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Developing a publication ranking system in Finland: a discussion

ABSTRACT

The Finnish Ministry of Education together with the Universities in Finland are establishing a publication ranking system. The aim of the publication ranking system is to assist in evaluating the output of researchers, research groups and organizations. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it reviews some of the journal ranking systems used at European research institutions, in particular their categorization of financial accounting journals. Second, the paper discusses some important issues which need to be considered when constructing journal lists in different disciplines. The paper will thus support the work of the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, the body coordinating the project in Finland.

Introduction

The Ministry of Education and the Finnish Universities have during August 2010 started a project to establish a Finnish publication ranking system.¹ The work is coordinated by the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies.² The purpose of the project is to classify academic jour-

nals based on quality. The work will be done by 23 panels representing research fields as classified by the Academy of Finland. The publication ranking system will be used to evaluate the scientific output of individuals, research groups, and organizations.

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¹ "Julkaisufoorumi -hanke"

² Tieteellisten seurain valtuuskunta

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The purpose of this paper is first to gather some anecdotal evidence of financial accounting journal rankings applied by different institutions and business schools across Europe. By doing this the paper provides an overview of the different publication ranking systems that have been implemented in Europe. Furthermore, the paper discusses some of the important questions related to the structure of a publication list. Overall, the paper will support the work of the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies and provide some benchmarks and discussion for the panel assigned to rank financial accounting journals.

How financial accounting journals are ranked in a sample European business schools

There is a large amount of published papers that have ranked academic journals in financial accounting using different methods (see e.g. Chan et al. 2009; Reinstein 2006, for two recent examples). Most commonly the rankings are based

on some sort of measure of the frequency of citations to papers published in a particular journal, the so called 'impact factor'. One of the most commonly used ratings is the *Journal Citation Reports*[®] provided by ISI Web of Knowledge, Thomson Reuters. The ISI impact factors are extensively referred to in the discussion related to journal rankings. In the field of financial accounting there are twelve journals that are rated in the *Journal Citation Reports*[®]. These journals and their impact factors are illustrated in Table 1. The low number of journals rated in this ranking is a considerable limitation if one is interested in constructing a comprehensive ranking of financial accounting journals.

There is no single correct formula to count impact factors or other journal quality ratios and therefore rankings may differ markedly depending on the method. The measures or methods, i.e. *how* rankings have been made, are not of interest in this paper, but rather, the output, i.e. *what* is the ranking of financial accounting journals in selected European business schools.

TABLE 1. Journal Citation Report – Financial Accounting journals rated in year 2009 in the ISI Web of Knowledge.

JOURNAL CITATION REPORTS, ISI WEB OF KNOWLEDGE JOURNALS IN FINANCIAL ACCOUNTING (CATEGORY: BUSINESS, FINANCE)	
Publication	Impact Factor 2009
Journal of Accounting & Economics	3.551
Accounting Review (The)	1.938
Accounting, Organizations and Society	1.904
Journal of Accounting Research	1.870
Review of Accounting Studies	1.750
Contemporary Accounting Research	1.129
European Accounting Review	0.961
Auditing: A Journal of Practice and Theory	0.946
Journal of Business Finance & Accounting	0.832
Abacus	0.575
Accounting and Finance	0.446
Accounting and Business research	0.359

In the first part of this paper financial accounting journal rankings in Europe are reviewed. The reviewed rankings are non-randomly selected. The selection is based on (i) the online availability of the ranking, (ii) geographical considerations and (iii) business school reputation. The reader should be aware that the listings provided in the Appendix are mostly abstracts from more comprehensive lists. In order to sort and select the financial accounting journals from the full lists, the institutions' search engines have been used when available. Elsewhere the financial accounting journals are manually abstracted by the author. It should also be noted that accounting research is extensively published also other disciplines' journals. Since the focus of this paper is on financial accounting journals, the journals in areas such as management (incl. management accounting), finance, information systems, corporate governance, business, econometrics, and organizations are not included in the listings.

