**TITLE:**

In Defiance of Folly:

Journal rankings, mindless measures and the ABS Guide

**Abstract**

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

**Keywords: Journal rankings; research assessment; disciplinary authority**

**Introduction**

Journals rankings lists, such as the Association of Business Schools (ABS) Guide, have been paraded and applied as a tool for managing processes of selectivity – for appointments and promotions as well as for selecting those submitted to national research quality assessments (e.g. Research Assessment Exercises). As Rowlinson et al (2008: 157) unashamedly acknowledge, the scale used in the ABS Guide was adopted ‘in anticipation of the rating system to be used in RAE 2008’; and its authors elsewhere extol the Guide for its assistance to managers seeking ‘a reliable means of assessing the achievements of their academic staff’ (Harvey et al, 2008: 1).

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

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

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

Whatever the purpose originally intended for the Guide by its sponsors (that is, the ABS which is effectively the trade association for UK business school deans (the ABS-D), it has been deployed as a potent weapon of managerial control that widens divisions and revises the rules of academic life (Sangster, 2011). A distinguishing feature of the Guide is its privileging of *the place of publication* as the prime indicator of research quality, thereby automating, and aspiring to replace, a peer review process in which account can be taken of authors’ broader contributions and the future potential of their work. Application of the Guide intensifies established forms of discipline and punishment in the pursuit of career advancement and promises to deliver the best possible grade point average (GPA) in selectivity exercises[[3]](#footnote-3). In what follows, we explore some of the perverse effects that arise from this dangerous liaison of ambitions (see also Tourish, 2011; Willmott, 2011).

**The Wider Context**

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

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

This is part of the commodification and corporatisation of academia (Hogler and Gross, 2009; Bell, 2012), often justified in terms of ‘accountability’ and the ‘audit’ society (Colquhoun, 2007). Such is the trajectory that journal rankings, whatever their original intent, have placed upon academics. Some business schools in the UK now use the volume of 3\* and 4\* work, again as instantly determined by reference to the Guide, as an ingredient in determining teaching allocations via workload models. It is not hard to anticipate the skewed effect on scholarship that this regime is likely to have, since it sends a clear message that publication in these outlets, rather than the quality of ideas, is what counts. To the extent that this mania takes hold, any search for truth or emphasis on social usefulness becomes subordinated to purely instrumental aims (Craig, Amernic and Tourish, 2014).

Prasad (2013) vividly describes how entrenched such tendencies have become in elite North American business schools, with doctoral students often explicitly advised that to publish in European journals would damage rather than enhance their career. How desperate, ill-informed or loopy must you be to submit your work there? The danger is that isomorphic pressures assert themselves, since those schools who also covet such elite status typically imitate the behaviours of those already deemed to be successful (Starkey and Tiratsoo, 2007). The Guide facilitates this process, by handily identifying what it deems to be 4\* or ‘world elite’ journals. In consequence, it calls to mind Foucault’s (1977) description of the panopticon – an elaborate system for ensuring that behaviour can be regulated as people feel they are under a permanent form of surveillance, or at least can never be quite sure if they are observed or unobserved at any particular point in time. The effect is that they tend to self-regulate their behaviour to that which is required, or deemed appropriate.

It is our contention that the Guide has become a means of panoptic control, where journal fetishism becomes internalized in many business and management schools. What people publish, and indeed their publication intentions, can be instantly compared to the norms outlined in the Guide – without anyone having to go to the trouble of ever reading the material or advise on the most apposite or realistic outlet for particular forms of scholarship. Publication in outlets lacking the Guide’s seal of approval can result in disapproval and sanction (Hussain, In Press). Insufficient levels of publication in designated 4\* ‘world elite’, or at least 3\* (‘heavily refereed, with a ‘fair to good citation impact factor’, Morris et al, 2009: 1448) journals can be used as evidence of weak performance. Managers may then impose increases in workload to compensate for such deficiency. The Guide thus enhances the disciplinary authority of management when determining research and teaching priorities in a wholly uncollegial manner that would once have been almost inconceivable (Sparkes, 2013). Thus, the assessment exercises (e.g. the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, REF) and the Guide are, in many ways, mutually constitutive. The Guide gains importance mainly because of its REF uses. In turn, REF submissions are, in many business schools, constituted primarily by reference to the Guide.

This underlines the key point that, ultimately, all ranking systems (and, for that matter, criticisms that are made of them, including our own) enshrine particular ideologies – a point Gladwell (2011) has aptly made in discussing the rankings of US Universities. The weight attached to the variables included within ranking systems, combined with the uses to which they are put, reflect the values and ideologies of those doing the ranking, or the criticising. In our present context, with the growing marketization of UK higher education, journal ranking systems have become a potent means whereby much of academic life is regulated, and academic work commodified. But they tell us less and less about the intrinsic value of the work that they purport to rank. The ABS Guide is a panoptic gaze that directs attention away from what is important (e.g. ideas), and towards the vacuous (e.g. Impact Factors), underpinned by the managerialist assumption that unless academic work can be rated, graded and listed it might as well not exist.

