



Rank and File: Managing Individual Performance in University Research

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League tables are a common way for various competitive sports to judge team quality and identify winners and are also making increasingly frequent appearances in higher education globally. In this paper, we argue that this compilation of league tables is a product of the global hegemony of market-driven systems of higher education in which universities compete with each other for declining resources and students-as-customers. We explore why and how such exercises shape and define conceptualisations of the relative strength of organisations, and what the consequences of this are likely to be. Our analysis is grounded in a conceptualisation of universities, particularly in the UK, as marketised, neoliberal institutions for which rankings are essential to organisational transformation. We provide empirical data to support our argument via an exploration of the UK Association of Business Schools' *Academic Journal Quality Guide*.

Higher Education Policy (2012) 25, 335–360. doi:10.1057/hep.2012.12

Keywords: university; academic performance; ABS list; reduction of variety

Introduction

League tables, defined as ranked lists compiled in accordance with specified evaluative criteria, are a common way for various competitive sports to judge team quality and identify 'winners'. The competitive arenas around which such league tables are formed, such as national or international tournaments, are clearly identifiable, as are the markers of quality, such as the number of goals or runs. League tables are also making increasingly frequent appearances in higher education globally. For instance, the *Times Higher Education* list (*The Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, 2011) ranks universities across the world by a basket of criteria. Such league tables extend from the organisational level through to faculties and, increasingly, to individual academics. Research league tables often rely upon data from national audits of research (such as the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), now



renamed the Research Excellence Framework (REF)) and indeed on numerous available rankings, such as those of journal quality.

In this paper, we argue that this extensive compilation of league tables is a product of the global hegemony of market-driven systems of higher education in which universities compete with each other for resources and students-as-customers (Boden and Epstein, 2006) — league tables signal relative product quality, facilitating differentiation between organisations. There is now a substantial array of different types of league table, covering topics such as student satisfaction, research grant income and, the focus of this paper, the quality of research outputs.

Research quality has become a major competitive focus for universities battling each other for limited funding and relative prestige (Marginson, 2006) and league tables have become an important mechanism for defining, producing and advertising it. But, crucially, the selection of the evaluative criteria by which organisations' positions are determined are heterogeneous, subjectively defined and continuously negotiated. Indeed, higher education has become a little like Formula 1 racing, where there is a constant and fierce battle to define the increasingly complex and subjective rules by which the races are governed, because winning is, in part, about the capacity to write the rules to complement one's own strengths.

League tables and the data systems (such as bibliometrics) that feed them have been subject to extensive critique. This literature does valuable work in pointing up the problems, subjectivities and difficulties inherent to such exercises (Lowe and Locke, 2006; Adler and Harzing, 2009; Hussain, 2010), but tends to focus on technicalities and the practicalities of how to produce better input data and devise better league tables from them. In a rare example of more critical work, Willmott (2011) offered a critique of the usage of ranked journal lists and framed the analysis in terms of 'fetishism'; he also made explicit the ways in which this is problematic. Similarly, Rafols *et al.* (2011) provide a critical and empirically substantiated account of the ways in which the Association of Business Schools' list (which forms the focus of this paper) restricts interdisciplinarity in business and management research.

In this paper, we take a somewhat different perspective, exploring why and how such league tables are developed and adopted, how they shape and define conceptualisations of the relative strengths of organisations, and what the consequences of this are likely to be. Our analysis is grounded in a conceptualisation of universities, particularly in the UK, as marketised, neoliberal institutions for which rankings and league tables are essential to organisational transformation. We provide empirical data to support our argument via an exploration of the UK Association of Business School's *Academic Journal Quality Guide* (ABS, 2011). The *Guide* was selected for three principal reasons. First, it is widely used in the UK and beyond. Second, its production is well



documented and much debated; it therefore offers a suitable ‘critical incident’ that renders the topic amenable to research. And third, we believe that the potential adverse effects of this list are serious enough to merit timely and robust discussion.

This paper is organised into three further sections. First, we conceptualise the usage of league tables in universities in which we consider how and why contemporary universities might be seen as akin to 19th century capitalist factories. This yields an explanation of why ranked journal lists, used as proxies for academic quality and tools for the standardisation of academic work, might be seen as valuable instruments for managing universities. We then interrogate the *ABS Guide*, narrating the history of how this device emerged, and became established and embedded in the academic system. Finally, we turn to consider some of the implications of such technologies for universities, academics and the nature of knowledge.

The University as Factory?

Universities are complex, multi-layered and multi-faceted organisations. Traditionally, ‘the university’ was defined by communities of scholars within knowledge fields (see for example Knorr-Cetina, 1982), the members of which overlap with but are not confined to any particular organisation. But universities are also, increasingly, organisations subject to exogenous imperatives the origins of which lie outside of the immediate realm of scholarly knowledge producers (Nedeva and Boden, 2006). Higher education is increasingly seen in neoliberal regimes as a resource to be deployed to strengthen knowledge economies, engendering practices designed to promote efficiency, performance management and individualisation (Boden and Epstein, 2006). Steering universities at a distance, government are using their funding powers to direct universities towards national policy objectives. There is, of course, no inherent reason why the interests of communities of scholars and neoliberal policy imperatives should be misaligned — but the perception, especially in the UK, is that they are.

...The British universities, Oxford and Cambridge included, are under siege from a system of state control that is undermining the one thing upon which their worldwide reputation depends: the calibre of their scholarship. (Head, 2011)

Knorr-Cetina identified a range of economies within which academic research communities might be seen as operating: gift exchange economies where they seek the reward of recognition; credit-seeking economies where scientists gain symbolic capital; or credibility economies, where the goal is



scientific capitalism, characterised by the ‘reproduction [of knowledge] for the sake of “reproduction”’ (1982, 105). None of these models are classical capitalist economies where labour and the means of production are brought together so that capitalists can expropriate the surplus value of labour. Yet, not foreseen by Knorr-Cetina, higher education policy now frequently conceives of universities as what might be termed ‘knowledge-factories’, producing standardised knowledge products intended to generate real financial returns (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004).

