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# Creating a world leading academic journal: taking the responsibility seriously

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## Looking back at another successful year

On behalf of the *Journal of Change Management* (JCM) editorial and advisory boards we would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who is contributing to the exciting journey towards becoming a world leading academic journal. Especially, we would like to thank all our submitting authors, our guest editors, reviewers, readers and ambassadors – being colleagues referring to work published in JCM or librarians subscribing to the title. We would also like to thank everyone at Routledge who are supporting us with world-class services and production. THANK YOU!

In the year gone by JCM was represented at several conferences. At EGOS, in sunny Helsinki, we ran an editorial board meeting and played an active role in the overwhelmingly overcrowded ‘Meet the Editors’ session together with colleagues representing the world leading journals Organization Studies, Organization Science and Organization. At AOM, in always welcoming Boston, we ran another editorial board meeting as well as contributing to the Organization Development & Change (ODC) Doctoral Student Consortium and a Professional Development Workshop (PDW) focusing on change resistance. Supported by our colleagues at Routledge we also hosted a wine reception for the ODC PDW participants.

Looking back on 2012 we can be proud about our success of working towards creating a global and inclusive community centre for all scholars with an interest in organizational change and its management. We published three exciting and very different special issues: Changing Identity and the Identity of Change (guest edited by Deborah Price and Rolf van Dick); The Globalizing City (guest edited by Kees Boersma and Stewart Clegg); and Perspectives on Ethical Leadership (guest edited by Steven L. Grover, Thierry Nadisic and David L. Patient). Furthermore, we have continued with the success story of our Reflections series. 2012 saw the publication of contributions by Paul du Gay and Signe Vikkelsø (Reflections: On the Lost Specification of ‘Change’) and David Boje (Reflections: What Does Quantum Physics of Storytelling Mean for Change Management?).

To date (10<sup>th</sup> Dec) in 2012 there have been 47,580 full-text downloads from the JCM on the Taylor & Francis Online platform. With over 10,000 extra downloads, this figure represents approximately a 34% increase on the full-text downloads accrued during 2011. The article “Organisational change management: A critical review” by Rune Todnem By from Volume 5 continues to experience especially high online readership with 3,590 full-text downloads to date in 2012. The article published in 2012 that experienced the highest number of full-text downloads this year was David M. Boje’s Reflections piece from Volume 12 Issue 3,

downloaded 2,766 times. With an annual acceptance rate of 8.7% for articles submitted in 2012, the average time from submission to first decision in the previous 12 months was 33 days, whilst the average time from submission to final decision was 37 days.

Now, let's look ahead. As an editorial board we are overwhelmed by the support provided by the academic community. There is a real buzz about the Journal! There is excitement and there are expectations. Expectations we are all working very hard to meet and surpass. We have particularly been focusing on two very specific challenges in 2012. The first one concerns securing inclusion in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and a subsequent future impact factor, and improving on our Association of Business Schools (ABS) *Academic Journal Quality Guide* standing. These are crucial targets that we need to meet in order to break down the barriers preventing some colleagues' from submitting their work to new journals currently without an impact factor. Being an international journal we have a responsibility to support the professional development of our submitting authors. When we hear a growing voice asking us to secure an impact factor this is exactly what we will do. However, as academics and editorial board members we are getting worried about the increasingly managerial approach to academia, research and publication. Academics are a group of very well educated individuals which are in ever greater numbers, for very good reasons, expected and convinced to follow the Pipers. For us the Pipers are named Thomson Reuters and ABS, and we are playing to their tune as well.

During the 2012 AOM meeting we learned through Routledge that Thomson Reuters - a private sector, for profit company who owns academic journals and the SSCI - the 'Lord of the Impact factor' has sent a clear signal to publishers that any new entries to SSCI must provide a mock up impact factor which will place the 'newbie' securely in the top half of the list... This criterion would in fact exclude half of the journals currently included. It also means that JCM can be of a better quality and have a higher mock up impact factor than 49% of all journals currently included without being included ourselves. Is this making sense to anyone? Does it not contradict the purpose of the 'list'? One thing is for sure, the goalpost is continuously moving and more is expected from a potential new entry than from the journals already included.

