommodated within disciplinary silos (see Meriläinen *et al*, 2008).

The marginalization of heterodox research is illustrated by the editorial policy of the (US-based) journal *Operations Research*, widely regarded as one of the top two journals in its field. Operational Research (OR) has mathematical roots but since the 1970s, especially in the UK, the adequacy of mathematical modelling of complex real-world problems has been questioned, resulting in the development of a new area of OR, known as "soft OR" or "soft systems" (Checkland, 1981). Yet, no papers on soft OR have *ever* been published by *Operations Research*, or in the other `top' (also US-based) journal, *Management Science*. When challenged by a letter in *OR/MS Today* (Ackerman and 48 others, 2009), signed by academics from around the world, the response from the Editor was that, as far as *Operations Research* was concerned, non-mathematical OR was *not* OR and therefore not publishable. Since *Operations Research* and *Management Science* are the only two journals in the ABS list to be ranked 4* for OR, soft OR academics are, by definition, incapable of, or disqualified from, producing work that is "world leading" as the REF would put it.

OR may provide a 'limit' case but an equivalent restrictive logic applies across other specialist fields of management (e.g. International Business), and this is despite repeated exhortations in `top-tier' editorials to develop a more expansive and inclusive research

agenda (see also McWilliams *et al*, 2009). At best, publishing research in highly ranked journals which does not fit their established mould is conditional upon shaping and revising submissions in a manner that emulates a model of rigor ascribed to the physical sciences (Thomas and Wilson, 2011). Even when the data are qualitative - and when there is no explicit hypothesis testing of propositions; no reference to internal, external or construct validity; and no preoccupation with the operationalization, measurement and statistical analysis of variables - the ethos of positivism, in the numerous guises of neo-positivism, tends to hold sway (e.g. Scandura and Williams, 2000; Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki, 2008). To the extent that a journal list broadly reflects, endorses and reproduces the hegemony of this neo-positivist tradition of scholarship, its most potent (performative) *effect* is to devalue and marginalize, if not exclude, heterodox forms of scholarly contribution, and thereby induce a homogenization of research activity.

One best list: Taylorizing business school scholarship

For a majority of senior managers - from research directors, through deans to vice-chancellors - the ranking of their university's departments, including its business school, in national evaluation exercises is the key indicator of its status in relation to other universities. The position of departments in the resulting league table also indicates a rise or decline of their standing since the previous exercise. In turn, the outcome of the evaluation is an indicator of the stewardship of senior managers in preparing for the exercise - with regard to staff recruitment and retention as well as to fostering a supportive research environment. The development and widespread adoption of the ABS Journal Guide stems, we suggest, from the performance anxiety of university managers.

Performance anxiety

Determining whether the outputs of staff are of adequate quality to be submitted to research evaluation exercises and, if so, which publications to select, presents university managers with a major challenge, especially when the reputation of the university and the business school is research-based, and so is heavily dependent upon the outcome. When faced with such troublesome decisions, the availability of a journal list is a seductive decision-making aid as it purports to provide an impersonal and objective basis for assessing the quality of research published by staff, and thus offers a basis for making and justifying difficult and divisive decisions. The appeal of a list is especially strong in contexts of diversity where there are multiple paradigmatic differences over what counts as quality - differences that can be as acute and delicate within business schools as they are between schools.

PLACE EXHIBIT 1 ABOUT HERE

As university managers wrestled with consequential, and politically charged, decisions in selecting staff and their outputs for the 2008 UK evaluation exercise, a further consideration was the knowledge that outputs judged to be of the highest quality (i.e. as 4*, see Exhibit 1) - were very likely attract a significantly greater (but unspecified at the submission stage) weighting for funding purposes than outputs judged to be 3* or , 2*. There were therefore material inducements, in addition to symbolic benefits, associated with submission of outputs with the best chance of being judged as 4* or at least 3* quality; and, conversely, there was a concern to minimize the number of staff with outputs at risk of being evaluated as 2* or below.

