



# Quality journals and gamesmanship in management studies

Quality journals and gamesmanship

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Publication in quality journals has become a major indicator of research performance in UK universities. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the notion of “quality journal”.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper examines the situation in management studies and finds dizzying circularity in the definitions of “quality journal”.

**Findings** – The paper finds that what a quality journal is does not really matter: agreement that there are such things matters very much indeed. As so often happens with indicators of performance, the indicator has become the target. So, the challenge is to publish in quality journals, and the challenge rewards gamesmanship. Vested interests have become particularly skilful at the game, and at exercising the winners’ prerogative of changing the rules. All but forgotten in the desperation to win the game is publication as a means of communicating research findings for the public benefit. The paper examines the situation in management studies, but the problem is much more widespread.

**Originality/value** – This original and topical paper concludes that laughter is both the appropriate reaction to such farce, and also, perhaps, the stimulus to reform.

**Keywords** Serials, Competitive strategy, Authorship, Research work, Peer review, United Kingdom  
**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Higher education in the UK is an industry supplying an education product for mass consumption. British universities are businesses selling education, managed like other large organisations. Academics are employees serving customers; they are managed, told what to do, their performance assessed and, where possible, measured. Academics respond with the efficiency their managers admire and encourage (Thornton, 2004), by doing what is counted and eschewing what is not. Managerialism rewards “academics who willingly restrict their work to duties and activities that provide the greatest measurable output” (Willmott, 1995). Academic endeavour can be particularly hard to measure, and indicators of performance often substitute for performance itself.

Publication in quality journals has become the major indicator of research performance in UK universities. The rewards are huge, though for achieving the indicator rather than for performing the research. The indicator has become the target (Lewis, 2000). Small wonder, then, that gamesmanship is rife: academics, editors, university departments all play the game, their eagerness to win enhanced by the

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prospect of the winner's prerogative – the ability to set the rules. The losers are not so much those less skilled in the game as those who look to publication as a means of communicating research findings for the public benefit. In UK universities, the situation is made more acute, rather than caused, by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), allocating vast sums largely on the basis of publications in quality journals. We focus on the area we know best, on Management Studies. There we find farce. We propose laughter as not only an appropriate response, but also a stimulus to reform.

### Quality journals

Just what is a “quality journal”? The terms “premier”, “key”, “core”, “flagship”, “top rank” and “top tier” seem to be used synonymously with “quality” as descriptors of journals to suggest that these journals are superior in some way. Oddly, in just what way they are superior hardly seems to matter. The value of a quality journal lies not in its quality, but in its status as a quality journal.

Academics are notoriously poor at identifying quality journals not known to be quality journals. They tend to be very familiar with very few journals, and very ignorant of the vast majority (Boor, 1973; Levin and Kratochwill, 1976). Academics think more highly of journals when they have published in them (Donohue and Fox, 2000), or served on their editorial boards (Theoharakis and Hirst, 2002). To be sure, there are lists of quality journals in Management Studies, but none of these is compiled in isolation (Harzing, 2005a; Park and Gordon, 1996).

The initial set of journals was selected on the basis of the number of times they had been included in previous studies of journal influence (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2005, p. 475).

Once a journal is on one list of quality journals, it is fairly likely to appear on other lists of quality journals (Johnson and Podsakoff, 1994; Parker *et al.*, 1998); it is a quality journal because it is on a list of quality journals. Conversely, journals not on the lists are likely to remain excluded.

Such circularity is endemic in the world of quality journals. For instance, one characteristic of quality journals in Management Studies is that authors from top business schools publish in them, but then, which are top business schools is often determined by publication in quality journals (Baden-Fuller *et al.*, 2000; Borokhovich *et al.*, 1995; Fische, 1998; Trieschmann *et al.*, 2000). Authors with the highest reputation in Management Studies publish in quality journals, but then those who publish in quality journals acquire the highest reputation (Dewett and DeNisi, 2004). Similarly, quality journals are quality journals because they contain quality papers, known to be quality papers because they appear in quality journals (Johnson and Podsakoff, 1994). Zoroastrian calculations of citation rates and impact factors can be attempted to discover quality in journals, but only inclusion in the Social Science Citation Index makes analysis possible, and inclusion is reserved for quality journals (MacRoberts and MacRoberts, 1989; Porta, 1996).