The beginning of this process in the UK was marked by the Jarratt Report (1985), which recommended that universities should become more like private enterprises, and their leaders the chief executives of knowledge corporations. To support this transformation, new hegemonic managerial hierarchies have developed that do not necessarily have any association with or particular understanding of academic work (Boden and Epstein, 2006). These new managerial hierarchies need technologies with which to manage. Scholarly communities have a distinct ethos and their own methods for regulation and the allocation of the symbolic capital implicit in credibility. Such symbolic capital is frequently translated into financial and other resources for research (Latour and Woolgar, 1986). These practices may be inaccessible to the new management hierarchies precisely because the managers are not necessarily part of the scholarly communities. The dissonance between scholarly and management paradigms may mean that the tools of the former are inappropriate for or inaccessible to the latter.

If government policy makers and university managers are to be effective in capturing and controlling knowledge production processes towards neoliberal policy ends, in turning universities into profitable knowledge factories, they need appropriate regimes of surveillance and control. At the national level, systems for the evaluation of research outputs in terms of both quantity and quality are becoming endemic (Whitley, 2007) and are used primarily in the allocation of financial resources between competing organisations. University managers have reacted strategically to this environment by developing and institutionalising their own localised organisational systems of evaluation in an attempt to ensure that their organisations are steered towards satisfactory levels of performance within national systems. These systems underpin core organisational practices such as appointments, promotion, staff retention and resource allocation. Technologies such as human resource management seek to give effect to efforts to control academic work through processes of neoliberal individualisation (Waring, 2009).

Universities, in the UK at least, are increasingly embodying the core traits of enterprises in a capitalist economy reminiscent of the 19th century factory as they shift from being communities of scholars to being managed hierarchies with an ‘industrial architecture’ (Boden and Epstein, 2006). In the 19th century



factory, production occurs when labour and capital are united by an exchange under which workers sell their labour. Since labour is the only thing that workers have to sell, the exchange relationship embodies a power asymmetry that facilitates capitalists' extraction of the surplus value of the work. This is commonly known as 'exploitation', with the surplus value of labour representing the profits of the enterprise (Marx, 1867).

Competitive markets incentivise efficiency, which is achieved through a complex process of standardisation involving, first and most crucially, a designated standard product for which a market is anticipated. This is produced through a detailed process designed to facilitate high degrees of control and surveillance. This process utilises labour but, unlike artisan-production, it is fragmented and workers have only low discretion and narrowly specialised skills (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1969)

In such production modes, the measurement of productivity is relatively unproblematic because work is both visible and amenable to quantification in terms of time expended. Such measurement permits comparison between entities and across time. The classic example of this is the time and motion studies undertaken in factories in the last century to set 'piece-rates' for workers' wages (Braverman, 1998; Taylor, 2005). This efficiency in the utilisation of resources is a product of, and in turn improves the allocative efficiency of, the markets in which enterprises compete. That is, such systems are meant to ensure that resources are allocated to where they can generate maximum returns in terms of profit. Within markets, enterprises compete on a variety of terms, including both price and product/service quality.

Such ideal-types provoke consideration of the extent to which universities conform to this model of the capitalist enterprise and what the points of divergence might be. A first consideration is that, in universities, there is no clear distinction between labour and the means of production. Rather, knowledge-producing capacity is embodied in a range of assets: people, knowledge artefacts and equipment and facilities. However, the fundamental capital asset is the intellectual capacity of academics — without this the material assets of the university cannot be productive. That is, in universities, labour and the most important form of capital are a unity. Whilst academic workers' ownership of the primary means of production affords them a position of some strength, it also means that the product is closely connected to their identities, making them personally susceptible to managerial control: criticism of their academic product constitutes an attack on the self.

A second point of distinction is that, in the mainstream UK system at least, there is, at present, no capitalist class in the form of owners.¹ The ownership of UK universities is largely ambiguous, but they are traditionally seen as organisations of the knowledge commons (Ostrom, 1990): there is, thus, no distinct and identifiable 'owning' class, nothing akin to shareholders in



the formal sense. This creates a lacuna in governance system (Boden and Epstein, 2011).

However, like capitalist firms, universities do have identifiable managerial agents. Neoclassical economics assumes that managers will maximise their own positions at the expense of their principals (the owners) to the extent that they can get away with it (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). Managers seek to reduce their principals' suspicion by providing them with reassurance through trusted and verifiable mechanisms such as accounts. Thus, the principal-agent control dilemma is addressed through measures such as audit, accounting and accountability. Of course, managers in such enterprises will also seek to influence the nature and structure of the accounts they have to give and the audit regimes to which they are subject to the extent that they are able. However, the managers of capitalist enterprises are not completely free agents in constructing such regimes of accountability — these are shaped by principles, law, and international and national organisations. The university-as-factory likewise subjects its managers to audit, control and surveillance via the mechanisms of the state. In short, there is likely to be an ongoing power struggle between incumbent managers and those seeking to control them.

Jensen and Meckling (1976) argue that the amount of audit and surveillance exercised over managers is determined by the extent of the risk and the cost of that surveillance: principals will make a rational decision as how much to spend on items such as audit to mitigate the risk of loss. In both universities and capitalist enterprises the remedies designed to address the moral hazard created through the power asymmetries between the principals and managers may be imperfect, to the detriment of the former. Where the principals are ill-defined, as in universities, this hazard may be greater.

