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Starry-eyed: journal rankings and the future of logistics research

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Abstract

Purpose – This is a polemical paper challenging both the principle and practice of journal ranking. In recent years academics and their institutions have become obsessive about the star-ratings of the journals in which they publish. In the UK this is partly attributed to quinquennial reviews of university research performance though preoccupation with journal ratings has become an international phenomenon. The purpose of this paper is to examine the arguments for and against these ratings and argue that, on balance, they are having a damaging effect on the development of logistics as an academic discipline.

Design/methodology/approach – The arguments advanced in the paper are partly substantiated by references to the literature on the ranking of journals and development of scientific research. A comparison is made of the rating of logistics publications in different journal ranking systems. The views expressed in the paper are also based on informal discussions with numerous academics in logistics and other fields, and long experience as a researcher, reviewer and journal editor.

Findings – The ranking of journals gives university management a convenient method of assessing research performance across disciplines, though has several disadvantages. Among other things, it can skew the choice of research methodology, lengthen publication lead times, cause academics to be disloyal to the specialist journals in their field, favour theory over practical relevance and unfairly discriminate against relatively young disciplines such as logistics. Research evidence suggests that journal ratings are not a good proxy for the value and impact of an article. The paper aims to stimulate a debate on the pros and cons of journal rankings and encourage logistics academics to reflect on the impact of these rankings on their personal research plans and the wider development of the field.

Research limitations/implications – The review of journal ranking systems is confined to three countries, the UK, Germany and Australia. The analysis of journal ranking was also limited to 11 publications with the word logistics or supply chain management. The results of this review and analysis, however, provide sufficient evidence to support the main arguments advanced in the paper.

Practical implications – The paper asserts that the journal ranking system is encouraging a retreat into ivory towers where academics become more interested in impressing each other with their intellectual brilliance than in doing research that is of real value to the outside world.

Originality/value – Many logistics academics are concerned about the situation and trends outlined in this paper, but find it very difficult to challenge the prevailing journal ranking orthodoxy. This paper may give them greater confidence to question the value of the journal ranking systems that are increasing dominating academic life.

Keywords Journal rankings, Research assessment, Logistics research, Supply chain management research, Transportation research, United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, Journals, Supply chain management

Paper type Viewpoint



1. Introduction

It has long been accepted in the academic world that some journals are better than others. Their stronger reputation can be attributed to several factors. They may simply

be older and hence contain some of the classic papers published in the early years of a new discipline when those who went on to become the “big names” in the field were doing the pioneering work. Their longevity will be reflected in the frequency with which their papers are cited. The better journals may have a tradition of being more rigorously refereed. Because of their reputation they are also likely to attract a healthier flow of papers, allowing editors to be more discriminating in selecting papers for each issue. So in journal publishing, like so many other spheres of life, a good reputation can become self-perpetuating.

Over the years more formal systems have been devised for measuring the relative standing of business-related academic journals. Individual universities started to rank these journals to give their staff guidance on the best places to publish to maximise the impact of their research. Associations of universities and business schools and even newspapers then began to publish rankings, compiled in various ways. The latest edition of the *Journal Quality List* compiled by Harzing (2012) pools ranking data from 23 rating schemes. Mingers and Willmott (2010, p. 9) claim that there is a “surfeit” of journal ratings and that this causes a “vertigo of uncertainty about which list, or combination of lists” to adopt. In the UK, interest in the ranking of journals has been strengthened by the government-commissioned reviews of university research performance conducted every five to six years, initially called the research assessment exercise (RAE) and now renamed the research excellence framework (REF). More and more countries are now assessing university research outputs comprehensively and systematically, making journal rankings a preoccupation of academics in many parts of the world.