In 2010, when we were first successfully included in the ABS *Academic Journal Quality Guide* after only one year as a new editorial board, it was promised that: "The rankings made in the ABS Guide are not fixed, but have been reviewed annually, and from 2010 onwards biennially in light of available evidence" (ABS, 2010, p. 5). However, ABS did not provide a new version in 2012 and we are not quite sure when they will. Hence, the Guide will in fact be fixed over a number of years – not capturing the development of academic journals. The list is in other words becoming an outdated 'measurement' protecting status quo. The problem here is of course that both lists are having a direct negative impact on journals such as ours as it fails to reflect our true quality and impact in real time.

None of this is to be taken as an editorial moan. It's not in our nature. However, we are genuinely concerned about a growing culture of managerial decision making deciding where academics are submitting our work, and that these managers are making their decisions based on lists which are outdated and arguably unethical in their current stance of preventing new and developing journals from being acknowledged. We are looking at the

creation and protection of monopolies where it is becoming somewhat impossible to compete as new entries.

This leads us on to the second main challenge we have been facing as an editorial board this year: academic autonomy and freedom.

### **Academic autonomy and freedom**

Looking at the UK as an example, we can observe that over the last 30 or 40 years journal rankings have moved from being something only a few people cared about to something that is central to the careers of individual academics, the future of individual departments and the financial health of most universities. -The reason for this is the decision by the UK government in the early 1980s to allocate the research component of university funding on the basis of an assessment of the quality of each university department's research. The UK government is not alone in this, many other governments have adopted similar arrangements. In the UK, the original Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has now developed into the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The main difference is that instead of academic departments being assessed, it is in effect individual academics that are being assessed. The various assessment panels will be asked to put academics into one of five categories, ranging from 4\* - quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour, to unclassified - quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Only academics whose output is rated as 3\* or above will attract REF funding for their departments.

In the business and management area, the categorisation will be determined by assessing four pieces of published work for each academic submitted by a university. Though the REF panels have stated that they will judge each output on its merits, universities appear to be assuming that an article in an ABS 4/4\*-rated journal will attract a four-star REF rating, an ABS 3-rated will attract a three-star REF rating, and so on. In such a situation, it can be seen why the ABS list has become so important to universities, in effect they are treating it as a surrogate REF measure. This has brought a new term into the university lexicon – REF GPA (grade point average). The GPA is calculated by adding together the journal ranking of each academic's four proposed REF submissions and dividing by four. Consequently, four publications in journals rated as ABS 4/4\* would equate to a GPA of 4, whilst four in journals rated as 1 would equate to a GPA of 1. There is now much debate in universities over the GPA they should set for putting someone forward for the REF. On the one hand, if they submit all staff, they will maximise their research income, on the other hand, if they submit only staff with an estimated REF GPA of 4, they will maximise their research ranking vis-a-vis other business and management departments. For example, in the 2008 RAE London Business School submitted 90 staff and came top of the RAE rankings with GPA of 3.350, and the University of Birmingham submitted 47 staff and was ranked 20<sup>th</sup> with GPA of 2.65. However, should Birmingham seek to move up the rankings, it might choose to submit only those staff who have an estimated REF GPA of 4 which, on the basis of the 2008 RAE, would be only 10 members of staff. This would reduce Birmingham's research income, but increase its ranking. Though no university has stated publically what its REF GPA will be, the leading ones seem to be leaning towards a GPA of somewhere between 2.75 and 3.25, if not higher. Once again using the 2008 RAE, this would mean that London Business School might exclude some 15% of the staff they submitted (i.e. around 13 people) and Birmingham might exclude some 45% of staff (i.e. around 21 people). It must also be remembered that even in

2008 universities did not submit all their staff. Therefore, many universities could end up submitting well under half of their staff if, as seems likely, they put ranking above finance in determining who to submit.