High rejection rates are often taken to be the mark of the quality journal (Donovan, 1998; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1992). Surveys of Management Studies journals find an overall rejection rate of 72.8 per cent in 1970 and 81.7 per cent in 1994, apparently as quality journals become more prevalent (Pierce and Garven, 1995). This compares most favourably with rejection rates of about 50 per cent among eight journals published by learned societies in the fields of Science, Technology and Medicine (Bence and Oppenheim, 2004a). The *Journal of Management* currently has a splendid rejection

rate of 92 per cent (Feldman, 2005) and that of the *Harvard Business Review* approaches an almost perfect 99 per cent (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2005).

There are lots of other criteria used to identify quality journals – degree of quantification, circulation, age, affiliated institution, and so on (Ali *et al.*, 1996; Polonsky *et al.*, 1999). Then there is citation, the general assumption being that the more a paper is cited, the better it must be (Phelan, 1999). And the better a paper is, the more it is cited, which means that the same papers are more and more likely to be cited. Of papers cited, the half more cited is actually ten times more cited than the rest (Seglen, 1997). Interestingly, they tend to be published in the same few quality journals. Just seven journals (though not the same seven) account for:

- 61 per cent of citations in 28 Management Studies journals (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2005);
- 58 per cent of citations in 60 Finance and Economics journals (Fishe, 1998); and
- more than half the references in 65 Management Studies and Social Science journals (Tahai and Meyer, 1999).

Our futile hunt for the characteristics of the quality journal is surely to miss the point: all that really matters is that there are some journals that can be designated “quality journals”. While the precise nature of their superiority may be difficult to identify, it is, of course, guaranteed by that last bastion of academic professionalism, peer review.

### Peer review

The system of peer review screens and improves papers so that, at least in theory, the refereed journal publishes only good and reliable papers (Bence and Oppenheim, 2004b). But does this theory hold in practice these days? Absolutely fundamental to peer review are collegiality and professionalism (Brown, 1997; Roberts, 2003), which means adherence to personal loyalties not circumscribed by an organisation, and a value system established by colleagues rather than imposed by an employer. In a hierarchical world with superiors and inferiors, which is what the university has become (Harley, 2002), peer review becomes a mechanism that allows those who know little about a subject to judge the work of those who know more (Albert, 1997; Coe and Weinstock, 1984; Extejt and Smith, 1990; Fry *et al.*, 1985), and to justify their decisions (Rowland, 2002). With so many desperate authors submitting papers to the same few quality journals, the system struggles to cope. At some point – Miner (2003) suggests a rejection rate of 90 per cent – even the most searching selection processes must break down simply because it becomes inexorably harder to pick a single winner among so many losers. At this point, the editor of the quality journal must intervene if selection is not to be random among the authors, ideas and styles that are most familiar. The editor must invite authors to submit, he must initiate themes, he must fast track (Laband and Piette, 1994).

... we “established authors” find it a lot easier to go the unrefereed route ... I inadvertently had an article published in the mainline journal *Administrative Science Quarterly*. It was neither submitted nor refereed, something one might consider the best of all possible worlds. This is what happened. I was talking with Karl Weick, the innovative editor of ASQ, and asked him if he knew where I might publish a technical report I had done for an agency ... Weick said he knew of some journals that might publish my report, that I should send it to him and that he would check it out. He read it and passed it on to the managing editor, who liked it. She, in turn, passed it on to the two associate editors, and, to my surprise, she said

ASQ decided to publish it, though I should make unspecified changes to make it more appropriate to the journal (Perrow, 1985, pp. 212-3).

The problem is exacerbated by academics having little incentive to referee these days: the work is anonymous and does not count towards performance assessment. Editors have to twist arms to persuade people to review.