The publication ranking lists from *Norway* (national list), *HEC Paris*, *ESSEC Business School*, *Erasmus Research Institute of Management*, *Amsterdam Business School at the University of Amsterdam*, *Tilburg University*, *Aston Business School*, and *Vienna University of Economics and Business* are tabulated in the Appendix of this paper. Essentially, these sample lists illustrate some of the different ways of ranking publications in financial accounting. There are examples of (i) narrow and broad lists, and also, (ii) two-tier and multi-tier lists.

The construction and content of the example rankings are most likely results of careful reflection. The structure of a journal ranking may well (and probably will) affect the behavior and decisions of researchers. Therefore, the institutions may have used the journal ranking

system to convey their goals to researchers and to direct researchers' attention to desired areas. In the next section, some of the pros and cons of differently structured lists are discussed.

Discussing some potential consequences of different ranking structures

Narrow list or broad list

By "narrow" or "broad" list this paper refers to the number of journals categorized. It can be seen from the examples in the Appendix, that some institutions classify a larger number of journals than others. This is strategically a very important decision, since the editorial policies of the journals included will affect what is studied.

At the extreme, a narrow list of journals (including e.g. only journals listed in the *Journal Citation Reports*) would make researchers focus on questions and methods that can be published in the listed journals. First, it has to be considered whether it is reasonable to expect that e.g. all Finnish financial accounting researchers have the resources or interests to conduct the kind of research that is published in these listed top journals. Furthermore, to illustrate the difficulty of publishing in the most highly appreciated journals, I reviewed the articles published in the top three financial accounting journals (*The Accounting Review*, *Journal of Accounting and Economics*, and *Journal of Accounting Research*) by researchers affiliated at Finnish Universities, and, to the best of my knowledge, there is only one paper published in *Journal of Accounting Research* (Kistner and Salmi 1980) and two papers published in *Journal of Accounting and Economics* (Kasanen, Kinnunen, Niskanen 1996; Kallunki, Nilsson and Hellström 2009). Clearly

this demonstrates the extreme difficulty to publish in these top three financial accounting journals. The difficulty of publishing in these top journals should, however, not be used as an excuse to include a broader array of journals in the ranking without considering how to appropriately categorize the journals. Having a short list with only hard to access top-journals could also be discouraging instead of motivating, and thus individuals could be pushed away from conducting research. The clear advantage of a short list with only top journals is, that when researchers succeed in publishing in those journals, the studies (as well as the researchers and universities) are likely to receive great amount of recognition and international exposure.

A second element worth considering is the nature and scope of *topics* published in the listed journals. Concerns have been raised by accounting scholars (see e.g. Lukka 2010, Malmi 2010 and Merchant 2010, for recent discussions), that e.g. the three journals perceived to be the top accounting journals (*The Accounting Review*, *Journal of Accounting and Economics*, and *Journal of Accounting Research*) publish primarily empirical articles using large archival data sets to test economics-based models. Merchant (2010) argues that when citation ratios are used for ranking journals, the outcome will always be that journals publishing mainstream research (i.e. containing widely cited publications) will come first. Consequently, if researchers are motivated or “pushed” to publish predominantly in those journals (e.g. by a publication ranking system or other reward structures) a reduction in topic, method and discipline diversity will follow (Merchant 2010). If these arguments by Merchant (2010) are considered valid, then e.g. the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies should consider whether they want the

Finnish academic research to be diversified or mainstream. Shedding light to this consideration, Lukka (2010) points out that homogeneity (in the sense of uniformity in topics, methods and disciplines) of the research community has benefits, such as efficiency benefits if resources are scarce. However, Lukka (2010) also mentions that homogeneity includes considerable disadvantages, such as producing research with marginal contribution and creating “non-discussables”, i.e. non-acceptance of research that fails to fit the mainstream (see eg. Malmi 2010 for examples on “non-discussables”). These benefits and disadvantages should be carefully considered when establishing journal ranking systems.

