

The impact of journal ranking fetishism on Australian policy-related research

A case study

Suzanne Young

La Trobe University

David Peetz

Griffith University

Magalie Marais

IAE Aix-en-Provence, France

In Australia, the Excellence in Research (ERA) exercise, first conducted in 2008 and continuing relatively unchanged in 2012, determines the level of research funding made available to Australian universities. However, the use of journal rankings as part of ERA is argued to be problematic (Cooper & Poletti 2011). Through a survey of academics in a field of policy-relevant research – employment and industrial relations – this paper analyses the impact on their discipline and working environments of the journal rankings ERA processes. Overall, we conclude that the ERA journal ranking system is strongly and negatively affecting the field and could lead to the diminution of the number of Australian journals and researchers, and the amount of Australian research, in this field. Such consequences would likely be harmful for social progress in Australia.

Introduction

Worldwide governments have introduced formal rankings exercises to assess research (Adler & Harzing 2009). In Australia, the Excellence in Research (ERA) exercise determines the level of research funding made available to Australian universities (Cooper & Poletti 2011). The ERA replaces the Howard Government's Research

Quality Framework (RQF), which similarly aimed to assess research quality within Australia's higher education sector based on peer review and metrics. Work on its first iteration commenced in 2008, with data collection and analysis in 2010, and a subsequent round to take place in 2012. Minister Kim Carr argued that the scheme would enable researchers to be more recognised and their achievements more visible.

However the ranking of journals under the ERA regime has been viewed widely as questionable, producing flawed results whilst eroding the contexts that produce 'quality' research (Cooper & Poletti 2011; Adler & Harzing 2009). As Oswald (2006) noted with such a scheme there is potential that where an academic publishes will become more important than what they have to say. This is based on the presumption that the value of academics' outputs is measurable; introduced as part of an auditing and benchmarking framework now found across other school sectors and public agencies, as part of a neoliberal agenda of accountability (Cooper & Poletti 2011; Olssen & Peters 2005). Cooper and Poletti (2011) cautioned that the use of auditing regimes changes academics' activities once they begin to place a measure on them, as such devaluing labour that has been traditionally viewed as important and valuable. Similarly Wicks (2004) argued this type of measurement regime adds a disciplinary lens to the traditional academic freedom inherent in being granted tenure.

A key element of ERA is the ranking of journals. This paper analyses the impact of the 2010 journal rankings system introduced as part of the Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) initiative. Technically, journal rankings are only a small part of ERA, which uses six broadly defined quantitative indicators plus varying degrees of peer review (Australian Research Council 2008). Notwithstanding, this research will provide a clearer understanding of what academics actually think of the ERA exercise, how it impacts on their careers and on university decision-making. As panels involved in the British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) found, high quality research is not restricted to a small number of elite journals (Svanesson & White 2009).

However, for universities themselves, journal rankings are an easy hook on which to hang assessments of academic work. The legitimisation and reification of journal rankings through the ERA process, even if unintended, has the potential to create major behavioural changes in universities the impact of which was not anticipated by policy makers. As the chief executive of the ARC noted, journal rankings are 'on the margins' of ERA compared to peer review and other indicators, yet 'universities are using it in ways that are more rigid than I would...[and] other than what was intended. Young people are getting the wrong message from senior people, that they should not publish unless it's in a A-starred journal' (quoted in McGilvray 2010; Row-

botham 2010a). Others have observed that 'while the ARC does not advocate universities using the journal rankings as a league table, the fact is universities are doing so' (Australian Curriculum Association director Shoo, quoted in Rowbotham 2010b).

This changed behaviour by universities may be reflected in changed behaviour by academics themselves as they realise that careers now depend on publishing in journals attributed with high rank. Cooper and Poletti (2011) argued this produces a set of perverse and dysfunctional reactions that threaten to undermine research quality in the long-term. Authors may increasingly cite themselves or be pressured by editors to cite other papers published in their journals (Wicks 2004). Academics are pushed to 'play the game', to switch their field of research, which strikes at the heart of trust, collegial relationships and mentoring roles necessary in establishing a research culture (Cooper & Poletti 2011; Adler & Harzing 2009).