**Two Cheers for Peer Review**

There are, as Rowlinson *et al* (2013) note, important questions to be raised about the effects of selectivity exercises, including the escalating risk of teaching becoming detached from research as competitive pressures intensify to attract and retain ‘4x4’[[4]](#footnote-4) researchers. But these effects can rarely be traced to the selectivity exercises alone. They are also a product of over-rapid expansion and diversification in business schools, an increased reliance upon markets for allocating resources, and the associated competitiveness for material as well as symbolic resources between and within Universities[[5]](#footnote-5). These problems have been fuelled, not contained, by the Guide. For example, one of the largest and most prestigious business schools in the UK has become notorious for aggressively recruiting 4x4 researchers, as determined by the Guide, seemingly to the exclusion of any other selection criteria (Parker, in press).

As its name suggests, the Guide *could* be used for guidance only; the problem is that its guidance takes a particular form – a one-size-fits-all-journals-ranking that, despite the protests of its architects, is narrow and conservative. Its effect is to discourage publication in journals, let alone books and other media, that are not listed in the Guide or that receive a low ranking, apparently because the journals are too specialised, open access, too recently established, or any one of numerous other thought crimes. Focusing upon the example of heterodox economics in the UK, Lee et al (2013) demonstrate in detail how it has been seriously weakened largely as a consequence of reliance by institutions on a journal rankings list, not unlike ABS, that purports to identify 27 core economics journals (broadly equivalent to the 22 ‘world class’ journals identified in the ABS Guide), which favour mainstream approaches to the discipline and whose pages are dominated by academics employed by elite US institutions. The use of the Guide threatens to exercise a comparably baleful influence on business and management studies.

Instructively, such concerns appear to escape the authors of ARQ, or simply lie beyond its authors’ range of comprehension. In their summary of criticisms that have been directed at the Guide (p. 2), disquiet about the homogenization of research within narrow and conservative parameters is unacknowledged, and so unaddressed, There is, it seems, an appetite only for offering mildly entertaining dismissals of these concerns – for example, by claiming that critics of the Guide cast its producers in the role of ‘auto-asphyxiation’ (sic) fetishists’ and ‘illiterate wankers with no passion for ideas’ (p. 4). This self-flagellating reading of such criticism is well wide of its target: criticism of journal list fetishism (Willmott, 2011) was directed at the fetishized value ascribed to journal publications by journal rankings, such as the Guide, and not at its designers.

We agree that ‘research quality is likely to be judged from different paradigms’ (p. 6). It is paradoxical, then, that it is this judgment which cannot be adequately reflected in a one-size-fits-all-journals-ranking list, despite the contortions involved in attempts to construct ‘some sort of equivalence between journals’ (p. 17). The restrictions of the design mean that recognition of diversity falls well short of a peer review process where outputs are, in principle, considered on their own merits, and not their place of publication. *If* peer review is what it says, then the process is capable of recognising diversity and resisting uniformity. Peer review retains the confidence of diverse communities of scholars to the extent that it adequately responds to, and appreciates, this variety of topics and approaches. Clearly, the practice of research selectivity panels approximate this process only when their members are selected to reflect diversity, when specialist advisors can be called upon, and above all when their deliberations recognise and reward plurality. Undeniably, peer review, like democracy, is a highly imperfect process (see Bedeian, 2004; Starbuck, 2003) which, in the case of research, does indeed depend upon panel members being ‘trusted to know what quality is’ (p. 17) without privileging a particular approach or area of research (see Lee e*t al*, 2013 for a counter example). It is very difficult, however, to grasp how the assessment of diverse research outputs may be better accomplished by reliance upon a one-size-fits-all-journals Guide. And, to repeat, it is perhaps instructive that there is no clamour amongst rank-and-file business and management faculty to replace the judgments of an ‘elitist’ (p. 17) panel of ‘experts’ (p. 2) with the use of a journal rankings list. There seems to be a silent endorsement of this imperfect approach to quality assessment based upon peer review, despite the availability of a Guide whose authors are – they seem to assume - not elitist, not (in)expert, infinitely more representative and incomparably more accountable than members of the assessment panel.