Third, Brown (1996), Lee and Williams (1999), and Lukka and Kasanen (1996) have raised concerns that there is a controlling elite within the U.S. accounting research community who decide what is published in the most influential journals. Williams and Rodgers (1995) show that the top three journals’ editorial boards consist primarily of faculty members from “elite schools” in the U.S. A consequence, for non-U.S. researchers in particular, is that the articles published in these journals should not only “fit” the journals (in terms of topics, theories and methods, as discussed above), they should also be using U.S. data or the setting should be generalizable and interesting to the U.S. market. Consequently, in the Finnish context it must be considered (i) whether narrow journal ranking systems create barriers for studies on topics interesting to the Finnish or European business society and if so, (ii) should researchers at Finnish institutions be motivated to focus only on studies with contribution to the international/U.S. markets. Lukka and Kasanen (1996) provide an extensive discussion on whether researchers

should focus on internationally or domestically interesting questions.

Finally, a broad list of ranked journals also has weaknesses, particularly if the structure of the ranking system is not designed carefully. For instance, if the ranking system has a low number of categories and a high number of journals, then the outcome is likely to be a high within-category variance in quality, i.e. low quality journals are weighted equally with significantly higher quality journals. This would in worst case bias e.g. the compensation and promotion decisions made by institutions based on the journal ranking system and perhaps even encourage researchers to publish in low quality journals.

Two tier or multi-tier categorization

In the "Introduction" to the publication ranking-project the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies states that in the publication ranking system, journals may be divided into, for example, two categories based on the scientific impact of the journal and a third category could represent non-scientific publication outlets where academics can communicate with the society.³

While the example of a two-plus-one category system could be considered just one of many options, let us consider what this would mean for classifying financial accounting journals. In the Appendix there are examples of two-tier systems (Norway, Amsterdam Business School and Vienna University of Economics and Business). The main problem in this categorization is whether selected journals can be reasonably divided to the two classes without creating large within-category variance in quality.

Using the financial accounting journals as an example we most commonly find three journals that are always in the top category (*The Accounting Review*, *Journal of Accounting and Economics*, and *Journal of Accounting Research*), one journal which is for the most part in the top category (*Accounting, Organizations and Society*) and two journals that are frequently in the top category (*Contemporary Accounting Research*, and *Review of Accounting Studies*). These journals are followed by five to ten journals that reach the top category from time to time. Consequently, by looking only at the examples tabulated in the Appendix, we can see that there is no agreement on which journals to count in the top category.

More than two categories would, of course, not abandon the problem of categorizing the journals, but it would significantly reduce within-category variance in quality, and thus provide a more accurate ranking of the journals. Consequently, it would also provide more variability for the researchers to choose publication outlets from, and for evaluators it would probably offer a more accurate measure of the productivity and quality of the research. Multiple categories could be problematic if they invite users, to think that the categories represent an interval scaling of journals where you could conclude that e.g. four publications in category D equals one publication in A. Unless a widely approved quantitative measure is provided, publication ranking systems should always be considered as ordinal scaled.

Conclusion

An increasing focus on journal rankings has been experienced internationally. One reason for this is that the rankings may provide some sort of objective and quantifiable instrument for

³ In Finnish at <<http://www.tsv.fi/julkaisufoorumi/jfhanke.html>>

performance measurement of researchers and research institutions. Significant risks are, however, associated with publication ranking systems, particularly if the consequences of alternative ranking system structures are not carefully considered.

In this paper, I have discussed some of the consequences related to (i) the number of journals included in the ranking and (ii) the number of categories the journals are divided into. Essentially, by ranking only a low number of highest quality journals the researchers are motivated or “pushed” to initiate only research projects that fit into the editorial policies and interests of these widely acknowledged and cited top-journals. When ranking a large set of journals it is important to carefully consider how many categories are needed to reasonably classify the journals without creating too much quality variance within a category. Within-category variance is not beneficial since it will eventually increase researchers’ incentives to publish in inferior journals and potentially reduce the quality of research conducted overall. Based on the examples drawn from the financial accounting literature, it seems clear that the development of a publication ranking system in Finland should be a part of a broader discussion on what kind of research is expected or desired from e.g. financial accounting researchers in Finland.