This preoccupation is manifest in several ways. Academics concentrate their efforts on publishing in the select group of more-highly ranked journals and neglect lower rated publications. Their institutions often encourage this behaviour by specifying journal rankings in promotional criteria, linking them to the distribution of teaching loads, offering financial bonuses for publications in the top journals and even restricting the outlets through which staff are allowed to publish. Some faculty and research students have begun to confine their literature reviews to journals in the upper echelons of the rankings. It is also changing the academic mindset. Faculty are increasingly seeing journal publication more as a form a academic point-scoring than as a means of disseminating research results. The journal ranking is increasingly being regarded as a proxy for the quality of the research, the inference being that research reported in lower ranked journals is of inferior quality. As Nkomo (2009, p. 16) observes, “we have all in some way or another fallen under the seductive power of academic journal rankings even as we harbour serious reservations about their value”. Mingers and Willmott (2010, p. 6) go further and diagnose a condition they call “list fetishism” which is “exhibited whenever the standing of the journal. . . in which an article is published assumes an importance greater than its specific contents”.

This poses a major dilemma for logistics researchers because most of the main journals with the word logistics in their titles, the mainstream publications in this field, are assigned relatively low rankings in the various league tables. This paper examines the nature of this dilemma. Its main aim is to stimulate a debate on the pros and cons of journal rankings and encourage logistics academics to reflect on the impact of these rankings on their personal research plans and the wider development of the field.

2. Ranking of logistics and supply chain journals

Table I shows the most recent ratings of logistics and supply chain journals in the main listings used for business-related publications in the UK, Germany and Australia. The UK list is compiled by the Association of Business Schools (ABS) (2010) and adopts a so-called star-rating (hence the title of this paper). The ABS listing “has currency and is used extensively in many countries across the world” (ABS, 2010, p. 4) In Germany the Association of University Professors of Business (VHB) published rankings of business-related journals (called Jourqual) in 2003, 2008 and 2011 (VHB, 2012) while the business newspaper Handelsblatt bases its tri-ennial rating of the publication outputs of individual business academics and institutions on a separate journal ranking (Handelsblatt/BWL, 2012). In the case of Australia, the table of journal rankings constructed by the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) (2012) has been used.

Table I lists the main journals with the terms “logistics” or “supply chain management” in the title. A blank cell indicates the absence of a rating. Some rating systems, such as Jourqual, list journals but do not assign them a score. Table II shows the proportions of all business-related journals falling into the various rating categories in each of the four schemes.

None of the logistics and supply chain journals in Table I, which one might regard (with the exception of *Naval Research Logistics*) as the core literature in this field, obtain a top rating in any of the rankings. In the ABS list, five of the eight journals assigned a score are in the lower 60 per cent of the distribution. The German Jourqual system places five of the nine that it evaluates in the B category, which ranges from 12 to 43 per cent in the distribution. This still leaves important logistics/supply chain journals like the

	ABS star rating (UK) 2010	Jourqual (Germany) 2011	Handelsblatt (Germany) 2012	ABDC (Australia) 2010	RUI score
<i>International Journal of Logistics Management</i>	2	D	0.1	B	29
<i>International Journal of Logistics: Research and Applications</i>	2	C	0.2	B	12
<i>International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management</i>	2	B	0.5	C	33
<i>International Journal of Shipping and Transport Logistics</i>					
<i>Journal of Business Logistics</i>	2	B	0.5	B	42
<i>Journal of Supply Chain Management</i>	1	B	0.5	B	7
<i>Logistics Research</i>		C	0.2		
<i>Mari Time Economics and Logistics</i>			0.2	B	
<i>Naval Research Logistics</i>	3	B	0.4	B	
<i>Supply Chain Management: An International Journal</i>	3	C	0.5	A	12
<i>Transportation Research E: Logistics and Transportation Review</i>	3	B	0.5	A	14

Table I. Ranking of logistics and supply chain journals in the UK, Germany and Australia

Notes: Ranges (best to worst): ABS (4*star – 1 star), Jourqual (A *-E), Handelsblatt/BWL (1-0), ABDC (A*-C); RUI: research useful index – based on “quality of articles, impact on discipline and value to your research”