Faced with this challenge, how might research directors and deans of business schools hope to minimize the risks and maximize the rewards of the exercise, thereby securing their personal, collegial and corporate reputations? Might the assessment process and associated procedures offer any pointers to a defensible stratagem? The public record for the previous (2001) national evaluation exercise stated that the Business and Management Panel read "15-30 per cent of outputs with some reading as much as 75%" (Bessant *et al*, 2003: 53). The Panel was noticeably silent on the question of how outputs that it did not read were assessed. It was unlikely that the volume of outputs for the 2008 exercise would be smaller, or that the size of the Panel would be significantly larger (or its operation as a body would become highly unwieldy). So, an obvious question presented itself: how would Panel members find the time to base their assessment on reading the outputs? And, if they couldn't, what would they do? Would they not have to rely upon some other, proxy measure of quality?

PLACE EXHIBIT 2 ABOUT HERE

Some indications of how the 2008 Panel would operate were provided in its statement of Working Methods, published in January 2006 (see Exhibit 2). It this statement, the use of any journal lists to evaluate the quality of submitted outputs were explicitly excluded: "the assessment will be one of expert review based on professional judgement". A lingering question remained, however, about how practically this undertaking could be fulfilled in the time available (a few months) by a Panel comprising less than twenty members. Closer consideration of the 2008 Panel's statement of its Working Methods revealed a commitment "to collectively examine *in detail* at least 25% of the submitted outputs" (emphasis added). So, how were the remaining outputs to be assessed?

It could be inferred from its Working Methods statement that the Panel would rely upon its "professional judgment" to assess the remaining outputs; and that it would do this without reading the outputs "in detail". This inference pointed in the direction of Panel members' (expedient) reliance upon some other indicator(s) of the quality of not-read-in-detail outputs - outputs which, it could be anticipated, would contain a very high percentage of journal articles. The most obvious proxy indicator of the quality of such outputs is the publication in which they appear. Whatever the explicit and repeated pronouncements of the Panel, its huge workload suggested that its members might well resort to a journal list in order to get the job done[v].

For members of research committees, research directors and deans of business schools, a possible remedy for their performance anxieties (see above) presented itself in the form of the indicator of publication quality provided by a journal rankings list[vi]. There was, however, an irksome difficulty. In 2006, when the Working Methods of the 2008 evaluation Panel were published, numerous journal lists were in circulation, including those constructed by several UK business schools, such as Aston, Cranfield, Durham, Imperial, Kent and Warwick (see also http:// harzing.com/). Supposing that Panel members would be obliged to resort to a list when assessing up to 75% of outputs that would not be read "in detail", there was no way to know, or deduce, which list or combination of lists they might use to assess those outputs. Faced with this uncertainty, a shared strategic objective of deans, especially those heading up research-based business schools, was, we conjecture, collectively to overcome the vertigo of uncertainty by establishing, endorsing and promoting a preferred journal list.

The creation of the ABS list was sponsored by the deans of UK business schools through the ABS which hosts their regular meetings and activities. The publication of Version 1 of the ABS list in January 2007[vii] coincided with, and drew legitimacy from, the endorsement of

journal ranking lists in other fields by influential bodies such as the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Commons[viii]. With the appearance of a list sponsored and endorsed by deans, the relevance of other 'local' lists diminished. As its creators of the ABS list claim, and not without justification, it "has been widely adopted as a policy tool in UK business schools and indeed in business schools in many parts of the world" (Kelly, Morris and Harvey, 2009: 2). They also note that, "In preparing for the RAE 2008, many university and business school managers…made use of the ABS guide in planning their submissions" (Kelly, Morris and Harvey: 2). Given this application of the ABS list, and its continuing use in preparations for the 2014 evaluation exercise, it is relevant to consider further how its construction and justification has contributed to exerting an influence over the range and direction of business and management research.

Managing by numbers: The ABS `Journal Quality Guide'

In the run-up up to the 2008 evaluation exercise, the ABS "*Journal Quality Guide*" became adopted as the "*de facto* standard" across UK business schools (Mingers, Watson and Scaparra, 2012: 3). Its relevance for this purpose was crudely signalled by Version 1 of the ABS list in which journals were grouped using a five point scale that directly mimicked the scale used by the Panel. As Rowlinson, Hassard and Mohun (2010: 157) observe, the scale was adopted, "in anticipation of the rating system to be used in RAE 2008", a view that finds confirmation in the Introduction to Version 1 of the `Guide' (see Exhibit 3).