The impact on non-scientific disciplines such as humanities is also problematic with reclassification of Fields of Research codes (FoR) resulting in review from those that do not understand nor value the discipline (Ozolins 2008; Graham 2008). And as researchers seek to have their research published in higher ranked journals that have lower acceptance rates, Ozolins (2008) contends that actual research activity will fall. Moreover, Watson (2008) argues that the often traditional measures of quality such as peer review and metrics do not take into account policy implications of research, cautioning researchers and government to ensure they lobby for and understand the impact of such research such as that in the education sector. In this vein Oswald (2006) found that the best article in a medium quality journal has a greater citation impact and therefore influence than a 'poor' article in a more prestigious journal, with imperfect matchings between the quality of the journal (based on ranking) and the lifetime citations of individual articles. Moreover influential books, not included in the rankings exercise, receive considerable more citations than influential articles; whilst non-English publications as well as open access web based publications are ignored (Adler & Harzing 2009).

Even so, Haddow and Genoni (2009) in their study of citation measures of Australian education journal articles concluded that Australian education research managers need to move away from a heavy reliance on citation measures to devise one that is sensitive to the contexts of their own discipline (also see Ozolins

2008, Graham 2008). Here they argue national journals play an important role in scholarly communication, being framed by national institutional and social policy. Whilst the purpose of the ERA exercise is to benchmark internationally they concluded that the result will be that national journals' rankings will fall.

Our study focuses on a field of research that is policy relevant and in which a significant amount of the research that is relevant to Australians is conducted within, and about, Australia. That is the field of employment relations, also known as industrial relations or industrial and employment relations. The term 'employment relations' has been used interchangeably to reflect these expressions.

In this paper, we comment on the significance and (multi) disciplinarity of employment relations, and present the results of a

survey of more than 100 employment relations academics on the impact on their discipline and working environments of the journal rankings ERA processes, and the salutary lessons that can be drawn from the survey. This study

contributes significantly to our understanding of the effect of rankings exercises. Other articles reviewed here have argued of potential effects of the rankings exercise or analysed citations of journals, whereas this study has obtained reliable empirical data from the total population of academics working and researching in the one discipline about their actual perceptions and experiences of the effect of the ERA journal rankings exercise.

Nature of the field

The study of the employee-employer relationship – under the banner of employment relations – has been a field of study for over a century, part of university courses since the 1920s in the US, the 1930s in the UK and the 1950s in Australia.

The value of employment relations lies in 'integrating micro and macro analysis, acknowledging power and competing goals in the employment relationship as central variables and accepting fairness as an important criterion [of analysis of the employment relationship]' (Kelly 2003, p. 167). It is 'the paradigm that exposes the contradictions that are at the heart

of the employment relationship' (Bailey 2003, p. 45). As Kaufmann (2004, p. 631) points out, 'industrial relations seeks to humanise, stabilise, professionalise, democratise and balance the market system'.

It is important for public policy. As a critical field, it also sometimes produces findings that are uncomfortable for those in positions of power, as it may investigate the power relationships that underpin the employer-employee relationship and related public policy. As a result, for example, several employment relations academics undertaking research into aspects of the 'Work Choices' legislation were vilified by senior Ministers charged with advocacy of that legislation (Marr 2007; Jefferson 2008). The relevance of employment relations to modern society is undiminished over time (Osterman, Kochan, Locke & Piore 2001). This

is because 'labour is being commodified across the global economy, inequality and insecurity are on the rise, global market forces are undermining national regulatory regimes, one out of six workers in the world economy are jobless or seriously underemployed,

and workers' interests are increasingly subordinated to consumers' interests' (Kaufman 2004, p. 630).

Recent periods have witnessed the decline of equity for employees in Australian organisations: increases in working hours and work intensification, the introduction and promotion of individual contracts, the reduction of union 'voice' in many workplaces (to name a few issues). Many of these changes have hit hardest those at the bottom of the labour market. According to Kaufman (2004, p. 628), 'as long as employees and employers exist, the relations between them will be problematic, sometimes conflictual, and always in need of mechanism for dialogue, adjustment and regulation'. The continuing study of employment relations is therefore of great significance for the wellbeing of Australian society, as wellbeing at or through work is a central element of overall wellbeing.

