

## A case for ranking tourism journals

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### Abstract

This paper argues that the lack of a journal ranking system ultimately works against the best interests of tourism academia. Few tourism journals are included in any ranking system, which in turn, may foster a culture of research mediocrity. The implementation of a fair system will set unambiguous standards and targets for all stakeholders, benefitting the academic community and journal publishers alike.

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The overarching conclusion reached by Jogaratnam, Chon, McCleary, Mena, and Yoo (2004) is that the state of tourism scholarship in high end journals has never been healthier. Over the past 10 years, more than 1400 people world-wide have authored or co-authored 2000 plus papers in the three most respected journals in our field of study. Publishing in tourism is, therefore, truly a democratic activity, where the quality of the work determines success rather than the author's name and/or institutional affiliation. Good papers are published because they are good. Papers are not accepted because they do not meet the rigorous standards of the journals.

These findings alone should dispel the myth that publishing in top journals is somehow the realm of a small number of superstars or insiders. In fact, the 46 leading authors contributed to less than 17% of the total output and, importantly, produced a median of less than 1 paper a year across all three journals. Likewise, staff from the 21 leading institutions are associated with only one-third of the total output, with the leader, Texas A&M having less than a 3% share. The geographic distribution of authors and the lack of concentration

within any one or small group of institutions is a sign of a globally competitive, creative and innovative field of study.

The work also raises much deeper philosophical and practical questions about how tourism output is assessed, whether tourism research is of the same quality as other disciplines and, how to measure equivalency in quality. There is little dispute that the 'Big Three,' journals reviewed are the leaders in the field. But, these are only three of the more than 40 dedicated tourism titles. How do the rest measure up in comparison? Certainly, not all are equal. Some are strong and, indeed, are beginning to challenge the Big Three as very influential players. Others are solid, workman-like journals that consistently publish good work and make a valuable contribution to the development of the field. Others still are variable in the quality of the work published.

That a hierarchy of tourism journals exists is no surprise, for tourism should be no different than any other discipline area or field of study. In any environment where a multitude of publication outlets exist, natural selection will occur and journals will be sorted over time into leaders, niche players, second tier players, followers and hangers-on, based on their reach, difficulty in having papers accepted and impact on the field.

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But tourism is different in one notable area and that difference places us at a distinct disadvantage. Our journals are not ranked formally, unlike virtually every other area. The Thomson ISI scale (Thomson, 2004), housing the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) and others, is the best known quantitative method, although other quantitative and qualitative exist. Thomson assesses more than 8750 journals including at least 20 accounting and finance titles, another 20 marketing, promotion and consumer behavior journals, about 40 in the field of general management and 30 in geography.

Tourism journals, are however, notable by their absence from this or any other independent system. Only three titles are included in the ISI appraisals: *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Tourism Management* and the *Journal of Travel Medicine*, the latter being a medical journal. Perhaps this oversight is understandable, as the field is still young and many new titles are being launched. The reasons matter little. The omission of all but a handful of titles is a critical issue for it works against the best interests of tourism scholarship. Tourism and hospitality research is a vertical specialism, with its own body of 40 tourism journals and another 30 or so hospitality journals. Few people outside the field consult this literature unless conducting tourism research. By the same token, those working within the field cite the literature constantly. Consequently, it is impossible to gain a true indication of the true impact of any tourism journal, let alone the suite of titles available, unless and until a critical mass of titles is assessed.

Importantly, the stakes have gotten much higher in the past few years as universities and government agencies implement across-the-board Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) to measure productivity and allocate funding. RAEs are a mixed blessing, posing both a threat and an opportunity. If implemented poorly, or with incomplete information, they can be used to starve funding. But, if implemented wisely, the RAE can be a tool to stimulate research excellence and reward departments that excel. The experience at my own university demonstrates conclusively the benefits of a fair RAE system. The Hong Kong University Grants Committee instituted a formal RAE in 1996 and has repeated it periodically since. In order to maximize the School's mark, senior management adopted a formal policy of encouraging staff to publish in the select group of threshold journals, wherever possible, and to target top tier journals where appropriate. Annual research output is monitored and taken into consideration in the allocation of total workload. The results, as shown in Jagaratnam et al. (2004), speak for themselves—PolyU is now one of the leading tourism research institutions in the world. No doubt the success is a testament to the quality of staff employed in the School. But the RAE also motivated good staff to strive for excellence by setting the standards they should aspire to reach.