International Journal of Logistics Management (IJLM), the *International Journal of Research: Research and Applications (IJLRA)* and *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal (SCMIJ)* languishing in the C or D brackets. The German Handelsblatt/BWL scheme includes five of the logistics/SCM journals in the upper quartile, though also relegates *IJLRA* and *IJLM* to, respectively, the third and fourth quartiles. Two of the journals secure A ratings in the Australian ABDC list but the rest are in the second quartile, except for the *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management (IJPDLM)*, the oldest journal in the field, which is in the bottom 50 per cent. Overall, the rating of logistics/supply chain journals in these ranks can be described as mediocre.

It is worth noting that the same journal can get a markedly different rating in different schemes. For example, *SCMIJ* which merits three stars in the ABS list and an A rating in Australia is only considered to be worth a C grade in the German Jourqual scheme. In contrast, the US *Journal of Supply Chain Management (JSCM)* which is accorded a B rating in Germany gets only a one star from ABS.

It is also interesting to compare the relative standing of the logistics/supply chain journals in the published listings with the results of a survey of 143 academics around the world specialising in this field. The team conducting this survey, Menachof *et al.* (2009), invited these academics to rate a list of 82 journals related to the field plus any others that they wanted to add. They used a five-point Likert scale to rate these journals against three criteria: "quality of the articles", "impact on the discipline" and "value to your research". The three scores were combined in a composite research usefulness index (RUI). This was done by multiplying the proportion of respondents identifying the journal by the average Likert score for the three criteria. Table I contains a column of RUI values for most of the main logistics/supply chain journals. Comparing these values with the various journal ratings reveals only a weak correlation. This suggests that there is significant mismatch between the ordering of the journals in the published lists and the perceptions of the main academic users of these publications. The purpose of the Menachof *et al.* survey was to discover what logistics researchers consider to be the most important journals in their field. It did not attempt to measure the relative standing of these publications relative to those of other business disciplines. It shows, however, that empirical surveys of academic opinion can produce quite different rankings from "official" rating schemes which are based on a mixture of quantitative measures (mainly citation-based impact factors) and the subjective judgement of small panels of experts.

ABS	%	Jourqual	%	Handelsblatt	%	ABDC	%
4*	3	A*	3	1	2	A*	5
4	9	A	9	0.7	7	A	19
3	28	B	31	0.5	12	B	28
2	36	C	46	0.4	13	C	47
1	25	D	10	0.3	17		
		E	2	0.2	23		
				0.1	26		

Table II.
Percentage of all journals
in the various rating
categories

3. Advantages and disadvantages of journal ranking

The main advantage of journal ranking is that it gives university management a quantitative metric for judging the quality of research produced by its staff and applicants for new posts. As Chapman and Ellinger (2009, p. 197) observe, “administrators find it so simple to use a numerical value for a journal’s impact as a proxy for the impact of the individual research papers published therein”. This value is then “used to assist in the assessment of faculty research performance for annual review, merit pay increases and promotion and/or tenure decisions” (Menachof *et al.*, 2009, p. 145). If ranking is consistent across disciplines, it should offer a standard means of assessing the research outputs of individuals, departments and schools. As discussed later, this is a big “if”. Another administrative use of the rankings is to give librarians guidance on the selection of journal subscriptions so that they can concentrate resources on what are deemed to be the best publications (ABS, 2010). As Shugan (2003, p. 438) notes, however, “libraries that face scarce resources might discontinue journals with low rankings”. Such a cost-cutting strategy can impact disproportionately on a subject area, like logistics, with a preponderance of lower rated journals.