A third consideration is that knowledge products are hard to standardise; scientific knowledge is, by its nature, new every time it is produced. This inherent variability and novelty makes standardisation of production processes problematic; each research problem requires a different approach and work cannot generally be fragmented on a time or skill basis with any certainty. Moreover, research is a highly unpredictable process and knowledge products cannot be guaranteed *a priori*. Thus, with regard to labour, not only does the organisation lack ownership over its core intellectual capital, but it also cannot direct it in a standardised way in the research process. The organisation may 'own' the knowledge workers' time, but it cannot standardise how that time is deployed, in total or across the spectrum of activities that constitute the research process. This failure of standardisation engenders an inability to 'know' the time devoted to production, making product costing extremely problematic.²

Any enterprise in a competitive market must compete on quality and price, and contemporary universities are no exception. Controlling quality and price



depends upon the standardisation of products and processes, something that poses an insuperable hurdle in universities where standardisation of products and processes are problematic. Quality rather than cost control forms the focus of this paper, and in capitalist factory production processes, quality is defined by adherence to pre-determined and precise standards. In contrast, the quality of academic products is more usually judged on the basis of the epistemic criteria continuously negotiated by knowledge communities themselves (Wynne, 2003; Henkel, 2005).

This presents three serious obstacles for university managers. First, the trends towards increasingly professionalised managerial elites means that managers are not necessarily active or highly active members of knowledge communities and, as such, their familiarity with the state of the art in the research field may be constrained (Nedeva and Boden, 2006). Second, universities are hierarchical organisations and, as such, managers may well have responsibility for a diversity of academic units. This may make it hard for them to be sufficiently knowledgeable to judge quality in all of the areas in their purview. Third, the remit of university managers is to ensure the quality of research products within the organisation. However, in traditional academic terms, the determination of what constitutes quality takes place within the much wider research fields, which span a wide variety and large number of research organisations.

A tension therefore exists between characterising universities as classical capitalist enterprises with imperatives for controlling productivity and quality on the one hand, and the problems associated with doing this on the other. In universities, both the product (knowledge) and the process by which it is produced (research) are non-standard by default. Moreover, research quality is subjectively determined and continuously negotiated by knowledgeable epistemic communities to which managers might have limited access. This tension might be resolved by developing and implementing a management tool that (re)defines and objectifies quality, removing discretionary power from epistemic communities and creating a proxy for standardisation of academic processes and products. In the next section and by way of an extended example, we illustrate the creation of such a management tool — the *ABS Guide*.³ This, we demonstrate, has sought to redefine ‘excellence’ in research outputs utilising amenable, easy-to-use and ubiquitously applicable tools as a proxy for the standardisation of academic labour and output, even in conditions where managers lack subject-specific expertise.

A (Star) List is Born

Journal-ranking lists have become increasingly numerous in recent years, and are as heterogeneous as they are ubiquitous. They attempt to rank journals in



terms of their quality, the implication being that the presumed quality of a journal is synonymous with the quality of each and every paper published in it. Implicit in such a conclusion is that more highly rated journals have stricter and more rigorous editorial processes and are 'harder' to get published in, thus ensuring consistently high quality. Despite this, there is no evidence that the construction of these rankings is informed by the assessment of the rigour of the editorial process. Rather, such indices tend to rely upon bibliometric data such as impact factors, citation counts and/or, of most concern, subjective editorial judgements.

In the UK, one of the best-known journal lists is produced by the Association of Business Schools — a not-for-profit company that acts as a forum for most, if not all, business and management schools in the UK. In contrast to learned societies associated with academic discipline, the ABS primarily facilitates networking among senior managers in business and management schools. It describes itself as the

authoritative voice of business and management education in and for the UK...[that] works with similar organisations in Europe and around the world to influence those who have an involvement or interest in business and management education. (ABS website)

The *ABS Academic Journal Quality Guide* lists a number of management and management-related journals and gives them a quality 'star rating' corresponding to the RAE/REF⁴ ratings of 1* (national standing) to 4* (world leading).

The ABS list came to be widely adopted and, to date, appears to be by far the most frequently used list in UK management and business schools. Unlike many other such lists around the world, it was originally produced by middle/senior-level academic managers at the dean level, rather than government-appointed committees primarily of academics or academics themselves.

If, as argued above, the managers of universities feel the need to produce technologies that redefine research quality on their own terms in order to resolve the dilemmas created by trying to turn universities into capitalist knowledge factories, three aspects regarding the origins of such lists can be hypothesised. First, such management tools are likely to be developed within organisations with problematic research performance according to established measures — an inability to do well under existing regimes may lead to efforts to re-write the rules. Second, such lists are likely to be developed, promoted and used by university managers who are expected to manage performance, productivity and quality but, as discussed above, have a deficit in the specialist knowledge that would enable them to do so. And third, such journal lists are likely to be developed and promoted by academic managers rather than more



prosaic administrators, since they have the standing and influence necessary to engender 'buy in' from academics. We now consider whether and how these three expectations are manifested in the case of the development, diffusion and institutionalisation of the ABS list by reference to its history.

The *Guide* was originally produced in 2004 as the 'BBS/Harvey–Morris list', with a second version in 2005. The name reveals something of its genealogy; BBS is the Bristol Business School at the University of the West of England, a post-1992⁵ organisation that achieved a relatively modest score of '3a' in Business and Management Studies in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise. This grade is defined as 'quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in over two-thirds of the research activity submitted, possibly showing evidence of international excellence' (www.rae.ac.uk/2001/pubs/other/raeguide.pdf).

In 2004, Charles Harvey was the dean of BBS and Huw Morris was the associate dean. Using publicly available web sources such as Google, Google Scholar and Harzing's *Publish or Perish*, we mapped their careers. Whilst, at that time, Harvey had a very respectable publication profile, Morris had no doctorate and was entered into the University of the West of England 2001 RAE with one co-authored monograph and one journal paper rather than the usual four outputs. We can find no entry for him as submitted in the 2008 RAE. Since 2001 we can trace just one research-based journal paper authored by Morris; it was published in a journal rated as 1* by the ABS *Guide*. It is about the *Guide*.

In sum, the three expectations formulated above manifest themselves in the story of the emergence of the *Guide*. First, BBS was performing relatively modestly in RAE terms in business and management studies and was, presumably, under pressure to improve its performance. Second, whilst its Dean was a respected academic, this was in the relatively narrow area of business history; yet he had to manage a business school embodying a wide variety of disciplinary interests. Third, the Associate Dean could not be regarded as a leading researcher and therefore his competence to judge quality might reasonably be described as limited. In the competitive research environment of business and management schools, BBS therefore aspired to excellence rather than possessed it.