**Only Jeers for the ABS Guide Defence**

Much of the analysis in ARQ relies upon a paper by Mingers *et al*. (2012) which deploys linear programming to estimate the ratings given to outputs by the 2008 RAE. As they report, this involves creating ‘a set of decision variables for each journal that represent the five possible quality levels (including unclassified as zero). We then use LP to find the value of those variables that minimise the difference between the estimated quality profile (calculated from the variables) and the actual quality profile awarded to each department. The approach is analogous to least squares regression but with several thousand variables to be determined. The result is an estimation of the proportion of papers from a journal that were awarded the various levels of quality’ (p.1080). We do not intend to engage in detail with this analysis as, for us, the face validity of a number of its *specific* estimates, to which Rowlinson *et al* appeal*,* are hardly compelling. They do indeed ‘need to be used with some caution’ (p. 8), a caution that is then largely disregarded in ARQ[[6]](#footnote-6). To illustrate why such ‘caution’ is so well advised, consider Mingers *et al’s* estimate that the RAE 2008 panel:

* rated all three outputs from the *Review of Industrial Organization* [ABS rating = 2) as 4;
* rated all five outputs published in *Journal of Economics and Business* [ABS rating =1] as 3;
* rated all eighty nine outputs published in *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* [ABS rating =3] as 2;
* rated all two hundred and nineteen outputs published in *Journal of Management Studies* [ABS rating = 4] as 3. (p. 9; p. 10; p.12).

Despite one of the authors being a member of the 2008 panel, we are not privy to the actual ratings given to outputs. Nor are the authors experts in linear programming or statistics. It may be that the broader brush results from Mingers et al.’s (2012) linear programming calculations are more credible and reliable. But we would contend that the estimates of ratings awarded to publications in these four journals, and especially to the *Journal of Management Studies*, suggests that we should hesitate to place great confidence in them.

If, however, we follow Rowlinson et al (in press) in accepting Mingers et al’s (2012) specific calculations, then the case for the Guide is weakened rather than strengthened. For the inescapable conclusion that flows from the Mingers et al analysis is that the Guide cannot be relied upon to forecast likely assessments of panel members, despite a proclivity of many business and management schools to make this administratively congenial assumption. When endeavouring to defend the use of the Guide, ARQ tacitly underscores this point. Had RAE panel members simply applied the Guide to determine the quality of submissions, then a greater percentage of 4\* work in general, and also the submissions published in a number of 3\* journals (including CPA) would have been rewarded. So, for example, all the two hundred and nineteen articles that appeared in *Journal of Management Studies* would have received a 4\*, instead of an estimated 3\*, rating[[7]](#footnote-7). Whatever the dubious merits of the argument, it reinforces the point that the 2008 panel did not abrogate its responsibilities to peer review the submissions by subcontracting this task to the Guide. Although vigilance is required, we can find no credible basis for substituting the use of a journals list for the assessments made by a panel.

Earlier we conjectured that the Guide has amplified a narrowing and conservative effect on scholarship by exerting a homogenizing influence over research activity; and elsewhere we have argued that the Guide discriminates against non-mainstream approaches, such as feminism and post colonialism, as well as specialist sub-areas (see also Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). The former concern is ignored by Rowlinson *et al* (in press). But the latter criticism, regarding the fate of sub-areas, is challenged by pointing to the specialisms of business history and accounting where, it is argued, researchers are demonstrably able to publish in highly rated, generalist journals (e.g. the *Journal of Management Studie*s). Researchers working in these sub-areas, Rowlinson et al (in press) show, have ‘a broad orientation, rather than a narrow specialist interest in business history, and publish across a wide range of journals’ (p. 12). That is undoubtedly the case, at least for the specialists whose work was judged to be worthy of inclusion within submissions to RAE 2008. Rowlinson et al’s (in press) choice of these examples is disingenuous as they are hardly representative of most specialisms within the field of business and management. Business history (and also accounting) is long established and it forms a comparatively integral part of the study of management. The same cannot be said of other, more emergent specialisms, such as sustainability[[8]](#footnote-8). Interdisciplinary research is also likely to suffer from the one-size-fits-all ranking exemplified by the Guide since it privileges work that falls within neat categories and boundaries (Rafols et al, 2012).

Evidence that *some* academics in *some* sub-specialisms may be able to publish their work in mainstream journals hardly addresses the criticism that specific journals in those sub-areas are disadvantaged by the Guide. Journals in sub-areas are established for many reasons, including the building of a community of scholars with an interest in certain marginalized or emergent issues and/or novel perspectives. Specialised journals can speak more directly to the core academic audience in the field for whom they have a particular value. That the academics who value them *may* sometimes also publish their work in, for example, the *Journal of Management Studies* does not take account of these issues.