It has been argued that the ranking of journals raises the standard of research and publication. As competition for slots in top-tier journals is more intense, authors have to produce higher quality work to publish there and this raises the benchmark of academic excellence. The explosion of information and proliferation of journals has also made it more difficult for researchers to keep abreast of all the published work in the field. Journal rankings, so this argument goes, tell them, particularly new entrants to the field, where to concentrate their attention when reviewing the literature. Publishers also have a strong vested interest in journal rankings as it gives them a strangle-hold over not only the dissemination of academic research but also the higher educational rewards system. This may be beneficial to the large, hugely-profitable publishing houses and their shareholders, but is not necessarily in the best interests of academics, universities and research funding organisations (Naughton, 2012).

Against these putative advantages can be set a series of disadvantages. Some of these disadvantages relate to the principle of journal ranking, others to its practical implementation. One intrinsic weakness was mentioned earlier. This is the use of the journal rating as a surrogate measure of research quality. It removes the need for those managing academic institutions and related bodies to read the papers and assess their individual merits. My personal experience as an academic researcher over the past 30 years suggests that the correlation between the quality of a paper and the reputation/ranking of the journal is far from perfect. I often find dull, unoriginal and/or irrelevant papers in supposedly good journals and insightful and well-researched papers in journals well down the ranking list. Bennis and O’Toole (2005, p. 99) also acknowledge that, “Some of what is published in A-list journals is excellent, imaginative and valuable. But much is not”. This is hardly surprising as the quality control system for all journals is very fallible. I edited two logistics journals over a period of eight years and witnessed the peer-review process from the inside. It is most certainly not the “gold standard” it is often considered to be. The numerous deficiencies of the journal refereeing system are thoroughly documented elsewhere (Rowland, 2002). I merely raise the subject here to make the point that the whole journal ranking edifice is built on rather shaky foundations.

The peer-review system is too capricious to allow one to assume that highly ranked journals have a monopoly of research excellence and lower-tier journals only publish poorer papers. Longitudinal research by Singh *et al.* (2007) on the longer term effects of articles published in top management journals (as measured by the Social Science Citation Index) casts serious doubt on the use of the journal rating as a proxy for impact. An elaborate statistical analysis by Starbuck (2005) which compares the value of articles published in more and less “prestigious” journals in psychology, sociology and administrative science came to a similar conclusion. He concludes that:

Higher prestigious journals publish quite a few low-value articles, low-prestige journals publish some excellent articles [...] Evaluating articles based primarily on which journals publish them is more likely than not to yield incorrect assessments of articles’ values.

He goes on to say that, “extreme emphasis on publication in top-tier journals has a significant probability of introducing randomness because the confidence intervals associated with such publications are very wide” (p. 196).

Another fundamental problem with journal ranking is that it tends to lengthen publication lead-times. As the pressure on academics to publish in the most highly rated journals mounts, these journals become inundated with submissions. Given constraints on the frequency of publication and journal length, this concentration of research through a small number of outlets inevitably extends the “pipeline” and delays the research dissemination process.

If a system of journal ranking could be devised which was fair and consistent within and between disciplines and across research approaches and paradigms, its advantages might outweigh these inherent disadvantages. This appears not to be the case, however. In my opinion, the current ranking systems for business-related publications are biased in several respects. First, theory is favoured over practice. Journals containing conceptual papers, often written in abstruse, inaccessible language, tend to get higher ratings than those reporting empirical results that may be of greater practical relevance to the business world. Second, within specific fields, journals with greater mathematical content tend to command higher ratings. For example, *Transportation Science* which is by far the most mathematical of the transport journals is also the most highly ranked. van Wassenhove (2009, p. 341) reckons that this bias extends to “papers with highly powered methodology” which in his view “have a high probability of being published, irrespective of how futile the problem is they are dealing with”. Third, long-established disciplines are better represented at the upper levels of the journal rankings than relatively new fields of study. As mentioned at the start, this is partly because journals in more mature fields have had more time to establish a reputation. As discussed later, it can take a long time for journals in emerging fields to be included in citation databases and be assigned impact factors. It may also be because these fields are poorly represented on the academic panels which supervise the journal ranking process. The senior academics in more established fields, whose own reputations are largely based on publications in highly rated journals, then have a vested interest in maintaining the position of their journals, not just for personal reasons but to preserve the status of their discipline, their departments and their universities. The rating of journals after all is a key element in the power structure of the academic world, determining the distribution of resources and prestige.