One viable strategy in this situation is to try to redefine what constitutes excellence in research. Helpfully, the editors of the ABS *Guide* have stated themselves that these are the origins of the list.

With the transformation of polytechnics into universities in 1992, larger numbers of academics faced having their research assessed and there was a need to legitimise and understand how judgments were made...How then could [this work] be consistently and fairly rated?... With the size of the funding cake growing more slowly than the number of researchers, it is not surprising that many went hungry. It is also not surprising

that many managers focused more acutely on activities and measures to bolster funding that were influenced by research ratings as they were translated into league table rankings. (Harvey *et al.*, 2011)

In these conditions, Harvey and Morris produced their first list. This was circulated as a mimeo around management and business schools in the UK and perhaps beyond. There is no evidence that there was any take up of the list at this time and Harvey left BBS in 2005 to become the Dean at Strathclyde University business school and went from there to become Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of Newcastle. Morris also left around this time to become Dean (and Professor) at Manchester Metropolitan University.

From January 2007, the Harvey–Morris list was translated into the ABS list. Prior to at least June 2005 neither Harvey nor Morris had any official positions within the committee structure of the ABS (ABS, 2005). By June 2006, Harvey was a member of the committee for Scotland but Morris still had no official position (ABS, 2006). By June 2007, this situation had changed markedly. Both Harvey and Morris were on the executive committee, Morris as Vice-Chair, a position he occupied until June 2009 when he became the Chair for a year. There is very strong anecdotal evidence that the diffusion of this list started during 2007. It is reasonable to conclude that the capture of the ABS provided the editors with the social and cultural capital necessary to diffuse the *Guide*.

In the introduction to version 1 of the ABS list, the editorial team stated that

The Harvey-Morris list has been well-received within the business and management community, albeit with caveats, as a fair and consistent quality guide, and when the ABS Research Committee began to consider the desirability of publishing its own Journal Quality Guide, as an authoritative source of reference for member schools, it turned to Harvey and Morris for advice. (ABS, 2007)

An examination of the ABS annual reports for the years 2003/04 to 2009/10 suggests that the *Guide* became an important mechanism by which the organisation promoted itself. The centrality of the journal quality list in gaining publicity, standing and prestige for the organisation appears to be reflected in the rapid advancement of people such as Morris within it. This is a classic story of diffusion (Ariely, 2010), whereby an existing and familiar platform (the ABS) was mobilised to imbricate new management instruments within a well-established and conservative system. This process is best captured by Professor Howard Thomas, then the Dean of Warwick Business School, in the foreword to the January 2007 edition of the list:

A comprehensive guide of this kind, designed specifically to meet the needs of the UK business and management research communities, has

long been needed. The world of academic publishing has become ever more complex and competitive. An authoritative Guide to the relative quality of the many hundreds of journals that publish the results of academic research has become necessary for several purposes. Those who fund research and evaluate the outcomes need a guide to the academic quality of the outlets in which it is published. Deans and other university senior managers need a reliable means of assessing the achievements of their academic staff. Information professionals, responsible for large budgets, need to know what they are getting for their money when they purchase access to a journal or bundle of journals. Above all, individual researchers need to be well informed when making choice with regard to preferred outlets for their work. (ABS, 2007, 1)

Method(ology) or madness?

Having charted the genealogy and the diffusion of the ABS *Quality Guide*, now we examine its methodology. Strong claims regarding the authority of the list have been made (Morris *et al.*, 2009). In principle, such claims can be made either in reference to a trusted source or a trusted product. In this case, claims to authority and robustness can be made in reference to the use of the ABS *Guide* (i.e., its level of diffusion) or to the robustness and reliability of the *Guide* itself. The latter criterion crucially depends on the robustness of the methodology through which the *Guide* was compiled.

The methodology used to compile the Harvey–Morris list and indeed the ABS list remains opaque. Version 1 of the 2007 ABS list states that

The original list of journals included in the Harvey–Morris list stemmed from an analysis of publications submitted to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in Business and Management Studies (BMS) in 2001. This list of publications was extracted from the HERO database and then corrected to remove inaccurately coded items... From this master list and imputed RAE score was determined for each journal by assigning the mean rating from all units of assessment (UoA) entering articles published in the journal... (ABS, 2007, 6)

This sounds plausible and indeed objective. However, the editors go on to state that

Following discussions with members of the RAE [Business and Management Studies] panel in 2001, it became apparent that journal quality lists were not formally and systematically used to inform deliberations. (ABS, 2007, 6)

This constitutes an acknowledgement by the editors of the ABS list that journal quality lists did not figure in deliberations on the 2001 RAE. The editors carry on, stating that

However, interviews with research directors in many UK business schools revealed that they [journal quality lists] were frequently used in the compilation of submissions and preliminary shadow assessments. (ABS, 2007, 6)

The details of these interviews, their findings or even any statistics about how frequently journal quality lists were used are intriguingly absent from the editors' comments at this point. Undeterred by the impediments of evidence, Harvey and Morris call this an 'insight' and 'it was decided to incorporate the lists compiled by researchers at some of these institutions into the Harvey-Morris list' (ABS, 2007, 6).

The editors state that they deliberately introduce a distinct UK-bias into their list by excluding 'non-UK-based lists in order to reduce the influence of national differences in the qualities attributed to different journals' (ABS, 2007, 6). In a globalised, networked and thoroughly internationalised knowledge community, it appears surprising that they chose to take such a narrow view. The explanation for this may lie in the conceptualisation of universities as capitalist enterprises operating in a specific national market. That is, they are attempting to constrain the competitive playing field. This becomes particularly important if journal quality lists are used to justify claims for organisational research excellence and therefore credibility and prestige with funders and other stakeholders.