Location of the discipline

The Australian Bureau of Statistics classifies the field of research (FoR) 'industrial relations' with a six digit code (150306) that represents a sub-category of the four-digit 'business and management' group (1503).

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This location does not accurately depict the nature of employment relations research. 'The discipline of industrial relations takes theories and concepts from [the] traditional social science disciplines and uses them to study industrial relations', including 'economics, politics, law, history, sociology and psychology... That is to say, industrial relations, by the nature of its content, cannot be adequately studied by using only one traditional discipline' (Sappey, Burgess, Lyons & Bultjens 2006, p. 7-8).

This multidisciplinary character of employment relations means that it no more belongs as a sub-field of 'management' than it does of 'sociology', 'law', 'economics' or 'public policy'. The public policy implications of much employment relations research are quite distinct from the firm-focused implications of the other 'management' fields of research, the aims of which are to maximise one or another aspect of the efficient organisation of business. Some researchers in these 'management' FoRs may feel uncomfortable with the critical nature of some employment relations research. This lack of consonance between employment relations and the 'management' FoR, and the very multidisciplinary nature of employment relations, mean it would be best considered as a four-digit FoR in its own right.

Perhaps for the above reasons, or perhaps for unrelated reasons, key employment relations journals did not fare well in the final version of the ERA journal ranking issued in 2010. Several journals that had been ranked highly by the Association of Industrial Relations Academics in Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ), and likewise ranked highly in the draft rankings issued by the ARC in 2008 (including two of the three widely recognised global leading journals in the field), were downgraded in the final 2010 rankings.

It is in this context that the AIRAANZ survey of the impact of the ERA journal rankings was undertaken.

Methodology

The survey's aim was to gain data to provide a greater evidence-based understanding of the consequences of the ERA journal rankings for staff and universities involved in employment relations; this included to study the effects of journal rankings on careers (including promotion, recruitment, grants) and universities in general.

Several questions used scales that assessed both the strength of an impact and its valence (positive or nega-

tive). An online survey creation tool 'Qualtrics' was used to edit and distribute the survey to the AIRAANZ community. More than 300 members and past-members obtained from the AIRAANZ membership database were emailed to gain their responses. The survey was open for three weeks between 24 November and 15 December 2010. One hundred and one responses were collected with a response rate of close to 33 per cent, which is quite high for an electronic survey. The answers were analysed using SPSS statistical software.

All of the respondents are attached to a university of Australia or New Zealand and, by being members of AIRAANZ, have demonstrated an interest in the field of Industrial and Employment Relations. The tenure of respondents in their current positions varies and demonstrates different stages in respondents' career progression. Those respondents involved in decision-making or high level positions were in a position to assess from the inside whether ERA journal rankings had led to changes to university practices. (Thirty-eight per cent of the respondents have been a member of a selection committee, 19 per cent have been involved in allocating university research grants and 15 per cent have been head of school/department or member of a promotion committee).

Respondents' experience in employment relations is extensive with most of them having been involved in this field for more than 10 years (71 per cent). The amount of time spent by respondents in employment relations varies but most of the respondents declared a significant time commitment to this field (about 60 per cent declared spending more than 40 per cent of their working time in this field).

Impact of the ERA Journal ranking exercise on academic decision making

To understand the consequences of the ERA journal ranking for employment relations academics, we assessed its impacts on decision-making processes within the university. Our results show that this ranking has had a strong impact on decision-makers with 84 per cent claiming that the ERA journal ranking has replaced traditional decision-making or evaluative criteria.