Logistics, supply chain management and transport are not represented on the influential ABS judging panel. These subjects are subsumed within the area of interest of one panel member whose specialisms are defined as “Operations, Technology and Management Science” (ABS, 2010). On the other hand, “Tourism and Hospitality Management” has its own representative on the panel, something that may not be entirely unrelated to this field having two journals in the highest ABS category. It is important to emphasise that journal ratings are strongly influenced by the subjective judgement of relatively small numbers of expert advisers. While some reference is made to more objective measures like citation impact factors they are supplemented by a substantial amount of expert judgment. For example, the derivation of the ABS ratings relies heavily on “(a) evidence relating to the academic standards prevailing at the journal and (b) the originality and quality of the research articles typically published in the journal” (ABS, 2010). Neither the nature and source of this “evidence” nor the method of evaluating “originality and quality” are actually specified. It is acknowledged, however, that:

[...] in making these qualitative judgements, editors and advisory panel members, in addition to their first-hand knowledge as subject experts, consulted a specially-constructed data set, enabling them to compensate for biases relating to the types of article published within particular journals (p. 7).

This may sound scientific, but we are not told what the “data set” contains and there is no escaping the fact that personal opinions of senior academics lie at the root of the evaluation process. With mainstream logistics, supply chain and transport specialists excluded from this process, there is a lack of expert judgement on the calibre of the journals in these fields and no-one to defend them against the disciplinary prejudices that sadly afflict the academic world.

The various biases present in the journal rating schemes work against the interests of many of those researching in the fields of logistics, supply chain management and transport. Much of their research is inherently practical and industry-facing, has limited mathematical content and belongs to a discipline that is relatively young in academic terms. As logistics is not well represented on the panels that preside over journal rankings there is no-one to make the case for its stronger journals. Recent efforts of the logistics professoriate in the UK to get the ABS panel to revise upwards the rating of the main logistics journals have proved singularly unsuccessful. Their latest submission to the panel in October 2011 argued that when journal:

[...] rankings fail to reflect the true quality of a discipline’s journals, as in the case of logistics/SCM, there is a danger that its academic status will be under-valued and its development impaired.

The professorial letter contained a wealth of data on impact factors, citations, prestige of source (SJR) scores and the results of the Menachof *et al.* (2009) journal survey mentioned earlier, all challenging the current rankings and showing that logistics-related journals are under-valued. But to no avail. The panel is refusing to reconsider the status of logistics journals until 2014 at the earliest.

4. Consequences for logistics research

So what does all this mean for the development of logistics as an academic discipline? I believe that it is having three negative consequences.

First, it is often making it difficult for logistics researchers to command the same level of respect in business schools as their colleagues in other fields of management which happen to be blessed with a broader range of highly ranked journals. When the rating of journals becomes the main criterion against which research achievements are judged, academics publishing in the mainstream logistics, supply chain and transport journals are placed at a disadvantage. This can adversely affect their career prospects, their ability to secure research funds and their relationship with academic colleagues.

Second, the natural reaction of logistics academics confronted with this situation is to try to publish in higher rated journals, even though these may not be directed at their target audience and their papers may appear peripheral to the main themes of the journals. There may be some benefit in this publication strategy as it helps to diffuse the results of logistics research more widely and integrate the subject more closely with other cognate business disciplines. On the other hand, if researchers abandon the specialist logistics journals in favour of other more general ones with higher ratings, it will prove even harder to raise their status. Specialist logistics journals need a continuing flow of high-quality papers and high levels of citation to stand any chance of gaining higher rankings.