PLACE EXHIBIT 3 HERE

In place of any principled articulation or defence of the ABS list – for example, by indicating how it might contribute to promoting more innovative research and scholarship - its architects simply anticipate and openly commend its managerial use. The preparation of the list is warranted on the grounds that, "people do not always read all that they are expected to read", from which it follows, apparently, that "it is surely a good thing if a systematic method of determining journal quality, like the ABS guide, is used"; the alternative being "the unsystematic and imprecise methods that might prevail in the absence of ranking journal titles" (Morris, Harvey and Kelly, 2009: 1449). In other words, the list is commended as a handy, expedient tool for those charged with making onerous decisions about their colleagues' careers, yet who are disinclined to prioritize time for reading and assessing the work itself, or seeking advice from subject specialists. To the extent that this commendation is followed, the performative effect of journal lists is to frame, guide and justify decisions on what counts as "quality research" and where resources are allocated.

Performative Effects of the ABS List as a Policy Tool

The conflation of the scales used in the ABS list with the 2008 assessment exercise, and the calculation that the Panel would make expedient use of a journal list, make it probable, as the architects of the ABS list claim, that the ABS list has been "widely adopted as a policy tool in UK business schools", and was used "in planning their submissions to evaluation exercises" (Kelly, Morris and Harvey, 2009:2). Moreover, the findings of a modelling exercise, its architects argue, also demonstrate "a high degree of congruity between the judgments reached by the 2008 Panel and the journal quality rankings of the ABS guide" (Kelly, Morris and Harvey, 2009:3). An implication of this "congruity" is that savvy university managers made use of the ABS list when selecting staff and outputs for the 2008 exercise and that, despite their repeated protestations to the contrary, members of the evaluation Panel were

heavy users of the list. In order to assess such claims it is important to take a close look at the results of the 2008 evaluation exercise.

Mingers, Watson and Scaparra (2009) examined the overall results for each business school submission to the Panel. Their analysis necessarily relies upon available, aggregated information on the outcomes of the 2008 exercise profiled as the percentage of outputs awarded a particular grade from 4 to 1 and ungraded (see Exhibit 1). The profile is compared to the actual journal-based outputs submitted by each business school or management department in order to determine whether the results could be recreated through an imputed ranking of the journals. The main findings of interest to the present analysis are:

- *Finding*. A much greater concentration of outputs as journal articles and correspondingly less as books or reports than in previous years – in 1996, 69% were journals whereas in 2008 the figure was 92%.

Comment. This increase cannot be attributed to the ABS list *per se* but it does perhaps indicate increasing risk-avoidance behaviour to which the significance assigned to journals by the ABS list contributes, leading to the conclusion that "at least you are safe with a refereed-journal paper, especially if it's in ABS". The implication is that academics should direct their research activity primarily to what is publishable in journals rather than through other media (e.g. monographs).

- *Finding*. The number of journal titles submitted increased from 1275 in 1996 to 1639 in 2007. Of the journal outputs submitted to the 2008 exercise, only 50% appeared in the ABS list.

Comment. This shows the vast range of research carried out within business and management that does not have the "ABS stamp" of recognition. This remarkable diversity remains to be

adequately acknowledged by the ABS list. We are concerned that this range will be narrowed if, in future, the (ABS) list becomes even more hegemonic in defining where management research is published.

- *Finding*. Evidence that the ABS list was used in making submissions – for instance comparing the ABS journals that were submitted with those that were not, 45% of those not submitted were ABS 1*, while only 4% were ABS 4*. An article appearing in a journal ranked as 1* or 2* in the ABS list was generally not submitted even though it might be assessed to make a substantial and well received contribution to its field.

Comment. This tendency militates against newly developed journals and innovative work. Mingers, Watson and Scaparra (2012) conclude that "there is evidence of extensive selectivity in submissions" guided by the pecking order of journals on the ABS list. They suggest that the presence and position of a journal on the ABS list was a "possible bias" with regard to the judgments of Panel members. This does not imply that Panel members directly consulted a list but, rather, that a `list mentality' may have been acquired by some Panel members, predisposing them to value outputs published in journals ranked comparatively highly on the ABS list.

- *Finding.* Evidence of an association between the proportion of a department's submission appearing in ABS journals and the evaluation it achieved. In other words, in general, departments with a greater concentration of ABS journals did better.

Comment. There is not necessarily a direct causal effect here – members of a department in which well-regarded research is undertaken will tend to publish in journals which are included and highly ranked in the ABS list. However, *some* submissions were virtually 100%

ABS journals, pointing to a high degree of managerial selectivity based upon the use of the ABS list.