We are also concerned about the impact of fetishized journal ranking lists on innovative work. Important new theories and perspectives can be difficult to publish in established outlets. Smith and Hitt’s (2005) edited text highlighted the reflections of a number of prominent scholars on how they had developed the theories for which they were best known. Many had particular problems getting their original work published in ‘top’ journals. Barney (2005), a founder of the resource based view of the firm, reported that the paper for which he is best known was rejected by all the established journals in his field. It was only published after he, generously perhaps, accepted his own paper for a special issue of a journal he was guest editing. At the time of writing, the paper in question has over 31,000 citations. This is consistent with a great deal of other research, which finds that reviewers prefer papers that are more consistent with their prior beliefs and that avoid controversial findings (Armstrong, 1997). While such problems can never be fully overcome, it seems likely to us that emergent journals, those with critical orientations and those that are devoted to emergent specialisms will be less likely to privilege orthodox lines of thinking in their publication practices, to the obvious overall benefit of the field. It is this heterogeneity of thought that is threatened by the one size fits all approach of the ABS Guide. Ranking systems that attempt to be comprehensive when dealing with heterogeneous phenomena invariably make ideological choices about what is important and what is not (Gladwell (2011). The architects and users of the ABS Guide seem to endorse drab uniformity as a price worth paying in the pursuit of mindless measurement.

Thus, ARQ selects convenient examples and is deafeningly silent on the politically-charged matter of perspective, as contrasted to the more readily parried gripes from proponents of specialist sub-areas. The authors of the Guide have nothing to say, for example, about the difficulty of publishing feminist or postcolonial work in top-ranked journals or the impossibility of publishing qualitative research in any OR journal ranked 4 in the Guide (see Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Nor is there any acknowledgement of the relative or complete absence of specialist journals in the 3/4 ratings in the Guide, or indeed anywhere in the Guide. For example, the Guide lists just two journals dealing with gender – one ranked as a 0, and the other a 3. However, we are aware of at least 39 academic journals devoted to this issue. Most of these are possible outlets for business and management academics, although their exclusion from the Guide does not enhance such prospects.

This has implications for the future development of specialised journals, an issue on which ARQ is also silent. Researchers face increased pressure to ignore such journals when they are poorly ranked by the Guide as a consequence, for example, of their low citation score (Segalla, 2008). Most ranking systems, including the Guide, place a great deal of weight on a journal’s impact factor. This further constrains the possibility of new journals in emerging fields establishing themselves. Journals must wait for three years before being considered for inclusion in the ISI Social Science Citation Index. They then have a further three year ‘waiting period’ before a score is awarded. This means a minimum period of six years from a journal’s inception to receiving its first impact score. Todnem By et al (2013: 2) report that Thomson Reuters, who publish the Social Science Citation Index, have signalled that proposed new entries for the SSCI must ‘provide a mock-up impact factor which will place the “newbie” securely in the top half of the list.’ As they go on to note, this would exclude half the journals that are currently listed. The implications are stark. A journal’s impact factor plays an important role in the Guide’s calculations while it is becoming more difficult for new journals to obtain an impact factor. The authors of the Guide have determined that ‘with few exceptions, journals not carrying a citation impact factor were graded at 2 or lower. The exceptions to this rule are journals with an established reputation and previously graded 3 in the Guide’ (ABS Journal Guide, 2010: 8).

Exclusion from the Guide can thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy. People may avoid publishing in a journal because it does not yet have an impact factor or feature highly in the Guide. This ensures that it will ultimately receive only a modest impact factor, if it obtains one at all, and so will struggle to establish itself in ‘official’ journal rankings. Unlike the situation in the past, before journal ranking became so ubiquitous and iniquitous, they may now limit the scope for journals to move up and down the various lists, ceding a semi-permanent advantage to elite journals. While all such advantages can be squandered, the problem is that journals at the top of lists come to acquire a high desirability for authors not because they are the most appropriate places to publish their work but because they are most prized by those who shape their careers. Authors are strongly encouraged and even materially incentivised to shape their work for submission to ‘top’ journals, regardless of the appropriateness of their prospective audience. These journals receive the largest number of submissions in relation to the publication space available and are at liberty to sift what they receive to comply with their entrenched standards of scholarship (see below). They remain ‘top’ journals because they are viewed as publishing ‘top’ work, and they publish ‘top’ work because they are considered to be ‘top’ journals (Macdonald and Kam, 2007). In terms of resource based theory (see Barney, 1991), their reputation becomes a valuable resource which attracts other resources – in this case, the preference of careerist academics to publish in them. Indeed, to be fair, any academic who wishes to obtain and keep a position where there is sufficient time and support for research can be seduced by this strategy or coerced or incentivised into its instrumental adoption. Because these journals are the most widely adopted by libraries and personal/institutional subscribers, as well as the most prestigious, they have the best chance of attracting or successfully inviting contributions from established scholars whose work is more likely to have an existing following and therefore garner citations, thereby further raising their status and prestige. This advantage impedes competitors (i.e. other journals) from duplicating that resource and assuming an equitable or superior position. Changes in status that occur are therefore likely to be minor, glacial and often temporary (Grey, 2010).