Third, to gain access to the top-tier journals logistics researchers often need to adopt a particular approach, methodology or paradigm. As discussed earlier, the current ranking system exhibits clear methodological bias in favour of more theoretical and more mathematical papers. For example, the wide gap in the average rankings of operational research (OR) and management science journals, on the one hand, and logistics management and transport journals, on the other, cannot simply be explained by differences in the rigour, originality and sophistication of the research. Only a certain type of logistics research, that places a greater emphasis on OR and mathematical modelling, is likely to be eligible for publication in the top-rated journals. This is likely to skew logistics research away from empirical, survey- and case-study-based approaches towards OR analyses. This shift is already clearly evident in logistics PhD programmes and the research profiles of many of the new faculty recruited to logistics posts.

This is not to deny the value and importance of quantitative and theoretical research in logistics. Instead it is an expression of concern that much of the original methodological diversity and practical relevance of the subject may be lost if its future development is sub-ordinated to the pursuit of publications with high-journal ratings. Over the past four decades logistics research has had a strong industrial focus, it has attracted academics from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and employed a healthy mix of analytical approaches and tools. An obsession with a system of journal ranking which systematically under-values logistics journals is putting all of this at risk. It also promotes the formation of what Mingers and Willmott (2009, p. 13) call “an academic monoculture in which business school faculty are induced to emulate values and forms of scholarship that dominate the most highly rated (largely US) journals”.

5. The possible response

If this diagnosis of the problem is accurate, what should we, as academic logisticians, do about it?

British logistics researchers should gain some reassurance from the unequivocal statement in the REF “Panel Criteria and Working Methods” report that “No sub-panel

will use journal impact factors or any hierarchy of journals in their assessment of outputs” (REF2014, 2012, p. 64). The Government Minister responsible for higher education has gone further declaring that:

Individual universities may have a different perspective on the journals you should have published in when it comes to promotion and recruitment, but the REF process makes no such judgements (Jump, 2011).

His view that university departments should “look beyond publication in a peer-reviewed journal as the be all and end all of academic life” should also resonate with many of those undertaking studies at the more pragmatic end of the logistics research spectrum. The Australian Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research has shown similar disdain for journal rankings and banned their use in the Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative. In May 2011 he stated that:

[...] there is clear and consistent evidence that the rankings were being deployed inappropriately within some quarters of the (higher education) sector, in ways that could produce harmful outcomes, and based on a poor understanding of the actual role of rankings (Rowbotham, 2011).

There is also growing discontent in the academic community over both the principle and practice of journal rankings. For example, a total 291 business academics in the German-speaking world boycotted the *Handelsblatt* ranking in 2012. In an open letter they criticise this ranking on five grounds: that it is one-dimensional in ignoring academic attributes other than journal publications; that it mistakenly assumes a close correlation between the quality of the journal and that of the individual paper; that it does not treat all subject areas consistently; that it skews academic research and recruitment towards the types of research favoured by top-ranked journals and, finally, that this research is not sufficiently relevant to major societal needs (Anon, 2012).

Despite the ministerial pronouncements and groundswell of opposition to journal rankings building up in some parts of the academic world, many university managers are still committed to using them as a measure of the quality of research and calibre of the researcher. It is unlikely therefore that journal ranking schemes are going to be abandoned or ignored in academic evaluations at least at university, school or department levels. Logistics researchers undertaking more practical and empirical research and publishing in the discipline’s core journals will have to continue labouring under a system which undervalues their work. They should not allow this to influence the nature of their research or choice of methodology. Nor should they be disloyal to the main journals in the field just because they are assigned lower ratings. Most of these journals’ performance metrics are heading in the right direction, steadily reinforcing the case for an upward regrading.