- *Finding*. Mingers, Watson and Scappara's (2012) analysis indicates "differences [between the ABS ranking and RAE grades] for particular journals with some being two or even three grades apart" (Mingers, Watson and Scappara, 2012: 25). There is evidence of dispersion around the grade of a journal, i.e., papers from the same journal being awarded different grades, as the RAE Panel expected *a priori*, and claimed *a posteriori* (e.g. for the journal *Industrial Relations* – "4* 53.6; 3* 0.0; 2* 8.8; 1* 36.7 O*0.0)* (Mingers, Watson and Scappara, 2012: 20-22)

Comment. For research managers seeking to "game the system", this indicates a downside of reliance on a list when selecting outputs for submission, rather than making peer-reviewed judgments about their merit[ix].

The actual grades awarded to individual outputs are not published. It is therefore necessary to underscore that it is impossible to know definitively whether the 2008 Panel members assigned a high grade to some articles in journals that were not ranked highly on the available ABS list; or, indeed, if a low grade was given to articles published in more highly ranked journals. Taylor (2011) has used regression analysis to assess the extent to which similar aggregate results could have been obtained by simply using the ABS list together with two other variables measuring the size of the submission, and membership of university groupings such as the Russell Group (a grouping of top UK universities). Taylor found that he could explain around 90% of the variation in mean score per department using these variables, which certainly suggests a high degree of correlation, at least in aggregate, but it does not shed light on differences at particular grade levels – e.g. percentage of 4*.

Such differences are, however, potentially illuminated by Mingers, Watson and Scaparra (2012). They show the following proportions – 4* 15%, 3* 31%, 2* 37% and 1*17% – for publications entered in the 2008 exercise that appear in the ABS list. The equivalent percentages which their study estimated from the results of the exercise were – 4* 18%, 3* 31%, 2* 28%, 1% 22% and 0* 2%. These results suggest that the Panel awarded more 4* (if repeated across all entries this would have been about 377 extra 4* outputs) as well as more 1* (and 0*). In other words, the Panel was more positive or generous in its assessments than the ABS list at the upper 4* end. These differences may not seem great but the weights for awarding funding were strongly skewed towards 4* (4*:9; 3*:3; 2*:1; 1*:0), and so have a significant financial effect for business and management research across the UK.

Discussion: The ABS List and the Taylorization of Business School Research

The claim by architects of the ABS list that "by promoting a broader *consensus*...researchers will benefit collectively both *culturally and economically"* (Morris, Harvey and Kelly, 2009: 1446, emphases added) rather echoes Taylor's assertions when introducing his principles of scientific management to rationalize industrial production. The consensus claim has been challenged elsewhere (Willmott, 2011) and we have questioned the claimed material benefits of the list. We therefore confine our comments to how the architects and sponsors of the ABS list have responded to expressions of dissensus, or cultural heterogeneity, including those which point to the adverse effects of its use upon research activity.

A specific, documented example is the misgivings voiced by the UK Committee of Professors in OR (COPIOR). They wrote to the ABS to communicate their concerns about the use of the list in certain business schools where, for example, early career academics are under pressure to publish in an ABS 4* journal *before* they can pass probation. In its response

to COPIOR, the ABS replied that it simply produced the list, and that how the list is used is not its responsibility (email communication). Rather like Taylor, any problems associated with using the list are attributed to its imperfect or misdirected application or, more recently, to "predelictions and prejudices" amongst journal editors and referees that the ABS list merely "reflects" and renders more "visible" and available to "challenge", thereby ignoring its performative effects (Morris et al, 2011: 563). The architects and sponsors of the ABS list willingly take credit for what they extol as its individually and managerially beneficial effects (e.g. widening access to previously restricted information and assisting managers seeking "a reliable means of assessing the achievements of their academic staff" (Harvey, Morris and Kelly, 2008: 1)). But, to date, they have resisted being "held responsible for at least some of the reasonably predictable effects of their actions" (MacIntyre, 1999: 312), and so they effectively deny, or only selectively acknowledge, their moral agency. Is this perhaps a case of wilful blindness?