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APPENDIX

1. Ranking of the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions.

Category '2'

Publication

Accounting Review (The)
 Accounting, Organizations and Society
 Journal of Accounting & Economics
 Journal of Accounting Research

CATEGORY '1'

Publication

Publication

Abacus	International Journal of Auditing
Accounting and Business Research	International Journal of Economics and Acc.
Accounting and Finance	Issues in Accounting Education
Accounting Business and Financial History	Irish Accounting Review
Accounting Education	Journal of Accountancy
Accounting Forum	Journal of Accounting and Public Policy
Accounting Historians Journal	Journal of Accounting Literature
Accounting Horizons	Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Finance
Accounting in Europe	Journal of Acc. and Organizational Change
Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal	Journal of Applied Accounting Research
Advances in Accounting	Journal of Business Finance & Accounting
Auditing: A Journal of Practice and Theory	Journal of Financial Reporting & Accounting
Australian Accounting Review	Journal of International Accounting Research
Behavioral Research in Accounting	Journal of Int. Acc., Auditing and Taxation
British Accounting Review (The)	Journal of Int. Financial Management & Acc.
Contemporary Accounting Review	Journal of Islamic Acc. and Business Research
Critical Perspectives on Accounting	Managerial Auditing Journal
European Accounting Review	Qualitative Research in Acc. & Management
International Journal of Accounting	Research in Accounting in Emerging Economics
Int. Journal of Acc. and Information Management	

2. Ranking of HEC Paris.

LISTE DES REVUES ACADEMIQUES ETABLIE PAR LA DIRECTION DE LA RECHERCHE DU GROUPE HEC. Groupe HEC – Direction de la Recherche – 2005

CLASS 'α' JOURNALS

Publication	Publication
Accounting Organizations and Society	Journal of Accounting Research
Accounting Review (The)	Review of Accounting Studies
Contemporary Accounting Research	
Journal of Accounting and Economics	
Journal of Accounting Literature	

CLASS 'β' JOURNALS

Publication	Publication
Abacus (New Zeland)	British Accounting Review
Accounting and Business	European Accounting Review
Accounting Business and Financial History	International Journal of Accounting
Accounting Historians Journal	Issues in Accounting Education
Accounting History	Journal of Accounting and Business Research
Accounting Horizons	Journal of Accounting and Public Policy
Accounting, Auditing & Accountability	Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Finance
Advances in Accounting	Journal of Banking Finance and Accounting
Advances in International Accounting	Journal of Business Finance & Accounting
Advances in Quantitative Analysis	Review of Accounting & Finance
	Review of Quantitative Finance and Accounting
	Journal of Finance and Accounting Research

CLASS 'γ' JOURNALS

Publication	Publication
Accountancy	Journal of Applied Accounting Research
Accounting Forum	Journal of Int. Acc. Auditing & Taxation
Accounting and the Public Interest	J. of Int. Financial Management and Acc.
Journal of Accountancy	
Journal of Accounting Education	

DISCUSSION

3. ESSEC Business School.

CENTRE DE RECHERCHE / RESEARCH CENTER

Liste des Revues / List of Journals

Group 0+ – Leading Journals

Publication

Accounting Organizations and Society

Accounting Review (The)

Journal of Accounting and Economics

Journal of Accounting Research

Group 0 – Excellent Journals

Publication

Contemporary Accounting Research

Review of Accounting Studies

Group 1 – Very Good Journals

Publication

Abacus

Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal

Auditing: A Journal of Practice & Theory

Critical Perspectives on Accounting

European Accounting Review

Publication

International Journal of Accounting

Journal of Accounting and Public Policy

Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Finance

Group 2 – Good Journals

Publication

Accounting History

Accounting Horizons

Accounting in Europe

British Accounting Review (The)

Int. Journal of Acc., Auditing and Performance

Publication

Int. Journal of Acc. and Information Managem.

Journal of International Accounting Research

Journal of Int. Financial Management and Acc.