The authors call their *Guide*, in sum, a

hybrid based partly upon peer review, partly upon statistical information relating to citation, and partly upon editorial judgements following from the detailed evaluation of many hundreds of publications over a long period. (ABS, 2007, 2)

The ABS *Guide* is perilously short of any further detail as to how the scores are derived. For instance, in contrast to the detailed and explicit systems used by the RAE panels, the editors give no details of the numbers of publications evaluated, the methodologies used for this or even the periods over which they were 'evaluated'. Of particular concern must be the use of so-called 'editorial judgements'. Version 1 of the ABS list contained no details of any editorial panel, and therefore one might conclude that the judgements were made entirely by the authors of the *Guide*. From version 2 onwards, the *Guide* does give details of the editorial panels, but there is no explanation as to how these editors were selected, nor of their particular qualifications for this task. What is noticeable is a strong correlation between deans who serve on ABS committees and membership of the *Guide* editorial panels. This is likely to have cemented



the relationship between the ABS and the list. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the *ABS Guide* very quickly became the expression of the ABS governance elite who were responsible for editing it and promoting it.

We have argued that if the universities are to operate as capitalist enterprises there is a necessity to standardise academic products and the processes that produce them. We also noted that universities, which like capitalist firms are expected to compete on quality, face three serious obstacles. First, managers may not be able to be knowledgeable across all disciplinary domains for which they are responsible. Second, managers may not be active researchers and therefore not privy to what constitutes quality in research fields. And third, they will be anxious to compete on an organisational basis.

The *ABS Academic Journal Quality Guide* may go some way to meet the need for tools to mitigate these difficulties. There are two principal ways for this to occur. One is by developing a tool that engenders compliance as a result of trust in its robustness and reliability. A second is by developing a tool that is easily embedded in core institutional practices with compliance resulting from managerial control. There is a strong consensus in UK academic opinion that reliance on the *Guide* would be misplaced (see e.g. BAFA, 2010; Hussain, 2010; Tourish, 2010). Indeed, in discussing journal rankings in a paper about the RAE2008 exercise in Accounting and Finance, the sub-panel for that area, writing collectively, stated that

...no direct one-to-one mapping emerged from the output assessments awarded by sub-panel members and any particular perceptions of journal rankings. This suggests that relying on journal rankings to capture research quality in accounting and finance, a practice seemingly on the increase in many UK institutions, and also in the rankings of business schools produced by newspapers such as the Financial Times, is likely to be misleading in capturing the real level of research quality in these research areas. (Ashton *et al.*, 2009)

This means that in order to gain authority the *Guide* would have to be imbricated in managerial regimes of control. In what follows we examine how this occurred in the case of the *ABS Guide*.

The extent of take up

Although evidence of the extensive use of the *ABS Guide* by UK business and management schools is accumulating, it is far from conclusive. Some evidence is anecdotal, consisting of reports that the *Guide* has been circulated to academics to 'inform' their individual publication strategies. Further, albeit indirect, evidence that the *ABS Guide* is gaining ground is provided by the strength of the reactions of different professional academic associations against



it. For instance, in April 2010 Professor Christine Helliard, then Chair of the British Accounting and Finance Association (BAFA; the learned society of accounting and finance academics), wrote a five-page open letter to Morris, taking the ABS list thoroughly to task.

It should be emphasised that the BAA/BAFA is a learned society the members of which are, in general, employees of UK universities. Given the purposes set out by ABS, and repeated above, it might not be entirely surprising to find that we, as a learned society dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and education in accounting and finance, should have disquiet, as a matter of principle, about a set of journal rankings established by a body that exists to represent and advance the interests of the employers of academics in business and management overall, as opposed to the advancement of knowledge and education. (BAFA, 2010)

There have also been claims, principally by the authors of the list, that it has been used prolifically, and to great advantage, to prepare organisations' submissions to the 2008 RAE (Morris *et al.*, 2009). It is however apparent that evidence about the extent of use of the *Guide* is fragmented, and systematic accounts of the level of its diffusion are sadly lacking. What is clear is that, in making their assessments, the 2008 RAE Business and Management panel made no use of and had little faith in such lists.

The sub-panels assessed virtually all the submitted work by examining it, and did not use its place of publication as an evaluative criterion. It is worthy of note that there was not a perfect correlation between the quality of a piece of work and its place of publication. (RAE2008, 2009)

Our study with academics from six business and management schools in the UK confirmed that the ABS *Guide* is used in all but one of them. Oxford's SAID Business School is the only one where no use of this specific list was reported, although other tools for benchmarking research performance, individual and collective, are being used. Significantly, SAID is also the top-ranked UK business school in our study — 27th in the world and third in the UK in the FT rankings.

The extent of the use of the ABS *Guide* is a necessary but not sufficient condition for it to generate any effects at the organisational level; the impact of the list is also contingent upon the conditions in which it is employed and we now consider these.

Conditions of use

Hiring (including probation procedures), promotion and the distribution of resources constitute three core institutional practices. Our study indicates



that the ABS list of journals is used by business and management schools to inform decisions regarding all three of these. At Nottingham, Bangor, the University of the West of England, Swansea and Warwick, the *ABS Guide* was reported as informing probation, promotion and research resource allocation decisions. At SAID Business School alternative lists were used to inform probation and promotion decisions. The comments made by academics who took part in our study reveal much about the strength of feeling associated with the *Guide*. A feeling that the *Guide* was influencing career development was evident.

Not personally [affecting me] at this late stage in my career, but I fear for the long term impact on university research because younger colleagues have to conform to the demands of arbitrary lists of journals. (Senior academic, male, pre-1992 university)

A number of academics felt keenly the impact of the *Guide* on decisions about resource allocation.

I would like to go to what is considered to be ‘good’ journals but I would not get the resources to carry [out] my research. That’s the language people around me understand and use the list as a currency converter!!!! (Lecturer, female, post-1992 university)

I am too senior for it to matter to me. (Though I would be financially better off — we have a system of payment by results — if I published in these journals.) (Senior academic, male, pre-1992 University)

I feel I have to follow the ABS rankings otherwise I won’t get research support. (Lecturer, male, post-1992 university)

It is evident that, as the respondent above noted, ABS performance points become tradable commodities that can be exchanged for resources (principally time) to do further research. Thus, performance on ABS terms and the resources necessary to be a researcher are indissolubly linked. Gaining ABS credits by publishing in the ‘right’ journals becomes a disciplining mechanism that drives individual behaviour towards managerial goals and, potentially, distorts the trajectory that research might otherwise follow.