Table 1 shows that large proportions of AIRAANZ members with decision making experience within their universities had witnessed strong impacts of the ERA on the decision making processes. Some 52 per cent of decision makers indicated a 'strong' or 'very strong' impact on internal promotions (only 17

Table 1: Impact of the ERA journal ranking on decision- making processes within the university

<i>Per cent</i>	<i>No Impact</i>	<i>Slight Impact</i>	<i>Moderate Impact</i>	<i>Strong Impact</i>	<i>Very Strong Impact</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Total</i>
Recruitment	15.8	3.5	14	22.8	24.6	19.3	100.0
Internal Promotion	10.2	6.8	11.9	22.0	30.5	18.6	100.0
Internal grants/research funds allocation	14.0	10.5	8.8	22.8	22.8	21.1	100.0
External grants/research funds allocation	9.3	9.3	3.7	29.6	18.5	29.6	100.0
Allocation of teaching loads in employment relations field	29.8	5.3	17.5	14.0	17.5	15.8	100.0
OSP/Sabbatical leave	18.5	14.8	11.1	13.0	18.5	24.1	100.0

per cent reported a 'slight impact' or 'no impact'). In addition, 46 per cent reported strong or very strong impacts on internal grants and funding allocations, 47 per cent on recruitment, and 48 per cent on external grants allocations, all well above the proportions reporting little or no impact.

When we asked respondents about the nature of the criteria that the ERA journal rankings have replaced, some of them put a positive emphasis on the value of this exercise to promote transparency in researchers' performance measure (instead of network nepotism), to avoid a numerical count of publications and to easily measure the impact of the research (Table 2). But limitations are also clearly underlined. The main regret of respondents concerns the domination of the research criteria in decision-making at the expense of the diversity of the service academics are involved with. They especially criticised the fact that 'the ERA ranking has become an end in itself and resulted in additional criteria being applied for promotion, appointments, etc'. The respondents are looking for a more balanced measure of their work within the university. This negative point does not necessarily refer to the weaknesses of the ranking in itself. Indeed, it appears more linked to the way universities are using this ranking.

However, other comments directly concern the limits of the ranking process of ERA. Respondents explained, first, that this ranking does not always reveal the quality of publications and in its use focused decision-makers to ignore other types of research contribution. The 'wide range of research contribution is now replaced by a very restrictive assessment of the research quality' explained one respondent.

The second issue quoted by respondents, and probably the most important one, is related to the impact on the promotion of the field with major application issues for institutions, industry and the community in general. Employment relations researchers defend the

value of this area especially for 'institutional progress and public policy'.

The results show that the ERA journal rankings are focused on criteria that are restrictive and relatively unfavourable for the employment relations area (for example, underplaying the value of qualitative research, or importance of national context). Moreover the impact of the ERA on the employment relations field in general clearly indicated the potential of the

Table 2: Impact of the ERA journal rankings in displacing other criteria in the decision- making process within the university: Open-ended questions

<i>Nature of the comment</i>	<i>Label of the comment</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>
POSITIVE	Replacement of numerical measure of publication	2
	Replacement of network nepotism / More transparency	2
	Easier measure of impact (e.g. citations)	1
NEGATIVE	Quality of the service and experience in general	2
	More attention to category one grants and A journals compared to other type of research contributions (other paper, book-chapter, conferences...). Not a complete measure of the quality of publications	5
	Teaching and leadership criteria => Exclusive focus on research and not well balanced measure of performance	12
	Importance of research for community/industry (applied research)	9

exercise to diminish its status; a field that, in its application of research to industry and public policy, has high social impacts with strong positive consequences for institutions.

In the rest of this paper, we consider the impact that the ranking system has had at the individual level, as perceived by the membership of AIRAANZ at large.

Table 3: Impact of focusing on employment relations for achieving A* or A publications (%)

Advantaged	3.2
Disadvantaged	35.5
Neither advantaged or disadvantaged	40.9
Don't know	20.4
Total	100.0

Table 4: Expected impact of the ERA journal ranking exercise on respondents' work areas (%)

	<i>Strongly negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Evenly balanced</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Strongly positive</i>	<i>No impact</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Total</i>
Promotion of the employment relations field	12.9	48.4	8.1	4.8	3.2	9.7	12.9	100.0
Attractiveness of employment relations for students	7.1	30.4	12.5	3.6	3.6	12.5	30.4	100.0
Ranking of your department	8.2	32.8	13.1	19.7	3.3	6.6	16.4	100.0
Attractiveness of your organisation	6.8	28.8	10.2	15.3	3.4	10.2	25.4	100.0