Such arguments have not, however, dissuaded the Guide’s authors from arguing that ‘the editors of UK journals who feel that their journals are poorly rated should consider the ways in which the rating of these journals can be improved or the journals discontinued’ (Harvey et al, 2011). Pluralism is subordinated to the need to satisfy those who compile the Guide and who, like angry Gods, have conferred upon themselves the right to determine whether journals should live or face execution. We agree with Bristow’s (2012) suggestion that the pressure on journal editors to move up the rankings in this way can too easily become an end in itself, distracting them from whatever innovative intentions led to the formation of the journal in the first place. When journal editors think and converse in terms of Impact Factors, journal rankings, and lobbying the authors of the Guide, rather than ideas, something profoundly important can be lost that may never be reclaimed.

The wider consequences for those writing for journals are also significant. There are major differences in approach between elite US journals and their counterparts elsewhere (Grey, 2010). For example, an editorial statement in the *Academy of Management Journal* in 2004 asserted encouragingly that ‘Qualitative research is important to *AMJ*’ (Gephart, 2004: 454). Perhaps this was an optimistic statement of intent but it rang hollow. In its then 47 year history, qualitative papers won the AMJ’s best article award three times, with one further best paper combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Publishing *critical* qualitative work in these outlets is even more difficult (Ozkazanc¸-Pan, 2012). To accept the hegemony of such journals, to which the Guide implicitly subscribes, involves acceptance of their dominant intellectual, theoretical and methodological standards of scholarship. The pursuit of a research agenda geared to publishing in ‘top’ journals requires acquiescence to the (neo-positivist) traditions that dominate those journals. Unsurprisingly, contributors to the longest established of these journals, the *Administrative Science Quarterly* (rated as 4\* in the ABS list),are almost exclusively drawn from the US (Grey, 2010), as are its editors and members of its editorial board. An analysis of contributions to *The Leadership Quarterly* (classed by the Guide as a 4\* journal) during its second decade of publication also shows that most contributors were drawn from North America (Gardner et al., 2010). The few non-US contributors that such journals publish are required by reviewers to ‘fit the mould’, and so are obliged to embrace the orthodoxy of US scholarship. There are, of course, exceptions, but they are not sufficient to disturb the general pattern and, of course, can be invoked to dismiss the broad point.

There is also a growing concern that business and management research has become increasingly formulaic in its concerns, with less imagination and creativity in evidence (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). There are doubtless many reasons for this but we suggest that a pursuit of specialization without vision, to adapt Weber’s potent formulation, has become routine since it offers a lower risk publication stratagem. Publication pressures intensified by the Guide shoehorn academic aspirations and incentivise work that is geared to North American journals or other journals that emulate their subject matter, analytic approach, writing style (generally clear but dull, impersonal, and po-faced) - and their restricted theoretical frameworks. The Guide reinforces academic discourse that is theoretically constrained, methodologically pinched, conformist in its topic coverage and often soul destroying for its authors to write (Cederstrom and Hoedemaekers, 2012).

Rowlinson *et al* (in press) observe that an increasing selectivity in submissions to the assessment exercise has ‘negative implications for the student experience’ (p. 16) as a consequence of research-active staff being required to do less teaching, and those who do more teaching being less research-active. There are two limitations to this argument. First, it overlooks the many staff who are research-active but not in ways that are readily recognised when applying the ABS list, and who may also be judged to lack the kind of ‘rigour’, ‘originality’ and/or ‘significance’ demanded by (often North American) reviewers of the most prestigious (predominantly North American) journals[[9]](#footnote-9). Second, there is no acknowledgement of the role of the Guide in contributing to such ‘negative implications’, not only by focusing exclusively upon journals but also by providing a beguiling proxy for the undisclosed assessments made by selectivity exercise panel members. The absence of information about panel assessments of individual staff outputs is bound to raise questions about accountability and transparency, even if, less obviously, this secrecy minimizes divisiveness and victimisation with regard to the ‘performance’ of those submitted to these exercises. While the secrecy of the panel’s assessments is challenged by the architects of the Guide, they are not forthcoming about how they, for example, ‘moderate the effect of differing citation practices in different disciplines’ (p. 17), or how they select and act upon advice provided by subject specialists when constructing the Guide.

**Discussion**

In ARQ, Rowlinson et al (in press) compare those who urge the withdrawal, removal or abolition of the Guide to campaigners for the abolition of nuclear weapons (p. 5), presumably because the realization of the objective is considered comparably remote[[10]](#footnote-10). This parallel fails to acknowledge the difference between selectivity exercises which are organized centrally, and the Guide which is a local initiative wilfully created and voluntarily applied by business academics. Because the selectivity exercises are unilaterally imposed by a central funding agency across all subject areas, the prospect of their abolition is comparatively remote. But the Guide could, in principle, be collectively rejected, withdrawn by ABS-D, or simply ignored by senior decision-makers within business schools. Indeed, a number of UK schools have, or at least claim to have, set the Guide aside in their preparations for the 2014 research selectivity exercise. If the ABS Guide were to be widely discarded, it is possible that other rankings, developed by ‘governments, university administrators, or media and internet corporations’ (p. 16) will appear. But that possibility, whether real or imagined, has itself been prepared and legitimised by the creation of the Guide, and its sponsorship by ABS-D. Nonetheless, short of the Guide or its equivalents being adopted and imposed by government, there is no obligation amongst business and management academics to use it to identify research quality. So, the parallel drawn with nuclear weaponry is comically grandiose as well as obnoxious.