Among other detrimental effects of this, one is likely to see late-career, distinguished academics who have not published in a sufficient number of 3 and 4-rated journals in recent years being excluded. As an example, if Peter Drucker were alive today and working in a UK university he would probably be excluded from the REF because his later-career output tended to be in books and not journals. Indeed, if Henry Mintzberg moved from Canada to the UK, he also might find himself unREFable! At one level, this can be seen as mere game playing, after all, does it matter if you are excluded from the REF? The answer unfortunately for staff not submitted to the REF is yes. Some universities have or are attempting to put most of their non-REF staff on teaching only contracts, thus, in effect, ending their research careers. In addition, whether one is included in the REF or not will impact on who is recruited by departments and who is promoted within departments. The result of this is that, in effect, academics are being told what journals they should publish in (ABS 3 and above), what type of research to undertake (because some research is more publishable than other types) and what topics to research (because some topics are more attractive to journals than other topics). Certainty, no encouragement is being given to anyone to publish a book or book chapter.

All this is a far cry from the idea of the university which prevailed in the many hundreds of years since founding of the first universities (See Burnes et al, forthcoming). As European universities, which many other universities now model themselves after, developed, they came to be characterised as autonomous bodies devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and truth for its own sake. As Lozano (2012: 219) notes, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this had grown into the 'liberal' view of the University imbued with the principle of 'Bildung':

*'Bildung'* is understood as a complex process of maturation in which the critical appropriation of knowledge – and not the mere transmission of knowledge – is encouraged. ... [the] starting point is the search for truth and knowledge for its own sake ...

This 'liberal' view was greatly influenced by the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt in Prussia. His creation of the University of Berlin in 1810 was seen as a model for other European and American universities. The central Humboldtian principle was that teaching and research were inseparable and that both were concerned with the disinterested search for truth. Humboldt also supported the classical view that the university was a 'community of scholars and students' engaged in a common task (Anderson, 2010).

As Burnes *et al* (forthcoming) have noted, in England, the main aims of government from the early 1980s onwards have been to massively expand student numbers, reduce the cost of running universities and turn them into market-orientated businesses. Central to this, the power of university vice-chancellors and senior managers has been greatly increased and collegiality, the involvement of academic staff in decision-making, has been commensurately decreased. The original RAE (and now the REF) has played a crucial role in this. Not only has the RAE turned universities from collaborating to competing institutions, thus encouraging the marketization of higher education in England, but it has also provided management with a tool to control what the

research academics do. In 1970, Edward Thompson (1970) along with colleagues and students at Warwick University savagely criticised the institution's leadership and direction. Though the University leadership did not like the attack, Thompson and co. were protected by academic freedom and the support of colleagues within the wider university sector. It is difficult to believe that today any academic would dare to challenge the management of their university in such a way without expecting to lose their job. It would also be difficult to see any one of the leading ABS journals publishing such a polemic. Such an attack would not be considered 'legitimate' academic research nor would the authors find themselves protected by the notion of academic freedom.

The shaping and constraining of research over the last three decades is not purely down to the RAE and similar exercises in other countries. Nor is it the fault of the SSCI, ABS list or any other similar assessments or lists. However, the ABS list mirrors the SSCI and its Impact Factor and both 'lists' have come to play a pernicious role in the management of what academics do. Academics do take notice of where something is published, but they are also capable of judging what is a good, bad or indifferent regardless of the quality of the journal it is published in. Unfortunately, not all university managers do have the knowledge to judge the quality of individual articles, so many rely on lists such as the SSCI and the ABS. If someone suggests that their article in a 1-rated ABS journal should be submitted to the REF or used to support a case for promotion, the university manager will look at what constitutes a 1-rated journal for ABS (2010: 5) and find the following:

They [1-rated journals] are modest standard journals within their field. Papers are refereed relatively lightly ...