For the use of a journal list to be contemplated and justified, its performative effects in narrowing, impeding or inhibiting diversity must be downplayed or simply ignored. In the case of the ABS list, its architects first acknowledge that the ranking of journals courts "the danger that highly original work fails to make a significant contribution to the field because it is damned by the name of the publication it appears in" (Morris, Harvey and Kelly, 2009: 1449). They also concede that work appearing in a journal ranked highly in a list can be seen in a better light that it would otherwise merit. But, they then push such considerations aside in order to establish and refine a single list that aspires to be definitive and of universal applicability. In order to create a metric with general applicability or *universality*, its *particularity* must be obscured– a particularity that unavoidably privileges the values of certain research traditions while it marginalizes others. The particularity of the ABS list is further disguised, as noted earlier, by the adoption of the 1*- 4* grading scale devised for the

2008 evaluation exercise. Quality criteria (see Exhibit 1) used by the Panel to assess *research outputs* are superficially indistinguishable from criteria used to rank of *journals* in the ABS list. Use of the same scale is, at best, confusing and misleading. Whereas the 2008 Panel's evaluation criteria explicitly rely upon the exercise of "professional judgment" in evaluating each output on its own merits (albeit not in detail, see http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2006/01/docs/i36.pdf), the ABS list assigns quality to outputs based upon place of publication whose status in the ranking is determined by citation counts, impact factors etc[x].

Policy Implications

If the logic of applying the ABS list is taken to its ultimate conclusion, the 22 "world elite" journals identified in its most recent edition (Version 4) should become the benchmark for business and management scholarship in the UK. Indeed, such a move has been advocated by those, including a member of the 2008 Panel, who contend that using such a benchmark is *the* way to make UK management and business research genuinely "world leading" (Saunders and Wong, 2011; Saunders, Wong and Saunders, 2011). Had this advice been followed by the 2008 Panel, a very small amount of funding would have been directed to a tiny number of institutions (e.g. London Business School, see Saunders, Wong and Saunders, 2011: 412) employing researchers with the capability and inclination to confect papers compliant with the requirements of such "world leading journals".

If diversity of research is to flourish rather than be smothered by the homogenizing logic of journals lists, proactive interventions are required. In the UK context, we suggest that the Business and Management Panel for any future evaluation exercises might:

1. Reiterate the exclusion of all use of journal lists from the evaluation process.

2. Actively welcome the submission of research monographs and other forms of output, thereby mitigating fears that such outputs are too risky to submit.
3. Encourage submission of outputs pursuing a broad research agenda and adopting a wide range of research styles.
4. Affirm the importance of research that addresses the problems that the world faces, and not just the managerially defined problems identified by executives and/or the narrow topics and scientistic methods which currently dominate top-tier journals.
5. Comment directly upon the contribution of journal lists to the development of the field.

The use of a journal list to evaluate research quality, we have argued, induces a narrowing of scholarship and so acts surreptitiously to "limit academic freedom" (Tourish, 2011: 369). Accordingly, our chief policy recommendation is a moratorium on their use. Unsurprisingly, the architects of the ABS list are hostile to this proposal. To date, the objections to the use of journal lists to assess "research quality" have also been ignored, resisted or rejected by university managers and narrowly careerist academics who welcome a performance metric, that mitigates uncertainties about what makes an academic a more desirable and highly priced commodity – in terms of being recruitable, promotable, eligible for submission to evaluation exercises, and so on. What is revealing about the objection of the architects of the ABS list is their assumption that a moratorium would require "policing" or "enforcement" (Rowlinson et al. 2011: 444), presumably by some managerial authority, rather than an agreement amongst self-regulating peers to suspend, and so effectively abolish, their use. The lead given by the 2008 and 2014 evaluation Panels could be followed by collectively agreeing to return the genie to the bottle. It should be clear that our call for a moratorium places no "curbs on *academic freedom* to analyse publicly available data and publish findings" (Rowlinson et al. 2011: 444) . Such data analysis can continue but our hope is that a fuller appreciation of the

dubious basis and adverse effects of the use of journal lists to evaluate research quality would accompany such analysis and so accelerate their demise.