Table 5: Relationship between expected impact of ERA journal rankings on employment relations field and whether rankings advantage or disadvantaged respondents in achieving A* or A publications (%)

	<i>Non-negative impact on employment relations field</i>			<i>Negative impact on employment relations field</i>
	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Balanced or no impact</i>	<i>Total non-negative</i>	
Advantaged in achieving A* or A publications	13	0	5	3
Disadvantaged in achieving A* or A publications	0	18	11	63
Neither/ don't know	88	82	84	34
Total	100	100	100	100
N	8	11	19	38

Perceived impact on industrial and employment relations as a field

We asked respondents whether, by focusing and working in employment relations, this had advantaged or disadvantaged them in achieving A* or A ('top tier') publications. Some 36 per cent of respondents said that, by focusing on employment relations, they had been disadvantaged in obtaining top tier publications; only 3 per cent said working in employment relations was an advantage in this respect (Table 3).

We also asked respondents to indicate the extent to which the ERA journal rankings could have a negative or positive impact on promotion of the employment relations field, its attractiveness to students, and the ranking and attractiveness of their department and

organisation. A very large majority of respondents (61 per cent) indicated that the impact of ERA journal rankings on the employment relations field would be negative (Table 4). This in turn flowed through to the attractiveness of employment relations for students: 37 per cent saw a negative impact there, compared to 7 per cent seeing a positive impact.

The negative impact of ERA journal rankings on the employment relations field was clearly related to the disadvantage respondents felt in achieving top tier publications. Amongst those who saw a negative impact on the employment relations field, some 63 per cent believed they were disadvantaged in achieving A* or A publications, whilst none felt advantaged. By contrast, amongst those who saw a balanced or no impact on the field, only 18 per cent felt disadvantaged in achieving A* or A publications, and amongst the small number who saw a positive impact on the field, none felt disadvantaged in achieving A* or A publication and 13 per cent felt advantaged (Table 5).

Many respondents consider that too few relevant journals have been ranked A, and especially A*, in the

Table 6: Impact of the ERA journal ranking exercise on respondents' publication strategy

	<i>Change in journals to submit to (%)</i>	<i>Submission in journal based overseas (%)</i>	<i>Submission to more generalist management, HRM or other journals (%)</i>	<i>Change of the field of research (%)</i>
YES	80.6	71.7	47.4	12.3
NO	19.4	28.3	52.6	87.7

field of employment relations in Australia - there were 21 spontaneous quotes about this issue.

The vast majority of respondents (81 per cent) indicated that they would change the journals to which they submitted articles (Table 6). By implication, those 81 per cent will reduce their submissions to C journals (including Australian C journals). Indeed, because of the ERA journal rankings, most respondents (72 per cent) declared that they will increase their submissions to journals based overseas at the expense of Australian journals. Almost half plan to increase their relative use of more generalist management of human resource management journals, which in turn implies a change in the focus of their research, as such journals tend to have less of an interest in policy issues.

However, even if they are able to refocus their publication strategy towards more generalist management and non-Australian outlets, another issue appears. As explained by the following respondent:

To a large extent research in industrial/employment relations is more context-dependent than research in the other disciplines or fields of study... In the Australian context, the recent focus of much industrial/employment relations research has been connected with the Australian laws, policy, and developments. Consequently, Australian research is tied to the Australian context, and thus generally of diminished relevance to non-Australian journals. As a result, this deters both publication of Australian focused research in more highly ranked journals. For example, no Australian journal is ranked 'A*' in the Business and Management (1503) rankings, and only two Australian journals are ranked in the 'A' category.

The qualitative methods often used in employment relations research also create significant issues for Australian researchers wishing to publish in highly ranked journals, with the A* and A journals often preferring quantitative research.