Nor are we impressed by the suggestion that the use of such ranking lists is ‘inevitable’ (e.g. Stewart and Cotton, In Press). Before the ABS Guide appeared in 2007, comparatively little attention was paid to the various and rather informal lists that were in circulation. There may have been an occasional moment of madness when some aspergic Dean took one of them seriously, but there was nothing remotely on a par with the rankings mania that currently grips UK business schools. The alleged ‘inevitability’ of the Guide or its equivalents merely reflects the widespread use of the Guide by business school managers who have seized upon it as an administrative short cut, principally in preparation for, and when justifying their ‘decisions’ with regard to, research selectivity exercises. We place ‘decisions’ in scare quotes because a strong appeal of such tools – for academics who are primarily interested in career progression as well as their managers – lies not only in their capacity to limit uncertainty and to remove subjectivity from decisions about where to publish, and who to appoint, promote and submit to research selectivity exercises. Its appeal also resides, and perhaps primarily, in the capacity of such tools to provide a seemingly objective basis for ‘making’ such decisions, thereby distancing if not absolving decision-makers from this responsibility.

The virtually naturalised status of the Guide demonstrates how quickly practices widely viewed as detrimental, even in their own espoused terms (of raising meaningful research quality), can become established as ‘normal’, if detested, by a community of people, including academics (see Willmott, 1993; 2013b). This might lead us to be deeply pessimistic about the future of scholarship in business schools (and perhaps beyond). While we are not wildly optimistic, we are encouraged by the numerous examples of dysfunctional systems and practices that were once viewed as ‘inevitable’ or ‘natural’ features of the social world, but then have been challenged, debunked and eliminated through the concerted action of those sufficiently determined to overcome them.

Scepticism about the Guide as a preferred means of identifying research quality on the basis of place of publication is, we contend, justified even when full account is taken of peer reviewers’ (e.g. panel members’) knowledge of authors’ identities, reputations and institutional affiliations – which is deemed to cloud their judgment. Assessment of the Guide’s value, we have argued, should be based primarily upon its day-to-day use and effects upon scholarly culture and practice, and not by reference to its claimed merits (e.g. in terms of predictability, reliability, ‘generosity’ or funding consequences, etc.) as a substitute for peer review[[11]](#footnote-11) or as a means of ‘hold(ing) the research audit to account’ (p. 17).

The Guide’s authors are not helplessly in denial of its damaging effects. In more reflective moments, they have acknowledged that ‘Journal quality lists represent and construct status and power relations within and between particular subject fields. They also provide a means through which ‘symbolic violence’ can be done to participants in these fields, whether this is through the act of labelling articles, authors, journals and/or institutions as 1\*, 2\*, 3\*, 4\*, world elite, or through the process of denying resources to these participants’ (Morris et al, 2011: 564). But in ARQ, they seek refuge in the beguiling thought that the Guide has (at least) the virtue of being produced by academics, to be used simply as a guide; and that if it is used for other purposes, then this is not the responsibility of its authors. The comparison is specious as well as disingenuous. The right to free speech does not confer any obligation to shout ‘fire’ in a crowded theatre. The Guide’s *raison d’etre* is not just to ‘guide’ academic discourse, but also to provide a resource for the managers of academics when making decisions about appointments and promotions, especially with regard to their inclusion for submission to research evaluation exercises. The authors of the Guide cannot credibly sidestep the concerns raised by the effects of its practical application - unless, of course, they do tacitly subscribe to what fuels it. Either they can acknowledge their responsibility for the malign, albeit in some cases unintended, consequences of the Guide, which they are clearly reluctant to do. Or they can fully acknowledge these effects and advocate its withdrawal, which they also refuse to do. Instead, they justify their continued involvement with the Guide by appealing to their identity as even-handed, value-free academics/scientists. It is difficult to see how the authors of the Guide can credibly disavow the managerial uses to which it is put and which they themselves encourage.

Given that the existence, application and consequences of the Guide are viewed negatively by all but an elite of administrators and highly mobile (4x4) researchers, it is unsurprising that its architects seek to switch attention to the REF. The irony, of course, is that urging this switch would be unnecessary had the ABS list been stillborn, or abandoned, as its critics have urged. The authors of ARQ argue that the results of successive research selectivity exercises, not the Guide, merit the closest attention and scrutiny. The puzzling question, then, is why they have chosen to labour so lovingly over repeated revisions and defences of a ‘distracting’ Guide instead of directing their critical energies at the effects of selectivity exercises.