Review of Accounting and Finance

Group 3 – Narrow

Publication

Australian Accounting Review

4 ERIM Journals List (Erasmus Research Institute of Management).**'STAR'****Publication**

Accounting Review (The)
 Journal of Accounting and Economics
 Journal of Accounting Research

'PRIMARY'**Publication****Publication**

Abacus
 Accounting and Business Research
 Accounting, Organizations and Society
 Auditing: A Journal of Practice and Theory
 Contemporary Accounting Research

Review of Accounting Studies

'SECONDARY'**Publication**

Publication

Accounting and Finance
 Accounting, Auditing and Accountability
 Behavioral Research in Accounting
 European Accounting Review
 International Journal of Accounting

Journal of Accounting and Public Policy
 Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Finance
 Journal of Business Finance and Accounting
 Journal of International Accounting Research
 Review of Quantitative Finance and Accounting

DISCUSSION

5. ABS-journal list – Amsterdam Business School.

'A' Journals

Publication

Accounting, Organizations and Society
 Accounting Review (The)
 Contemporary Accounting Research
 Journal of Accounting and Economics
 Journal of Accounting Research

'B' JOURNALS

Publication

Publication

Abacus	International Journal of Accounting
Accounting and Business Research	Issues in Accounting Education
Accounting and Finance	Journal of Accounting and Public Policy
Accounting Horizons	Journal of Accounting Literature
Accounting, Auditing, and Accountability Journal	Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Finance
Auditing: A Journal of Practice and Theory	Journal of Business Finance & Accounting
Behavioral Research in Accounting	Journal of International Accounting Research
British Accounting Review	Journal of Int. Financial Management and Acc.
Critical Perspectives on Accounting	Journal of Management Accounting Research
European Accounting Review	Review of Accounting Studies
	Review of Quantitative Finance and Accounting

6. University of Tilburg List.

TOP AND VERY GOOD JOURNALS ("top-core" journals marked *)

Publication

Accounting Review (The) *
 Contemporary Accounting Research
 Journal of Accounting and Economics *
 Journal of Accounting Research *
 Review of Accounting Studies

7. Journal League Table – Aston Business School.**WORLD LEADING****Publication**

Advances in Accounting
 Accounting Review (The)
 Accounting, Auditing and Accountability
 Accounting, Organizations and Society
 Advances in International Accounting
 Journal of Accounting Education
 Journal of Accounting Literature
 Journal of Accounting Research

Publication

Behavioral Research in Accounting
 Critical Perspectives in Accounting
 International Journal of Accounting
 Journal of Accounting and Economics
 Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Finance

INTERNATIONALLY EXCELLENT**Publication**

Abacus
 Accounting and Business Research
 Accounting and Finance Issues
 Auditing: A Journal of Theory and Practice
 Contemporary Accounting Research
 Journal of Business Finance and Accounting
 Journal of Int. Acc., Auditing and Taxation
 Research in Accounting Regulation

Publication

Int. Journal of Acc. Education and Research
 Int. Journal of Banking, Finance and Accounting
 Int. Journal of Behavioral Acc. and Finance
 Journal of Accounting and Public Policy
 Journal of Accounting Education

RECOGNISED INTERNATIONALLY**Publication**

Accounting and Finance
 Accounting Education
 Accounting Educator's Journal
 Accounting Forum
 Accounting Horizons
 British Accounting Review
 European Accounting Review
 Int. Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Taxation
 International Journal of Auditing
 Journal of Applied Accounting Research

Publication

Journal of International Accounting Research
 Journal of Int. Financial Management & Acc.
 Managerial Auditing Journal
 Research in Accounting in Emerging Economies
 Research in Governmental and Non-profit Acc.

RECOGNISED NATIONALLY**Publication**

Accounting Business and Financial History
 Accounting, Management and Information Technologies
 Irish Accounting Review
 Journal of Quantitative Finance and Accounting

DISCUSSION

8. *Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien.*

A+

Publication

Accounting Review (The)
Accounting, Organizations and Society
Journal of Accounting and Economics
Journal of Accounting Research

A

Publication

Abacus
Accounting and Business Research
Accounting Business and Financial History
Accounting Horizons
Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal
Auditing: A Journal of Practice and Theory
Behavioral Research in Accounting
Contemporary Accounting Research
Critical Perspectives on Accounting
European Accounting Review

Publication

Journal of Accounting and Public Policy
Journal of Accounting Auditing and Finance
Journal of Accounting Literature
Journal of Business Finance and Accounting
Review of Accounting Studies
Review of Quantitative Finance and Accounting