... people are already working 60 h or more a week and have no time for reviewing submissions; editors have to press friends into doing them favours or tell authors who have had their submission accepted that they will be expected to do a few reviews in return (Moret, 1997).

And in practice, editors – not referees – often reject or accept papers in that it is the editor who chooses the referee.

Editors can err in the choice of specialists (indeed, it is well-known among editors that a deliberate bad choice of referees can always ensure that a paper is either accepted or rejected, as preferred) ... (Harnad, 2000).

The double blind process in peer reviewing can easily guard the identity of the referee, but not that of the author, especially the prominent author. And editors, of course, always know the identity of authors, and are much more likely to reject papers from the unknown than from the known (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002). It could be that known authors write better papers than unknown authors, yet even when papers, identical but for their authorship, are submitted in experiment to various journals, editors accept the papers attributed to known authors and reject the others (Armstrong, 1984). As Bedian (2004) nicely explains, refereeing is best understood as a “social process”. It is a sobering reality that, whatever the merits of peer review, papers submitted to quality journals are unlikely to be refereed at all. There must be many ambitious young academics, resolutely submitting to quality journals, who have hardly ever received a referee’s report.

Certainly as a junior academic in the last RAE round I found it difficult to place papers in the so-called “best” journals, because they already had such a huge backlog of contributions. I cannot even say that they refused my contributions for their lack of quality because they did not even look at them (Barnard, 1998, p. 479).

### Gamesmanship

Such conditions tempt gamesmanship in the Potter sense – the art of winning games without actually cheating (Potter, 1966). Universities departments play the game, encouraging staff to submit their papers to approved journals (Harley *et al.*, 2004; Polonsky *et al.*, 1999). In Australia, just about to introduce its own version of the RAE, gamesmanship involves incentives of the most blatant sort. The University of Queensland Business School pays staff A\$12,000 each for every paper published in a quality journal. The going rate at Melbourne University Business School is A\$15,000.

Editors also game. They encourage appropriate authors (Ali *et al.*, 1996; Rowlands, 2005), cultivate cadres of regulars who can be relied upon to satisfy one of the major indicators of the quality journal by citing themselves and each other shamelessly, and they inflate rejection rates by encouraging authors to submit. Authors play the game, citing to impress editors and referees, especially citing papers published in the journal to which submission is made (Liebowitz and Palmer, 1984). It is important to cite papers that others have cited (de Solla Price, 1980; Redner, 2005; Thorne, 1977). This will improve the chances of the author’s own paper being cited. Self-citation also helps

to increase the impact factor (Phelan, 1999), especially when combined with multiple authorship (Amin and Mabe, 2000). Between 10 and 30 per cent of citation is self-citation (MacRoberts and MacRoberts, 1989). And the more citations a paper carries, the more likely it is to be cited itself (Baird and Oppenheim, 1994; Oppenheim, 1996).

I once asked a successful author why he kept citing work that he privately characterised as “crap”. He frankly admitted that he retained references of dubious value because he felt his public demanded it (Thorne, 1977, p. 1160).

To cite is not necessarily to have read. In fact, about one-third of all academic citation is to secondary material (which obviates reading the original), but even the secondary material often goes unread (Sweetland, 1989). Some surveys find more inaccurate citations than accurate (MacRoberts and MacRoberts, 1989; Pope, 1992), and the same errors being passed down through generations of papers (Harzing, 2002).

### Implications for management studies

The greater the reward for publishing in some journals rather than others, the more effort that goes into targeting. What quality journals are most likely to publish determines what and how research is conducted, and its presentation. Ultimately, this becomes homogenous research, research that “can impose a deadening uniformity on its field of endeavour” (Harley and Lee, 1997, p. 1434). In Management Studies, such developments are noted with approval (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2005). It is inevitable that most of what is published, even in quality journals, is not the stuff of Nobel prizes. In other subjects, this seems to be acknowledged (May, 1968), but not in Management Studies. It *often* seems that all publications in quality journals in Management Studies are novel and brilliant, the best of the best (Baden-Fuller *et al.*, 2000).