**Conclusion**

In one of the most incisive commentaries on rankings, which ironically appeared in a highly regarded Academy of Management journal, Adler and Harzing (2009) criticise the ‘volatility’, ‘consistency’ and ‘unfairness’ of rankings. Rankings are unequivocally dammed for ‘encouraging blatant self-interest’, for ‘undermin(ing) the very essence of good scholarship’ and ‘corrosively undervalue(ing) the importance of teaching and learning’ (Adler and Harzing, 2009: 54 cited in Rowlinson *et al*, in press: 16-17). It may be that Adler and Harzing’s focus is upon the more inclusive domain of ‘institutional rankings’, rather than the narrower terrain of journal rankings’, but their concerns are highly pertinent. It is instructive that, instead of recognising the negative impact of rankings upon the diversity of research culture and the residues of collegiality, Rowlinson et al (in press) attribute these consequences to ‘institutional rankings’, such as those resulting from research selectivity exercises. Thus, architects of, and apologists for, the Guide urge its critics to focus their (our!) attention elsewhere – to the research selectivity exercises. But this appeal is itself a distraction from addressing the wide-ranging concerns raised by Adler and Harzing, many of which we have considered and illustrated by reference to the Guide. We are no more persuaded than we would be by an arsonist who seeks to distract attention from the effects of his or her handiwork by pointing to a fire in an adjoining building, rather than the one that they themselves have caused.

What, then, of Rowlinson *et al’s* assertion that ‘business schools have been punching below their weight in terms of influencing government higher education policy’ (p. 18), presumably with specific regard to the existence and operation of research selectivity exercises? In our view, their (unsupported) claim is fanciful as it misreads the ‘broader context’ (p. 19) to which critics of the Guide are, ironically enough, patronisingly directed. The social sciences and the humanities, let alone business schools, are flyweights in the ring of selectivity exercises designed for, and dominated by, the heavyweight STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields. Even if they do punch well above their weight, their puny jabs are unlikely to make much impression on higher education policy. This deflating diagnosis offers a better understanding of why criticism has been directed at a Guide that could be dumped by business school deans, and not at selectivity exercises over which business and management academics are in no position to exert significant influence, except at the margins – for example, by proposing peers who are appointed to serve on assessment panels.

It might be argued that the entire debate over journal rankings is, at best, esoteric and, at worst, a self-indulgent irrelevance. We beg to differ as we consider it to be central not only to the future of business and management schools and their role in society but, more widely, to the future scope and direction of scholarly activity. And, given that the Guide is applied as a management and audit tool, it appropriate that business school academics, including accounting specialists, are vocal participants in a debate about its effects that Rowlinson et al (in press) seek to silence or at least divert. We alluded earlier to a mania for assessment, and an increased obsession with rankings and league tables that has swept through academia. Some, embracing this orthodoxy, seem intent on devising ever more ingenious formulae for allegedly improving the accuracy of journal ranking systems, and propose a lengthening list of variables for inclusion (e.g. Stewart and Cotton, in press). What, we wonder, would it be like if academics, including its authors, spent less time poring over the Guide, or any other authoritative list, and spent more time instead on actually doing interesting research?

Missing from ARQ is any focus on the wider value of Universities, or a concern for research that goes beyond issues of institutional positioning. ARQ (p.10), for example, notes that 169 outputs from JMS ‘were submitted for staff with an ABS score of 12 or more, which gives some idea of its status.’ An obsession with ‘status’ rather than the quality of ideas seems typical of this approach. It is one which we believe inflicts harm on both Universities and our wider society. When business and management schools are driven by the ambition of ‘being number one,’ ‘in the top three’ (or any variant of such goals that are now common to many of our institutions), academic theories become purely instrumental means of achieving prestige for the schools in question, devoid of any greater purpose.

When working in this void, focusing research and publication efforts on those journals that the Guide describes as ‘world elite’ makes perfect, if completely deranged, sense. The most prized academics are then the ones who have proved most skilful in limiting their research agenda, restricting their theoretical frameworks and narrowing their choice of method to what is congenial to ‘top’ journals. Such bankrupt scholarship pays scant attention to the critical questions that must be asked if business and management schools are to engage meaningfully with the deepening problems (e.g. of sustainability and social justice) that beset society (Dunne et al, 2008; Willmott, 2008; 2013a). The Guide has played more than a modest role in draining research of any meaning beyond the transitory rewards of competitive instrumentalism. While the Guide is as much a symptom as it is a cause of such absurdity, its misery is self-inflicted, and with sufficient collective will it could be removed. If its architects are not prepared to disown and withdraw their Guide, then it is high time that our academic community, perhaps with some leadership from Deans willing to acknowledge the folly of the monstrous creation, abandon its use.