Impact on publishing and careers

We asked respondents about various impacts of the journal ranking exercise. For individual researchers, the highest negative rating directly concerned their careers and promotion prospects. Some respondents spontaneously declared that the journal rankings could create issues during the recruitment process or for the attributions of grants/ research funds. One respondent explained that

So few employment relations journals are A*, the quality of many of our As are well above other disciplines' A*, applying for ARC grants under Business & Management makes it very difficult to access Discovery funding. This is despite the massive 'impact' and resonance of our work with 'end users' (including business, employees and regulators).

Respondents were asked to assess the impact of the ERA Journal ranking exercise on their own careers, with a large percentage, 48 per cent, evaluating it negatively. Only 17 per cent of the respondents gave a positive assessment (Table 7). As the ERA journal ranking has been developed to assess the quality of journals in order to maintain a high research quality, it is noteworthy that for academics involved in employment relations this ranking was perceived as having a strongly negative impact.

Table 7: Perceived impact of the ERA journal ranking exercise for the respondents' career in general (%)

Strongly negative	7.8
Negative	40.6
Evenly balanced between positive and negative	15.6
Positive	9.4
Strongly positive	7.8
Don't know	18.8
Total	100.0

In particular the difficulties encountered during the publication process for Australian researchers may have significant consequences for their career progression. Table 8 shows that 28 per cent feel that, overall, their being in employment relations has disadvantaged them in reaching their career levels and positions, whereas only six per cent see themselves as advantaged. The lower percentages here, compared to Table 7, probably reflect the fact that the ERA journal rank-

Table 8: Impact of focusing on employment relations in reaching career levels and positions (%)

Advantaged	5.5
Disadvantaged	27.5
Neither advantaged or disadvantaged	52.7
Don't know	14.3
Total	100.0

ings are only one of several influences on the impact that being in employment relations has had on their career progression to date. Its impact, however, can be expected to increase in future.

The career impact of the ERA system as indicated in Table 8 was strongly related to the impact that ERA had in downgrading the rating of employment relations journals, in particular the resultant difficulty in obtaining publication in A* or A journals. Amongst those who saw their opportunities to publish in A* or A journals hampered by the ERA journal rankings, as many as 77 per cent believed the impact of ERA on their career would be negative (Table 9). By contrast, amongst those who believed the ERA had not disadvantaged them in achieving A* or A publications, perceived career impacts were quite evenly split between

those who saw a negative career impact (27 per cent) and a positive career impact (33 per cent) with 40 per cent not identifying a career impact (either evenly balanced or 'don't know').

Underlying this problem is the downgrading of the employment relations field through the ERA process. The factor driving the negative career impact of ERA on employment relations academics is the impact that ERA has on the field. Amongst those respondents who saw ERA journal rankings having a negative impact on the employment relations field, some 71 per cent felt that ERA would have a negative career impact. Amongst the small sub-group who saw that ERA journal rankings would benefit the employment relations field, four fifths expected a positive career impact for them (Table 10). In other words, those who saw a negative impact of journal rankings on the employment relations field were three times as likely as anyone else to see a negative impact on their career, and only one eighth as likely to see a positive impact on their career. But because most employment relations academics felt that the impact of ERA journal rankings on the employment relations field would be negative, the largest number also believed that the impact on their career would be negative.

Table 9: Relationship between career impact of journal rankings system and whether respondent disadvantaged in obtaining top tier journal publications through being focused on employment relations (%)

	Non-disadvantaged in achieving A* or A publications			Disadvantaged in achieving A* or A publications
	Advantaged in achieving A* or A publications	Neither advantaged nor disadvantaged	Total Non-disadvantaged	
Negative career impact	0	29	27	77
Evenly balanced or don't know	50	39	40	23
Positive career impact	50	32	33	0
Total	100	100	100	100
N	2	28	30	26

Table 10: Relationship between expected impact of rankings on employment relations field and career impact (%)

	Non-negative impact on employment relations field			Negative impact on employment relations field
	Positive	Balanced or no impact	Total Non-negative impact	
Negative career impact	0	27	19	71
Evenly balanced or don't know	20	55	44	24
Positive career impact	80	18	38	5
Total	100	100	100	100
N	5	11	16	38

Table 12: Expected impact of the ERA journal ranking on respondents' work areas (%)