The key operationalization issue in any audit system is to develop a mechanism that is effective (provides valid measures of quality), consistent (applicable across discipline areas), simple (cost effective to implement), understandable (easy to implement with simple guidelines) and fair (compares like with like and is not open to abuse). Assessing output from approved lists of journals ranked from most influential to least influential is the preferred model. Such an approach values refereed journal papers most highly, in recognition of the need to pass some form of peer validation before publication. Journal papers are felt, therefore, to be of a consistently higher standard than conference papers, book chapters and even some books, where no such adjudication is required. Further, because a clear hierarchy of journals exists, the collective body of work published in the best journals should be of a higher standard than that published in second tier journals, which again is of a higher standard than third tier journals, etc. These two principles are sound, even though individual exceptions can always be found.

The exclusion of tourism journals from most ranking systems compels auditing agencies to develop their own ranking. Experience and observation suggest that the criteria used are variable, applied in an ad hoc, subjective and, arguably not particularly representative manner. The 'Big Three' are always included, but their value may be downgraded. One university in Australia, for example, rates one of these journals as a C-grade marketing journal! Other journals are either ignored or included selectively, with ratings applied based on the opinion of a small group of individuals who may not be familiar with the literature. Consequently, lists of 'approved' journals in general and those that earn maximum points, in particular, are short and not representative of breadth and depth of literature in the field. The result is that tourism research often receives a low grade. This omission contributes to the ongoing need to argue that tourism is a legitimate field of study.

Another, perhaps, even more important consequence may be the inadvertent fostering of a culture of research mediocrity in tourism. Ranking systems provide a means for authors to target the most appropriate vehicle for their scholarly output, and to be rewarded accordingly. The absence of such a system or the implementation of a narrow, exclusive system may result in papers being submitted to inappropriately strong or weak journals. Let us be blunt! It is arguably easier to get published in tourism than in most other fields. The massive proliferation of journals over the past 10 years has produced a geometric increase in the appetite for publishable papers. While new specialist titles have strengthened the field and provide important outlets for quality research, a number of people feel that the proliferation of titles has resulted in an overall decline in the quality of paper published.

Are there too many journals? That point is moot. Market forces will determine how many and which ones survive. Are bad papers being published? A personal opinion is no! The most unsuitable papers are rejected during the refereeing process. But, it is common knowledge among those who ask that many journals struggle to attract a sufficient flow of manuscripts. As a result, mediocre or marginal work has a high probability of being published if targeted at the right vehicle. Authors can still be seen to be prolific without learning the art of conducting high quality research or writing high quality papers. Others may become lazy and adopt a ‘near enough is good enough’ approach to their writing, knowing that it will be accepted somewhere. Indeed, it is disturbing to hear good academics confess that since they feel their work is not suitable for the Big 3, they do not want to put in the effort to producing a paper that would be acceptable in any of the next 10 best journals, when they know they can get it published elsewhere as is. Such an attitude fosters a quantity over quality mentality, that serves no one’s long term interests.

The entire tourism academic community has a moral obligation to ensure that its work is targeted at the most appropriate level of journal. Why? Because a field of study is only as strong as its strongest journals. Strongest journals do not just mean just the top three; it means that collective body of five, 10, 20 or how many journals that make a real contribution to the intellectual development of this diverse field. Yet, without a broad consensus of what these journals are and, therefore, where people should target their papers, it is difficult to foster a culture where excellence is recognized. Indeed, the lack of ranking system may, ironically accentuate the gap between the top few journals and the rest,

hurting the next tier of journals more so than the Big Three. If anything, they suffer from a surfeit of submissions, receiving somewhere in the neighborhood of 1200 manuscripts a year. Even with cooperative publishers adding extra pages and/or increasing the number of editions published each year, they can still only publish the best 10–20% of manuscripts. Many of the other 90% are still good papers, but may never see the light of day if academics feel pressured to publish in this select group. Yet, they would be well received by the other good quality journals and, importantly, would make a valuable contribution to the field.

Like it or not, the hierarchical ranking of journals is common practice in almost all discipline areas or fields of study, except tourism. Academics, publishers, universities and funding agencies accept this reality and do not seem to have many philosophical or pragmatic problems working within such a system. Interestingly, a ranking system does not appear to have an effect on the number of journals or volume of research published elsewhere. What it does, though, is simplify the process by establishing guidelines that send clear signals to all stakeholders, producers, users and assessors of information, about the appropriate venues for our work and how it can be assessed. It is time for tourism to join the rest of the academic community.

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