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1. Research selectivity exercises were introduced in the UK in 1986 and have been repeated every 5-7 years since then. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On this issue, Rowlinson *et al* (2013) are inclined to face simultaneously in opposing directions as they also observe that ‘citation counting is at least as questionable as a measure of quality for individual articles as the citation impact factor is for ranking journals’ (p. 17); and they imply that variability in the assessment of articles appearing in the same journal is attributable to panel members’ (undeclared) use of citations as an indicator of research quality (p. 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The point is acknowledged by Rowlinson *et al* (2012: 16), seemingly as a valued contribution of the Guide, although if Mingers *et al’s* (2012) analysis is to be believed, using the Guide to select faculty and publications for submission to the 2008 RAE resulted in a sub-optimal outcome as the panel’s evaluations confounded the rankings given to journals, and the articles published in them, by the Guide. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The reference here is to academics who have 4 journal articles, the maximum submissible to the UK selectivity exercise, accepted in journals ranked by the ABS Guide as 4\*. See Rowlinson et al (2013) for further details. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An example given by Rowlinson e*t al* (2013)is Warwick Business School (WBS) where, they suggest, maintaining the research profile is important, financially, for attracting postgraduate students who, they imply, will assess the value of WBS in terms of the profile ascribed to it by the research selectivity panel. In part, this may be so, although the prospective rise in salary is perhaps a more significance factor especially for MBA students. It should not be assumed, however, that the breakdown of the finances of WBS – in 2010/11, £45.7m turnover comprising £38.1 from teaching (and £5.7 in research income and a further £2m in teaching income funded by the UK government) - refers to postgraduate and/or even to undergraduate teaching rather than its broader education and training offerings. If a subsidy to research exists, its source is less from undergraduate and postgraduate teaching than from WBS’s wider course-cum-conference facility operations. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, on the basis of the estimates, Rowlinson et al (p. 11) claim without any qualification that ‘*the consistency in the grading of outputs from JMS in the RAE 2008* [according to Mingers et al.’s estimates, all 219 outputs received the same 3 rating by the panel] is not reflected in the citation counts for those articles’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Equally, according to Mingers et al’s, (2012) calculations, many submissions published in journals ranked as 2\*, 1\*, or absent from, from the ABS Guide were evaluated by the RAE 2008 panel as 3\* or 4\*, making it possible to argue that the panel was more discerning and generous in its assessment than if it had slavishly applied the Guide. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rowlinson et al (2013: 17) note the position of such sub-fields as sustainability which ‘do not even merit their own listing [in the ABS Guide] as a separate subfield’ but offer no defence or explanation of this. Instead, they just file it amongst ‘the usual litany of complaints about the ABS Guide’ (ibid: 16), the implication being that such complaints are groundless or trivial. In cases where journals in specialist areas, such as accounting, have been established with a broad, ‘social’ remit, and with diverse editorial boards (whose members include one of the present authors), it would be remarkable if many contributors did not publish in journals within a similarly broad remit. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rowlinson et al (2013) mistakenly believe that what constitutes originality, significance, etc, is a ‘mystery’ when their meaning is rather clearly (but not of course exhaustively) set out by the business and management panel in publicly available HEFCE documents [INSERT WEB LINK]. Either they have not acquainted themselves with these guidelines, or they are erroneously implying that little or no explication of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rather more fanciful, we suggest, given the centralized, standardized design of selectivity exercises, is the contention that ‘if business schools were required to account for research in relation to their mission there would be greater accountability for research funding and no need for outputs to be assessed according to artificial, predefined quality levels of “originality, significance and rigour”. That the AACSB is invoked as a model of such an approach does not instil confidence in the proposal (Lowrie and Willmott, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For example, it is stated that ‘the ABS guide is demonstrably more generous in its grading of journal outputs for the last RAE 2008 than the business and management panel actually was’ (Rowlinson *et al*, 2013: 17). What is meant is that if outputs had been graded according to the rating given by the Guide to their place of publication alone, irrespective of their contents, more of the outputs would have received a 3\* or 4\* rating. It is also argued - in response to complaints that Mingers (2012) estimates of grades allocated to the *Journal of Management Studies* and other journals (e.g. *Leadership*) by panel members are implausible - that these critics ‘can’t have it both ways’ (ibid) – that is, outputs from the *Journal of Management Studies* were not ‘downgraded’ by the panel, while outputs from other journals rated low by the Guide (e.g. *Leadership*) were not ‘upgraded’. Yet, it is consistent with the results of RAE 2008 that *many*, but by no means all, submitted articles published in the *Journal of Management Studies* were awarded 4\*, *and that* *some* articles appearing in journals ranked low by the Guide were assessed as 2\*, 3\* or 4\* by the panel. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)