	<i>Strongly negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Evenly balanced</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Strongly positive</i>	<i>No impact</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Achieving an Internal/External promotion	6.5	37.1	8.1	19.4	6.5	14.5	8.7
Obtaining a position in another university	8.1	35.5	11.3	16.1	8.1	6.5	14.5
Internal evaluation at work	11.5	34.4	16.4	19.7	4.9	8.2	4.9
Wage and compensation allocation	4.9	19.7	11.5	4.9	4.9	34.4	19.7
Teaching load	8.3	16.7	21.7	6.7	5.0	33.3	8.3
Internal grants/research funds allocation	5.1	30.5	15.3	11.9	10.2	15.3	11.9
External grants/research funds allocation	9.8	34.4	16.4	9.8	6.6	9.8	13.1
OSP/Sabbatical leave	5.0	13.3	21.7	6.7	5.0	25.0	23.3

In spite of the challenges now facing the employment relations field, many researchers involved in this area remained faithful to it. They defended and advocated the value added that their work could have in public debate and in management in general, and most would like if possible to stay within their current field of research (last column, Table 6). One respondent clearly expressed the value of his research area and the risks of the ERA journal ranking by explaining that 'I am a successful researcher who mentors many. The ERA is very negative for future researchers. It focuses on narrow instrumental goals, rather than doing good research, on important issues'.

The recognition and importance of this domain, however, remains problematic in the university sector. Some respondents declared that employment relations is not well valued compared to other fields of research. Some respondents talked about a less 'fashionable' field compared to research that advances the interests of the employers. One respondent explained that

Competing against accountants and marketing bodies, it is a different playing field. We do rigorous research; there are different measures for other business disciplines. Even when I have managed to get into an A* journal, I have been told that it is 'just' an IR journal, and doesn't rank against Organization Science, Organization Studies, Management journals ranked at the same ERA level. Very demoralising and bad for career!

These impacts seem stronger for people with long university tenure (more than 10 years). They especially regret the strong impact of the ERA journal ranking which sometimes replaces traditional 'quality' criteria and explained the negative consequences that this process could have in attracting new students (especially graduate and post-graduate students) in this

area. The employment relations field illustrates the problems with being engaged in policy and politics, thereby appearing to some external reviewers as a 'less serious field of research despite... the rigor of papers' developed in it. One respondent explained that

I held senior positions in 2 universities in the past decade. I chose to shift my career overseas, because I found the ERA mindset and processes narrowing and ultimately destructive of scholarship and engaged research. That said, once overseas my career was not damaged by the negative judgment overseas universities have of ERA and its impact on scholarship.

Another described how he was 'originally advantaged because of a consistent publication track record but now disadvantaged because the Department only recognises A* publications as significant'. Some researchers have decided to adapt their research strategy to the ERA journal ranking by focusing on multi-disciplinary research or by developing creative ways of combining different fields of research (especially for young researchers who integrate this at the very beginning of their career).

The 'non-recognised value' of the employment relations field is perceived by many other academics who are afraid of the potential risk of disappearance of a highly complex but ambitious and influential field of research.

Impact on other aspects of academic work

We also investigated the particular areas of work in which the impact was most likely felt. These results (Table 12) demonstrate that the impact of the ERA journal ranking is expected as mainly negative in

'internal evaluation at work' (46 per cent of respondents expected a negative impact here, nearly double those expecting a positive impact), 'external grants/research funds allocation' (44 per cent), 'achieving an internal/external promotion' (44 per cent), 'obtaining a position in another university' (44 per cent) and 'internal grants/research funds allocation' (36 per cent). While positive effects were expected by respondents for 'promotion' (26 per cent) or 'internal evaluation' (25 per cent), in both cases the negatives clearly outweighed the positives.

Conclusions

The fetishism with journal rankings, exemplified in the ERA journal rankings process, will have adverse impacts on Australian research and on the careers of Australian research in this field of social inquiry. There appear to be strong consequences in terms of 'funds allocation', 'evaluation and promotion' as well as for 'recruitment'.