If our moratorium proposal is considered excessively radical or censorious, then the ABS or an equivalent body might develop numerous lists as a way of recognizing and encouraging scholarly diversity, innovation and multi-disciplinarity. Lists could be developed for heterogeneous forms of research - on particular topics, within specific fields or sub-fields, adopting a variety of methods and/or guided by different theoretical approaches. This proposal, we readily acknowledge, multiplies rather than eliminates the "one-size fits all" logic common to all journal lists. But the resulting profusion of lists would surely serve to mitigate the homogenization of research resulting from ascribing authority to One Best List (see also Adler and Harzing, 2009: 90-1). If there were twenty or fifty lists, each covering journals relevant to a particular topic, sub-field, method or theoretical orientation, the effect would be to subvert the effect of relying upon one list to judge scholarly quality. But a moratorium on the use of journal lists for making decisions on recruitment, promotion and research evaluation submission is more consistent with our analysis, and so is the preferred policy recommendation. The plea to "develop and use [evaluation] systems that are reliable and valid and justifiable to all major stakeholders, internal and external" (Hitt and Greer, 2012) may be as commendable as Apple Pie but, in our view, it is politically naïve. Its pursuit is likely to perpetuate the shortcomings of using a journal list to evaluate research quality that it is intended to rectify.

Conclusions

It is hoped that the evidence and arguments presented in this paper will stimulate further discussion of the pros and cons of the use of journals lists. Our analysis has examined the application of the ABS list in the UK where the use of such a list is most advanced and widespread. Rather than focus upon its idiosyncratic features, we have stressed its typicality with regard to its construction and effects. Accordingly, our analysis and conclusions are broadly applicable to the use of the ABS list, or equivalents, elsewhere in the world.

To pay attention to the proclaimed virtues and latent vices of journal lists might seem to be esoteric and self-indulgent when compared to research that addresses topical issues of management practice or aspires to advance theory in vaunted areas like strategy or finance. But this judgment incompletely appreciates how the entire field of management scholarship and research can be significantly influenced and directed by evaluation criteria and metrics, such as those enshrined in journal lists. Paying attention to the effects of such lists is important because, rather like the time and motion techniques developed by Taylor or the infamous evaluations produced by credit ratings agencies prior to the 2008 financial meltdown, they exert potent and pervasive performative effects in commending and resourcing some forms of (research) activity whilst devaluing and impeding others. By providing a means of adjudication equivalent to Taylor's "scientific" calculations and prescriptions, the ABS list offers a technically elegant fix for a troublesome managerial problem as it disregards its unintended consequences, including the homogenization of research.

The claim of architects of journal lists is to have invented the equivalent of "a better mousetrap" – in the form of a superior device for identifying the quality of research. The numerically based, rationally calculated, centrally administered, bureaucratically assembled list is commended as a worthy replacement for the time-consuming and comparatively

unsystematic process of carefully reading and considering scholarly work. In contesting this commendation, we have highlighted the spurious objectivity of citation metrics and JIFs and argued that lists valorise formal comparability to the detriment of substantive contribution and diversity. A key indicator of an academic's scholarly credentials then becomes the possession of technical, instrumental competences for shaping and shoehorning research to fit the style of scholarship published in journals highly ranked by the favoured list.

A Taylorist infatuation with precision and systematicity obscures and homogenizes the features of a field which, as the creators of the ABS list acknowledge has, up until now "*resisted normative pressures to coalesce around a set of ontological, epistemological and methodological norms* (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998)" (Morris, Harvey and Kelly, 2009: 1444, emphasis added; see also Becher, 1989). Research in UK business schools, as they note elsewhere, exhibits "*differences in values, theoretical reference points, methods, and writing styles*" (Morris, Harvey and Kelly, 2009: 1449, emphasis added). If this diversity is to be valued and revitalized, rather brushed aside and smothered, then the overall assessment of the "quality" of the contribution of articles that appear in a particular journal cannot convincingly be made by reference to a single, standardising and homogenising measure.

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Exhibit 1 RAE Definitions of Quality

4*	Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour
3*	Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which nonetheless falls short of the highest standards of excellence
2*	Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour
1*	Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour
Unclassified	Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

Exhibit 2 RAE Working Methods

`The assessment will be one of expert review based on professional judgement. Each sub-panel member will be expected to form a view on all submissions. Sub-panel members with relevant specialist knowledge will assess cited work from all submissions…They will focus detailed examination on work which has not undergone peer review, or is published in new and less familiar media, or which is deemed to be potentially of the very highest standards. In conjunction with specialist advisers and members of other sub-panels to which work is cross-referred, the sub-panel expects to collectively examine in detail at least 25% of the submitted outputs."

extracted from paras 47 and 49 of http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2006/01/docs/i36.pdf

Exhibit 3 Quality rating and meaning from ABS Journal List

4 * A top journal in its field Publishes the most original and best executed research papers. Journals typically have high submission and low acceptance rates. Papers are heavily refereed and the journals have high citation impact factors in their sub-field.