JCM is an ABS 1-rated journal, but those of us who edit, review and/or publish in it would find it difficult to recognise the ABS description as applying to our journal. Those who compile the ABS list would argue that it is not their fault that the list is misused. However, given the nature of the university sector it is difficult to see how else it would be used. The compilers of the list state that:

The Guide should be designed primarily to serve the needs of the UK business and management research community (ABS, 2010: 1).

This it palpably does not – it serves the needs of those university managers who need an idiot's guide to journal rankings. It in no way serves the needs of the thousands of academics who make up the business and management field in the UK. It is difficult to believe that if the ABS disappeared tomorrow any academic would shed a tear at its passing, but many might well raise a glass to its departure.

### **Developing a 'world leading' journal: A paradoxical and evolving endeavour?**

Given the 'publish or perish' mindset (De Rond and Miller, 2005) which dominates in academic institutions, the colonisation of "academic journals as commodities" (Hogler and Gross, 2009; Oswick and Hanlon, 2009), and the reservations we have already expressed above about journal rankings (e.g. regarding the SSCI and ABS listings), one might question why we would want to see JCM develop into a world leading journal within a system which is so fundamentally flawed. Our response is two-fold. First, and for largely pragmatic reasons, the current system of SSCI/ABS

rankings constitutes the only game in town insofar as viable alternative mechanisms for becoming 'world leading' do not exist. Second, and drawing upon Karen Legge's work on change (1978), we favour a form of 'conformist innovation' (working within the system through legitimate processes to change the system) rather than 'deviant innovation' (working outside the system using unsanctioned processes to overthrow the system). In this sense, and somewhat paradoxically, we advocate working with, rather than against, the system in order to actually change it.

If one looks at existing elite journals, it is clear that becoming a world leading journal will be a slow and challenging process. That said, there are two key guiding principles that we feel are crucial to achieving our long-term goal. One principle is concerned with content (i.e. a *WHAT* issue) and the other is concerned with process (i.e. a *HOW* issue).

In terms of content, it is our intention that the primary focus of JCM going forwards will continue to be around issues pertaining to organisational change and change management. In this regard, it will remain a specialist journal rather than move to becoming a generic and broadly framed management journal. This may appear to be a rather obvious thing to say, but a number of journals have sought to compromise and re-position their core area of academic interest in order to gain broader appeal, attract more submissions and/or increase citation levels and impact. We would like to offer an assurance that JCM will continue to publish high quality work on change and meet the obligation previously stated in the Journal's information on Aims and Scope: "*JCM is committed to becoming the leading journal in its field by establishing itself as a community centre for all scholars with an interest in the complex and multidisciplinary field of change and its management*".

Our other enduring principle is concerned with a commitment to process (i.e. doing the right things in the right way). Moreover, it is a commitment to meaningfully concentrate on *the process of becoming a world leading journal* rather than a fixation on *being world leading as an outcome*. It may be helpful to use an analogy to illustrate the importance of this point. A top athletics coach was once asked what the main differences were between athletes who went on to be world leading in their chosen event(s) and those who failed to develop beyond mediocrity. One of the big things, he explained, was to do with whether they tended to focus on 'process' or 'outcome'. He elaborated using as an example the 400m hurdles. He suggested that if you asked an average athlete what they thought about just before the starting gun - they would tell you about crossing the finishing line first (i.e. the outcome). But, if you asked a top athlete the same question, they would tell you that they thought about their stride pattern to the first hurdle, and then the second hurdle, and so on (i.e. the process). The difference between the two being that the focus of the top athlete on the process meant that the desired outcome is likely to be achieved by paying attention to the actual process whereas the focus on the outcome by the average athlete meant that the process itself is likely to be neglected and was therefore far more likely to go wrong and, as a result, the desired outcome was far more unlikely to be achieved. The implication for JCM is that in order to become a world leading journal (i.e. the equivalent of becoming a world leading athlete) it is vital that we pay attention to the process in order to achieve the desired outcome. For us, concentrating on the ongoing process of aspiring to excellence involves maintaining and further enhancing our ability to attract high quality papers, preserving a rigorous and robust review process, and continuously improving the reputation and standing of JCM.

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