Academic compliance

In considering how the *ABS Guide* became imbricated into academic life in so many business and management schools, it is also necessary to consider the role of academics themselves in this process. For, without their complicity with the *Guide*, it would have no power. We have considered the material



conditions in which the *Guide* operates — as structural mechanisms that can reward or punish workers in terms of promotion, appointment and resources. But it is necessary for such tools to work at a discursive level too. That is, at a psychic level, academics must enfold themselves in the discursive framework of the *Guide* for it to succeed. It does this through a process of estranging academic labour, making it possible for academics to subject themselves to the discipline of the *Guide*.

Academic labour, as intellectual work, is a highly personal and personalised process that is a key part of academic identities (Henkel, 2005). The ABS list can be seen to estrange academic labour by commodifying its physical products in the form of journal papers. The work of academics — their papers — become objects that are classified, measured and standardised. As such, they become estranged from their producers. This process of objectification of journal papers is achieved by the derivation of quality from the ranked list of academic journals, a list constituted outside of the control of knowledge communities by (managerial) capitalists.

This constitutes an attack on academic identities (Henkel, 2005). As this male lecturer at a post-1992 university noted

The ABS booklet is infuriating! Several excellent journals in my field are unlisted, while others are given absurdly low ranks...I feel I have to follow the ABS rankings otherwise I won't get research support.

Estranged from the products of their labour, academics are then alienated from work itself. Work ceases to be under the control of the academic, for it must be directed to meet the imperatives of the *Guide*.

[I] feel I have to try and get things in higher ranked journals even when I don't think they're the best ones for the topics. (Lecturer, female, post-1992 university)

The attack promulgated by the ABS *Guide* on academic identity evidently, in some circumstances, resulted in a subjugation of the free academic to this management tool.

The lists distinguish/define a very top tier of journals from other OK journals. The step into the top tier is very important. Therefore if you have had a research project that is capable of generating a submission to a top tier journal, pursuing such a submission is worth huge amounts of time and effort because it is the best way to distinguish work and yourself as a respected academic. Being such, you have access to higher salary, better teaching loads, a choice of alternative jobs if your dean becomes uncooperative, esteem in the...academic community. (Senior academic, male, pre-1992 university).



This senior academic sees his whole identity as defined by the *ABS Guide*, his soul measured by it. He has, in a Foucauldian sense, enfolded himself in the discourse of journal rankings and they define him. As such, he has become a self-disciplining ‘docile body’ (Foucault, 1977). Boden and Epstein argue that creation of docile bodies

occurs through processes of examination, the development of the panoptical gaze and the production of categories of person — the criminal (Foucault, 1977), the lunatic (Foucault, 1965; Foucault, 1975), the homosexual (Foucault, 1978) and, indeed, the four star professor. Individuals are seduced and induced to enfold themselves in these discourses, becoming compliant bodies (achieving correct comportment) through self-discipline. (2011, 482)

As Foucault shows, docile bodies do not, by definition, have psychic freedom (Foucault, 1977). It follows, therefore, that if and when academics accept such disciplinary regimes, wrapping themselves in such discourses, they cannot exercise academic freedom and the course of their disciplines will be diverted. Such a future is, indeed, openly envisaged by the editors of the *Guide*, who have constantly exhorted the academic community to bow to the inevitable discipline represented by the *Guide*,

defining excellence with reference to journal quality is already widespread within the UK and that to pretend otherwise, or to wish that it were not so, is more damaging than to reveal and systematically compare differences in the standing of journals. An informed use of journal rankings such as the *ABS Guide* might help the business and management community to better prepare itself for a world in which research metrics are becoming ever more commonplace and routinely used by governments, agencies, universities, charitable bodies and the business community to make decisions about what research should be funded and what should not. (Morris *et al.*, 2009, 1449)

Journal lists are a feature of the academic landscape and cannot be wished away. However, they can be improved through debate, and, when combined with other measures, they enable academics to understand the rules of their profession so that they can make a better contribution to society and the economy. (Harvey *et al.*, 2011)

Mechanisms for Generating Effects in Universities, Academics and Knowledge

Having discussed the genealogy and institutionalisation of the *ABS Guide*, we now turn to the mechanisms by which its usage can, and indeed does, generate



effects in business and management schools, individual academics and knowledge and knowledge circulation. In this section, we also link these generative mechanisms and some early effects reported by the academics taking part in our study.

Mechanisms for structural effects on business and management schools

The *ABS Guide* permeates the core organisational structures of business and management schools, namely the structures for deciding probation, promotions and distribution of resources for research. These are affected by substitution of criteria; in other words, decisions are no longer founded on epistemic criteria of research quality but via the proxy of perceptions of the standing of academic journals. This substitution is likely to have negative effects for variety within the academic organisation as the criteria are determined not by active academics at the leading edge of research activity, but by middle managers whose primary concern is control. Founding decisions regarding probation, promotion and the internal distribution of resources on whether or not academics have published in the journals rated top by the *ABS Guide* create powerful imperatives for academics to research problems, use methodologies and produce the type of knowledge that will get published in these journals. Therefore, using the *ABS Guide* to manage the research performance of individuals and organisational units is likely to result in reduction of the spread of competencies and research skills within the organisation and, it can be argued, a commensurate reduction in research quality.

Most journals have editorial policies favouring specific epistemic positions, approaches and methodologies that demand highly specific research skills and competencies. By using lists of ranked journals to inform core decisions, business and management schools in the UK systematically recruit, promote and afford resources for research to academics who possess these competencies. Anyone who does not fit the bill is likely to be forced to leave the organisation or be marginalised within it. By creating powerful imperatives for academics to publish in particular journals, the academic organisations are in effect narrowing the research skills and competencies that their academics develop and use. This can result in uniformity affecting the research capacity and flexibility of the organisation.