More effort goes into negotiating publication in quality journals than into research (Bedeian, 2003; Spector, 1998). Years are spent in an assessment process that has become more cumbersome and convoluted than ever (Ellison, 2002). Time from first submission to eventual publication is estimated to average about four years, not counting time taken to conduct research and to write a first draft (Harzing, 2005b). Originality and excitement are unlikely to survive such prolonged evisceration, which might help explain why Management Studies academics tend to associate quality journals with papers that are a struggle to understand (Armstrong, 1980; Vastag and Montabon, 2002).

In Management Studies, quality journals are generalist journals (Johnson and Podsakoff, 1994; Polonsky *et al.*, 1999). Papers about specialised, multidisciplinary research (Easton and Easton, 2003; Henkel, 1999; Polonsky *et al.*, 1999; Tomlinson, 2000) and practical applications tend to be relegated to lesser journals (Ormerod and Kiossis, 1997; Parker *et al.*, 1998). New journals are treated with disdain, no matter how good the papers they publish (Piercy, 2000). The Business and Management Studies panel assembled for the RAE in 2001 was faced with papers to read in 1489 different journals (Bence and Oppenheim, 2004c), and certainly considered new journals a threat to quality (Bessant *et al.*, 2003). The panel was scathing about papers not grounded in the established thinking of Management Studies – as published in quality journals.

While the 1996 RAE exercise was admitted to be subjective, dependent on professional judgement (Cooper and Otley, 1998), by 2001 the Business and Management Studies panel had come to accept that quality is whatever is in quality journals and that publishing in other journals indicated scope for improvement. Those following 1996 panel members’ advice to produce more inter-disciplinary, comparative,

policy work on emerging and neglected areas (Campbell *et al.*, 1999), to invigorate research in Management Studies with “trans-disciplinarity” (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998), and to close the “relevance gap” by focusing on the interface with business (Starkey and Madan, 2001) would have had difficulty publishing in the quality journals revered by the 2001 panel.

It is said that many in British universities have lost sight of any purpose other than to improve their RAE score (Humphrey *et al.*, 1995; Piercy, 2000). Management academics scramble to identify with the prevailing ideology (Armstrong, 1994), publishing less to communicate than to associate (Easton and Easton, 2003). Staff certainly seem to be encouraged to publish in quality journals, which means performing the sort of research and writing the sort of paper these journals favour (Harley, 2002).

... most departments pressure members [each other] to do what *scores*, not what they think will contribute to human knowledge. Morale suffers conspicuously. The system is appalling and eliminates both the lazy and useless *and* the eccentric and brilliant (emphasis in original) (Harley, 2002, p. 201).

In August 2005, we surveyed the heads of management departments that had submitted to RAE 2001 Unit 43 (Business and Management Studies). They sketch a predictable scene (Table I). Forty-two of the forty-eight departments responding actively encourage staff to publish in some journals rather than others, and most resort to the lists to help determine quality journals. Nearly two-thirds maintain their own lists, generally adapted from lists compiled elsewhere. Professional journals are definitely out of favour. Various inducements to publish in quality journals are offered, though not usually as blatant as the Australian examples we have noted. Quality journals are overwhelmingly seen as publishing mainstream research rather than niche or interdisciplinary work. The major discrepancy between these findings and the observations of this paper is that UK heads of department are unimpressed by rejection rates. This may reflect a bias in the literature towards US attitudes, but the finding is still strange.

Percentage of respondents ( $n = 48$ )

*Criteria to determine quality journals*

Journal is refereed	85
Journal high in ranking lists	81
Personal experience	31
High rejection rate	8
Read by managers	4
<i>Maintain own ranking list</i>	64
<i>Characteristics of papers published in quality journals</i>	
Mainstream	81
Specialist	48
Critical	26
Interdisciplinary	21

*Means of encouraging publication in quality journals*

Advice on writing	79
Exhortation	71
Promotion	64
Money	21
Steering research into favoured areas	21

**Table I.**  
Attitudes towards  
quality journals of heads  
of management studies  
departments in UK  
universities



### Concluding thoughts

In a professional system, the academic writes partly for his own benefit and partly for public benefit. In a managerial system, the academic writes for the organisation (Harley *et al.*, 2004) and performance indicators are needed to monitor employees. Publication in quality journals has become the chief of these indicators in Management Studies. Academics have not been mere pawns, tragic victims in this transition. At the very least, they have been complicit, seeing protest as unprofessional (Miller, 1995; Parker and Jary, 1995; Parker *et al.*, 1998). Some have been active supporters.