3 * A highly regarded journal in its field Publishes original and well-executed research papers. These journals typically have good submission rates and are very selective in what they publish. Papers are heavily refereed and the journals have fair to good citation impact factors.

2 * A well regarded journal in its field Publishes original research of an acceptable standard. Papers are fully refereed and the journals have modest citation impact factors or do not carry one at all.

1 * A recognised journal in its field Publishes research of a modest standard or has yet to establish a reputation by virtue of being launched recently. Few journals in this category have an impact factor.

0 * A journal not recognised as an authentic research publication Journals aimed at practitioner audiences which attract academic contributors and which do not generally rely on peer review.

(Morris, Harvey and Kelly, 2009: 1448)

[i] In the example of the ABS journal list, this justification involves some re-writing of history. The second paragraph of the Introduction to Version 1 of the ABS Quality Guide explicitly states that it was "issued in January 2007 in order to assist member schools in making their preparations for the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008)" (see also below). The lead author of this re-write is an historian, See http://www.keele.ac.uk/cer/documents/ABS%20Journal%20Ranking%20Guide%20Introduction.pdf.

[ii] There is no space to elaborate upon other influences , such as the political climate of neo-liberalism manifest in the re-commercialization and corporatization of higher education (Willmott, 2003). This has provided much grist, but lent little encouragement, to heterodox scholarship.

[iii] For a list that is selective but does not rank its constituents, see Willcocks, Whitley and Avgerou, (2008).

[iv] On the other hand, when sufficient time has elapsed to disclose the articles that make a sustained contribution, citations may usefully inform processes of peer review that otherwise, when reliance only upon the judgments of established academics (such as ourselves) may result in a failure to appreciate new, path-breaking scholarship.

[v] Indeed, it has been unequivocally asserted that the 2001 Panel `assessed research in terms of the journals in which it was published' (Macdonald and Kam, 2007: 711), although it is unclear on what basis this claim is founded.

[vi] As Worrell (2009: 127 cited by Peng and Dess, 2010: 288) has joked, "The Dean may not know much about research but at least he or she can count". Even basic numerical skill is unnecessary when the only managerial competence required is an ability to match staff publications with the status conferred upon them by a journal rankings list.

[vii] For an overview of how the ABS list was constructed, see Willmott (2011). The process may account for some disquieting anomalies. For example, the journal *Business History* which, according to the *Web of Science,* had 161 citations and an impact factor of 0.250 during the period 2001-2007, received a 4* rating in the ABS rankings list whereas *The Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, which had 361 citations and a 0.615 impact factor for the same period, did not appear on the list, although submissions from both journals were made to RAE 2008 (see Rowlinson, Harvey *et al*, 2010: 10) .

[viii] "In 2004, this Committee has put its considerable weight behind the use of metrics to support or even replace peer review" (House of Commons, 2004: 3 cited in Taylor, 2010: 2); and this endorsement was subsequently supported by the Treasury which in 2006 favoured a more "cost-effective" assessment process based upon quantitative data (Treasury, 2006 cited in Taylor, 2010: 2-3).

[ix] Of course, the peer review process is time-consuming, imprecise, unsystematic and subject to cronyism (Bedeian, Van Fleet and Hyman, 2009a; 2009b; Peters *et al*, 2012), and so is easily trashed for being inefficient and unreliable, in contrast to a journal list which offers impressive precision and systematicity. The creators of the ABS list assert that "although high quality research may on occasion be published in lesser ranked journals and *vice versa*, these exceptions to the rule do not invalidate the overall assessment of the quality of the research published in a journal" (Harvey, Kelly, *et al*, 2010: 4). We beg to differ as a published research tends to point in another direction (see Starbuck, 2005). Addressing the question `Are Articles in "Top" Management Journals Necessarily of Higher Quality?', Singh, Haddad and Chow (2007:327) conclude that evaluation processes using `"top journal" publications as the sole or primary criterion for evaluating research and publication performance is a classic case of "throwing out the baby with the bathwater" .

[x] In the latest edition of the ABS list there is an elite 4* category above the 4 category, so it no longer quite mirrors the grading proposed for the 2014 assessment exercise.