Similar arguments can be developed about interdisciplinarity in business and management schools. Business and management studies are inherently inter- and multidisciplinary. Yet, as Rafols *et al.* (2011) found, the *ABS* list has an inherent bias against interdisciplinarity.

Last but not least, the use of the *ABS Guide* is inherently biased against minority subject areas. The way in which the *Guide* is compiled makes it unlikely



that a journal of a minority area will be top-rated. In fact, many journals in areas of minority interest in business schools are not even on the ABS list. Some academics in our study perceived that researchers with excellent international reputations who work in such areas are sidelined because they are excluded from the incentive structures of the organisation. In the words of a senior academic from a pre-1992 university:

The ABS journal ranking list is extraordinarily damaging to UK research. The failure of senior management to recognise its flawed construction is having devastating effects in terms of recruitment and promotion decisions to the point where my particular academic unit is facing imminent demise. (Reader, female, pre-1992 university)

The transformation of the incentive structures of the organisation might be expected to lead to changes in academics' behaviour. We now address these changes.

Mechanisms and effects on academic behaviour

Embedding the use of the *ABS Guide* in the core structures of business and management schools, coupled with the mechanisms engendering compliance with them, is likely to give rise to number of effects, including modifications of publication strategies and a developing tension between the pressures of the organisation and the requirements of the knowledge community, which many academics resolve by leading a 'double life'.

The academics taking part in our study reported that the use of the *ABS Guide* has already affected, and is continuing to affect, their publication strategies. This change manifests not in increased selectivity — academics have always been selective in terms of places of publication — but in the criteria for this selection. Customarily, academics selected the 'best' journal for their work as determined by their peer epistemic community. One of the reported effects of the ABS list is that they are starting to select their research by thinking about the ABS ranking of the journal where it could be published.

The way in which this has occurred divided the academics in our study into three groups. One of these consists of 'ardent converters'. Their position is that publications in journals ranked highly by the *Guide* not only should be sought but are also unproblematic:

I would target mainly 3 or 4* for submission. (Senior Lecturer, Female, pre-1992 university)

I try to target ABS list journals. (Professor, male, post-1992 university)



Another group of academics consisted of the ‘sceptical players’. These researchers consider conversion and adjust their publication strategy to target journals rated highly by the *ABS Guide*. However, they are not very happy about having to do so and are also the ones most likely to criticise the *Guide* because of the journals it selects and the ranking these are assigned. As a senior academic in a post-1992 university noted:

As you can see there is a big difference between journals. I therefore feel I need to try and publish in more mainstream management and organisation studies journals which then put me at risk of being reviewed by non-specialist in [...] studies. (Senior Lecturer, male, post-1992 university)

This strategy was shared by a professor who stated:

I have to consider publishing in less relevant but more highly-rated journals. (Professor, male, post-1992 university)

Another academic commented:

So when I’m looking both at research projects and research outputs, potential for publication in ABS ranked journals is an important consideration — I’d like to say it isn’t but... (Senior Lecturer, female, post-1992 university)

Yet another group were the ‘agitated objectors’. Members of this group share the view that the *Guide* is flawed, the practices of selection it engenders are detrimental to the organisation and knowledge itself and that it should be, and could be, ignored. This group was relatively small and includes mainly professors. Their reaction speaks for itself:

I know perfectly well how to publish my work. I don’t need a stupid list to inform me. (Professor, male, pre-1992 university)

There also appears to be a tension between the pressures of the organisation to publish in particular journals and the demands of knowledge communities to progress knowledge. This tension is resolved by leading a double academic life; academics meet their obligations to the organisation by publishing in journals ranked well by the *Guide*, but they also publish in other outlets that are more appropriate for their research and that will bring them reputation within their knowledge communities — which are sometimes different from the ones legitimised by the ranking. In one respondent’s words this tension is resolved:

[By] playing a difficult and exhausting double game, publishing in outlets that are relevant to my personal research community irrespective of the



'list', but also trying to publish in 'highly' rated journals notwithstanding that certain contortions in content/approach may be necessary. (Reader, female, pre-1992 university)

In sum, our study suggests that the use of the *ABS Guide* by business and management schools is changing, and has the potential to change further, academics' publication strategies, has had some effect on their research agendas and has engendered a tension between the demands of the organisation and the requirements of the knowledge communities that is resolved by leading 'double academic life'. Academics fulfil their duty to the organisation and then publish 'for the soul'. These effects are enacted by embedding the *ABS Guide* into core practices and management procedures such as recruitment, promotion and resource allocation.

Mechanisms and effects on knowledge and knowledge dissemination patterns

The use of the *ABS Guide* is also likely to affect knowledge production and dissemination patterns in a way very similar to its effects on organisations: in both cases, the ultimate effect is the reduction of variety. By creating strong organisational incentives to publish in particular journals, the *Guide* reduces the variety of publication output in two important ways. First, academics feel under pressure to, and indeed do, produce more journal articles to the detriment of other publication choices. Second, by incentivising academics to publish in particular journals, these become 'oversubscribed' whilst others have difficulty attracting sufficient number of submissions. This risks journal closure, the over-burdening of peer review processes⁶ and consequential delays in publication in highly ranked journals.⁷

Incentivising academics to publish in journals top-rated by the *ABS Guide* is also likely to engender a reduction of epistemic variety. Further, and considerably more detailed, research is needed to fully assess this. However, it is probably reasonable to expect that a reduction of epistemic variety will occur under two conditions: the (re)focusing of personal publication strategies towards a relatively small number of academic journals and the level of epistemic variety of contribution that these journals solicit. We have presented evidence of an overall change of academics' publication strategies. We undertook an examination of the editorial policies of journals categorised as 4 star by the *Guide* in finance and accounting (10), economics (17), and organisational studies (4). All of the top-rated journals in organisational studies are open for interdisciplinary submissions and explicitly state their willingness to accept papers with both quantitative and qualitative methods and with diverse data collection instruments. In contrast, only few among the journals in finance and accounting welcome critical, multidisciplinary contributions. They are *Accounting, Organizations and Society*