The negative outcomes identified by respondents are mainly related to the difficulties of reaching A* or A journals in employment relations, considering the small number of high ranked journals devoted to this subject that are based in Australia, and the compounding of difficulties arising from the downgrading of highly rated international journals (and some Australian and New Zealand journals) in the final ERA journal rankings. Moreover, the opportunities of publishing in international publications appear limited due to the characteristics of the employment relations research which frequently has a qualitative approach and a focus on the Australian context. Overseas (especially American) journals are often heavily quantitative, more so in the 'management' fields that universities are often trying to push employment relations researchers into, not least because of the now low representation of employment relations journals in the top ranks. Moreover these international journals tend to remain stubbornly nationally oriented, reinforcing the hegemony of knowledge from the West or, in particular, the USA (Nkoma 2009; Meriläinen, Tienari, J., Thomas, R. and Davies, A. 2008; Jack, Caláa, Nkono and Peltonen 2008). This is especially problematic in the social sciences as the USA is itself often portrayed, controversially, as 'exceptionalist' in industrial relations and several other areas of social policy (de Tocqueville 1945; Voss 1993). As Kaufman (2004, p.5) points out, 'in reality every country's industrial relations system is exceptional in

the sense of having numerous unique practices and institutions', but it is that combination of common threads and cross-national differences that makes it so important to retain a capacity for context-specific social research.

The data critically indicate that the respondents will switch from Australian journals to publication in overseas journals. This is likely to substantially disadvantage B ranked Australian journals and be highly threatening to C-ranked Australian journals. Indeed, if academics follow the incentive structures put in place by their universities (as the data indicate they are doing), then it is difficult to see some of these journals surviving, as they can be expected to suffer from an intensifying drought of submissions. We have already heard first hand from editors of Australian journals ranked B and C that have experienced a substantial fall, or even a drying up, of submissions (while submissions to A ranked have increased). This anecdotal evidence of the impact on journals supports the conclusions we draw from our survey data.

A corollary of the possible closure of these Australian-based outlets is the disappearance of much Australian-based policy-relevant research into employment and industrial relations and, we would expect, other areas of social inquiry. Overall, approximately half of all journals are ranked C and this gives an indication of the possible magnitude of the drop in Australian-based research. Overseas-based, B or A journals are frequently not interested in Australian research, especially that which is very specific to the sometimes unique circumstances of Australia. Yet it is often the unique aspects of Australian policy and practice, which cannot be understood from overseas studies, that Australian policy makers (and practitioners) are interested in. It is doubtful, then, that this was the intended outcome.

If this field is also sometimes criticised because of 'politically oriented' engagement, the respondents remind us of the importance of studies in this area especially for public policy and the progress of Australian institutions. They regret the negative consequences that the ERA journal ranking could have for the future of the employment relations attractiveness and evolution. It also seems important to underline the fact that the respondents regret the way that university decision-makers are using the ERA journal rankings. Indeed, they blame the universities for not considering the balance between the various tasks that comprise their function and underline, especially, the lack of recognition of teaching, programs, administration

and professional development tasks. Academics would not necessarily move away from publishing in lower ranked Australian journals if universities were not using the rankings to affect careers to such an extent.

Overall, we can conclude that the ERA journal ranking system is strongly and negatively affecting the employment relations field and could lead to the diminution of the number of Australian journals and researchers, and the amount of Australian research, in this field. Such consequences would likely be harmful for social progress in Australia. As Kaufman (2004, p. 631) argues,

industrial relations must have a future because real life capitalism cannot survive without it. This lesson had to be learned the hard way in the first age of globalisation a century ago; it is hoped that it will not have to be re-learned the same way during the second age of globalisation we are passing through now.

Our study showed that a field of research with policy applications that have specific relevance to Australia is significantly affected by the ERA journal ranking process. What happens in employment relations can be expected to happen in a number of fields of Australian social inquiry.

Suzanne Young, is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Management, La Trobe University, Australia.

David Peetz is a professor in the Department of Employment Relations, Griffith University, Australia.

Magalie Marais is a PhD student from IAE Aix-en-Provence, France.

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