Of course, academic publishing has always been ridden with self-interest, and academics have always schemed to promote themselves. But while collegiality and professionalism imposed at least some constraint on this behaviour, managerialism offers positive incentives. The winners in the game to produce indicators of research performance feel no obligation towards the losers. No collegial responsibility deters them from exploiting their position to ensure that the indicators incline towards what the winners produce. It is the ultimate in gamesmanship to be able to control the rules of the game. This is akin to what Merton (1988) identifies as the “Matthew Effect”, the observation from the Book of Matthew that those who have most get more, and those who have least tend to lose what little they have. Publication in quality journals has become a currency, representing value rather than having any intrinsic worth, and maintained only by consensus. Papers published in quality journals are money rather than wealth; they are published to be counted rather than read.

Following Harmon (2006), we suspect that ridicule and mockery might be more effective in bringing about reform than wailing and gnashing. Dare we have a good laugh at what we have been doing, or are interests so vested that everyone has too much to lose? Dare we admit that the rewards to scholarship in Management Studies are, in large part, rewards to gamesmanship? Dare we admit that publishing in quality journals has become the academic equivalent of painting by numbers? We might start by taking what we call the “Tinkerbell option”. Tinkerbell was saved by children everywhere clapping their hands to demonstrate their belief in fairies. Quality journals also need applause to survive in our academic Neverland. Ridicule and mockery mean good riddance to Tinkerbell, but Tinkerbell is a small price to pay for restoring some sanity to publishing in the journals of Management Studies.

While there might be pleasure in challenging the self-satisfaction that so often accompanies publication in quality journals, mockery alone will not effect change. For change, we must return to basics. Consider what is so often forgotten – the point of academic publication. Pompous as it sounds, surely the point is to contribute to knowledge, not to fill the pages of quality journals. The esteem and the rewards should flow from the former, not the latter.

And there is the rub. As long as the accomplishment is seen to be publishing in quality journals, there is little incentive to make papers worth reading, or even readable. As we have seen, they are often not read, or not read carefully. What might happen were papers published in quality journals not simply as a matter of record, but actually to be read? Imagine waiting excitedly for the next issue of a quality journal, its papers all so enticing that which to devour first is an impossible decision, their arguments all so stimulating that the corridors buzz with discussion. There is substantial progress yet to be made to achieve this goal.

It is tempting to expect the editors of quality journals to take the first step – let them publish better material. This alone is unrealistic and unfair; editors are as chained to the quality journal treadmill as academics generally, and – to be even more fair – as

university managers. No, the most appropriate agents of at least initial change are those academics who can afford to publish elsewhere without attracting the accusation that they are unable to publish in quality journals. Of all parties, they are best positioned to defy the system by placing some of their most significant work in specialist journals. There it will be very carefully read, the reputation of both author and journal dependent upon the scrutiny. Let our intellectual leaders show young researchers an alternative to desperately refining gamesmanship to achieve the single ambition of publishing in quality journals.

It is simply not acceptable that academic papers are published where they will yield the greatest financial gain for an employer, not where they will be read by the most appropriate audience. That stance will smack of precious professionalism to many a university manager, comfortable with a system in which publication in quality journals is central to the allocation of funds and the positioning of individuals in the university hierarchy. The more fundamental that system to institutional survival, and the greater the returns from managing it effectively, the more change will be resisted. Our mockery might reveal how contrived the system has become, but change itself demands less control of academics and more trust. Are those who have become so accomplished at gamesmanship still worthy of such trust? They have much to prove. Let them seize the opportunity.

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