One of the main reasons for the poor showing of logistics and supply chain journals in the main rankings is that they have only recently been added to the Web of Science citation database managed by Thomson Reuters. This database is the engine which drives the journal ranking process. While logistics journals were excluded from this database, it was not possible to assign them an “official” impact factor in the *ISI Journal Citation Reports* (Thomson Reuters, 2012). The necessary citation analysis could be conducted independently, as Chapman and Ellinger (2009) demonstrated for a group of ten major logistics/supply chain journals for four years (1996, 1999, 2002 and 2005). “Constructed” impact factors of this type, however, have been largely ignored by

the main journal ranking schemes. Chapman and Ellinger's analysis, nevertheless, showed that the impact factors they calculated for several logistics journals, most notably *JBL*, *JSCM* and *Transportation Research Part E*, compared favourably with the "official" impact factors of journals in the ISI Business, Management and Transportation categories.

In the absence of official impact factors, the rating of logistics and supply chain journals has been largely based on the perceptions of academic panels which, as discussed earlier, seldom contain logistics specialists. Over the past few years, logistics/supply chain journals have been gradually added to the Web of Science citation database: *SCMIJ* in 2005; *JBL*, *IJPDLM*, *IJLRA* and *JSCM* in 2008 and *IJLM* in 2009. It has been a long wait: it has taken an average of 25 years for these six journals to be admitted to this privileged club. All of these journals now have official impact factors, though it will take time for them to be incorporated into the journal ranking schemes, which, in most cases, are only updated every few years. As Ellinger and Chapman (2011, p. 415) argue "the addition of six leading supply chain management/logistics journals to the Web of Science database has great significance for the maturation of the field's literature" allowing them to "compete on a level playing field with other top tier journals". While this is clearly a positive development, a significant amount of expert judgement will continue to go into the ranking process and may continue to tilt the playing field against logistics and supply chain management. Chapman and Ellinger (2009, p. 206) also acknowledge in an earlier paper that the "impact factor has been prone to misuse and abuses". They have also found instances of deficiencies in the main citation database and "fallacious computations of the official journal impact factor".

At the end of the day, we should never lose sight of the fact that a good paper is a good paper regardless of the journal in which it is published. Furthermore, one can only judge a paper's worth when one actually reads it. As Milne (2002, p. 84) points out:

If we are to evaluate the quality of an academics' research, as I think we are destined to by the nature of our work, then I believe we owe ourselves the courtesy of actually reading their work and making up our own minds. And if we cannot be bothered to do this, then we should refrain from making a judgement in the first place.

6. Conclusions

This paper has challenged both the principle and practice of journal ranking. It has examined the arguments for and against the ranking of journals and asserted that, on balance, it is having a damaging effect on the development of logistics as an academic discipline. Although the views expressed in this paper are my own, I know that they reflect the concerns of many academics conducting research on logistics and supply chain management. Many of these academics, particularly those at an earlier stage of their career, would find it difficult to complain about the current journal ranking orthodoxy because it is the system imposed upon them by their institutions and peer group. Criticism of the system can be construed, quite unfairly, as a form of "sour grapes" coming from researchers who are simply not good enough to produce A and A* quality papers. Academics in other fields of business research whose core journals occupy lofty positions in the rankings are often unsympathetic to the arguments advanced in this paper. Is this any surprise as they benefit from the current system and have an obvious interest in maintaining the status quo?

The decision by national research evaluation organisations in the UK and Australia to focus on the quality of individual research outputs and not be swayed by the rating of the journals in which they appear is very heartening, though it will be difficult to enforce. Senior academics engaged in these evaluations will find the temptation of using a journal ranking as a proxy for research quality hard to resist. Mingers and Willmott (2009, p. 9) conclude that, given the magnitude of RAEs such as in the UK, “they would surely have to resort to journal lists simply in order to get the job done”.

The main aim of this paper has been to highlight the detrimental effects of the current journal rating system on the development of logistics research. This, however, is only part of a deeper malaise affecting business research whose various symptoms are discussed elsewhere by authors such as Bennis and O’Toole (2005), Tapp (2006), Schmenner *et al.* (2009) and Brown (2012). It is my contention that the journal ranking system is encouraging a retreat into ivory towers where business academics impress each other with their erudition and give too little thought to the managerial and public policy relevance of their work.

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