(Impact Factor 1.904) and the *Journal of Financial Economics* (Impact Factor 4.020). The latter's editorial policy explicitly accepts submissions that are 'both quantitative and less quantifiable, more descriptive and normative than usual'.⁸ All of the ABS top-rated journals in economics take an explicitly positivist stance, clearly stating that they only accept submissions utilising rigorous quantitative methods. For example, the editorial policy of the *Journal of Economic Literature* states that:

Accessible exposition does not entail trivialization. Technicalities are needed in economics research. We do not really understand a new idea, nor know whether it is correct, until it has been rigorously modelled. We cannot do empirical work properly without painstaking attention to the econometrics. But after the modelling has been completed or the regressions run, the essential findings should be expressible in plain English. (<http://www.aeaweb.org/jel/edpolicy.php>)

Such and similar editorial policies, embodying a high level of specification of epistemic position, methodology and research method, was found systematically across top-rated ABS journals.

Multi- and interdisciplinary journals are not ranked highly by the *ABS Guide*. In the field of organisation studies, for example, *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* (Impact Factor: 1.465) is ranked as 2 star. Nearly all interdisciplinary journals in economics (such as the *Journal of International Development* and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Economics* — which are highly respected in the field) are rated 1 star. This holds in the field of finance and accounting too, where the multidisciplinary *Journal of Accounting and Organizational Change* and *Managerial Finance* can be found at the bottom of the list.

To sum up, the conditions likely to engender a reduction in epistemic variety are present. On the one hand, academics have changed/are changing their publication strategies to target journals highly ranked by the *ABS Guide* and, on the other, these journals have a tendency towards strict and uniform editorial policies that determine the 'legitimate' epistemic position, methodology and methods of research. Some journals go as far as outlining the structure of the papers they are prepared to consider.

I think it does tend to stifle creativity and experimentation in qualitative methods and it discourages 'writing differently'. I believe strongly that it encourages 'safe' research at the expense of 'groundbreaking' work. More experienced colleagues tell me it is 'career suicide' to edit books or write textbooks, for example (though I do have a proposal out for the former with some colleagues). (Senior Lecturer, female, post-1992 university)



Reduction of variety in terms of output and knowledge can have potentially serious consequences for the healthy growth and development of academic and research fields.

Conclusions

This paper explores why and how management tools for compiling league tables become embedded in the core practices of contemporary universities, thereby shaping and defining their relative strengths. Further, it considered the mechanisms through which these affect the organisations, academic behaviour and knowledge, and knowledge dissemination.

We argued that, whilst universities are encouraged, and even expected, to behave like capitalist enterprises and compete on quality and price, knowledge products and processes are hard to standardise. This creates barriers to managerial control of academic and research quality, which can be overcome by redefining what constitutes excellent work through the development and use of amenable and ubiquitously applicable tools. In a case study of a list of ranked academic journals much in use in UK business and management schools — the *ABS Academic Journal Quality Guide* — we detailed how these ranked lists can constitute such tools.

The *ABS Guide* was developed by academic managers for academic managers, with the explicit aim of providing an authoritative source of reference for academic quality. It became imbricated in UK business and management schools by capitalising on a symbiotic relationship with an already existing organisation, the ABS. The *Guide* needed a vessel, the ABS needed a mission and the member Deans needed a tool that standardises academic output and makes it malleable to audit and control.

Widely used by business and management schools in the UK, the *ABS Guide* shapes and informs decisions regarding probation, promotion and distribution of resources. This underpins a process of estrangement of academic labour that is starting to affect academic identities. We found early signs that academics are changing their publication strategies, research approaches and methodologies, and that they feel under pressure to lead ‘double lives’ to satisfy the diverging demands of the organisation and their epistemic communities. With respect to academic units and knowledge, the main effects of the *Guide* relate to the ultimate reduction of variety, which in turn is detrimental to the capacity to produce knowledge.

We conclude with this heartfelt quote:

You will perceive from my responses that I have little time for the ‘top journal’ fetish. More than that, I consider it one of the most damaging, dysfunctional and pernicious trends in research culture. It damages wise



research, interdisciplinary research and the most innovative research. I feel an obligation to fight it — though I don't pretend I am winning the battle. (Professor, male, pre-1992 university)

Notes

- 1 This situation is rapidly changing. In April 2012 the College of Law, which has degree-awarding powers, was purchased by a private equity firm.
- 2 A particular form of research carried out by the university as a factory that only replicates and applies extant understandings more akin to consultancy is an exception in this respect. The processes that produce such knowledge can be standardised in terms of approaches, methodology and dissemination media. Labour can also be more closely directed in a capitalist enterprise sense, with a standardisation of skills embodied in staff. This form of research, however, is rather peripheral to the core knowledge production mission of the university.
- 3 To build the case of emergence and institutionalisation of the *ABS Guide* we traced back its versions and linked these to the career biographies of its authors; examined ABS official documents for the period after 2004; traced relevant media material; and used material from our empirical study.
- 4 The Research Assessment Exercise, now re-badged as the Research Excellence Framework, is a national evaluation system whereby academic units submit selected the academic output for assessment and are assigned a grade between 1* and 4*. For more on the RAE, please see Barker (2007).
- 5 As part of a general overhaul of policy for higher education and research in the UK, in 1992 the former polytechnics were formally rebranded as universities and brought under the same governance and resource allocation rules. Since these were organisations very different from the more 'traditional' universities, and differences still persist, analysis still distinguishes between pre- and post-1992 universities.
- 6 Interestingly, a dramatic increase of submissions to 'highly ranked' journals may in effect lower their quality as peer review becomes diluted and editorial control weakens.
- 7 Currently, many of the journals heading different journal rankings take 2 years or over to publish contributions. These delays can render results and papers obsolete and slow down careers.
- 8 http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/505576/description.

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