

**AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL SCIENCE: JOURNAL AND
PUBLISHER RANKINGS**

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Prepared for the Australian Political Studies Association.

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1. Introduction

The main body of this paper provides rankings for journals and publishers in political science, international relations and public policy and administration. This commentary describes how the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA) organised the rankings exercise, and identifies the issues posed by the exercise. The aim of the exercise was to rank journals solely on their quality (that is, the quality of the research articles they contain) not their importance to Australian researchers.

2. How we compiled the rankings

The Metric

DEST has been advised that splitting the top journals into A* and A is the only way to identify the very best journals and distinguish effectively between groups. They are deliberately called A* and A (rather than A and B, or Tier 1 and Tier 2) to make as clear as possible the assumption underlying the ranking is that ALL A and A* journals will be of VERY high-quality (see definitions below). The distinction between A* and A is necessary to make this work as a metric. In so doing, we follow the science disciplines which are ranking their journals on this basis. There is one important difference. The sciences rely heavily on the impact factor. The social sciences and humanities cannot rely on impact factors to the same extent because ISI coverage is incomplete or non-existent. So, the judgement of the APSA panel (see below) which played a greater role in the final rankings and journal reputation in the political science community was an important factor. However, the lists are roughly comparable to the science lists.

Data Sources

- Between 2000 to 2005, all journals and publishers from the 17 Australian political science departments covered by REPP as part of a DEST RQF pilot study.
- Any journals listed by ISI in its subject categories, 'Political Science', 'International Relations' and 'Public Administration'.
- Journals listed in Ulrich's Periodicals Directory (<http://www.ulrichsweb.com>) in its subject categories 'Political Science', 'Political Science – International Relations', and 'Public Administration'.
- DEST's list of accredited publishers.

Defining the bands

A* (top 5%)

Typically an A* journal and publisher would be among the best in its field or subfield in which to publish and would typically cover the entire field and subfield. These are journals and publishers where most of the work is important (it will shape the field) and where researchers boast about getting accepted. Acceptance rates would typically be low and the editorial board would be dominated by field leaders, including many from top institutions.

A (next 15%)

Publishing in an A journal and book would add to the author's standing, showing they have real engagement with the global research community and that they have

something to say about problems of some significance. Typical signs of an A journal are low-ish acceptance rates and an editorial board which includes a reasonable proportion of well-known researchers from top institutions.

B (next 30%)

Tier B covers journals with a solid, though not outstanding, reputation. In a Tier B journal, one would expect fewer papers of very high-quality. But there are good journals under B and such journals are important outlets, especially for the work of PhD students and early career researchers. Typical examples would be regional journals with high-ish acceptance rates, and editorial boards that have fewer leading researchers from top international institutions.

C (next 50%)

All the rest.

The process

We adopted a four-step process. First, we sent a provisional list based on our data sources to a small panel asking them to do a provisional ranking. Second, the National Office collated the response and circulated the revised ranking to all members of APSA. The National Office collated these responses and the panel adjusted the list to meet DEST's specifications and adjudicated competing assessments. Finally, we brought this penultimate list to the APSA annual conference and made it available for comment to all members on our web site. The National Office revised the list. It was then approved by the Panel for final submission to DEST.

We checked the listings against the ISI journal impact factors. There are 85 political science journals, 50 international relations journals and 25 public administration journals. There are also separate listings for area studies and gender studies. A* journals have a top 20 impact score in one or more of these groupings. A journals have a top 40 score. Most B journals have an impact factor. Most C journals do not have an impact factor. Our listings are broadly consistent with existing world rankings (see for example: *Political Studies Review* 3/1 2005: 293-313).

It would be foolish to claim there was unanimity on the rankings but APSA can make two claims. First, there was unanimity that APSA should compile such rankings for the political science community. Second, there was a substantial measure of agreement about the top journals. Most disagreements focused on the A*/A border and the B/C border. For the former, the panel believes such disagreements are of little consequence because all journals in these categories are world class. For the latter, the panel had to make judgements and it recognises that they will not command everyone's agreement.

3. Issues

1. ISI Journal Impact Factor

For many years, bibliometricians and journal editors have raised concerns over the construction and use of ISI's Journal Impact Factor. The methodological concerns surrounding the way it is calculated have been well documented, with Henk Moed (Leiden University) as the most authoritative voice. Thus:

“ISI classifies documents into types. In calculating the numerator of the IF, ISI counts citations to all types of documents, whereas as citeable

documents in the denominator ISI includes ... only normal articles, notes and reviews. However, editorials, letters and several other types are cited rather frequently in a number of journals. When they are cited, these types do contribute to the citation counts in the IF's numerator, but are not included in the denominator. In a sense, the citations to these documents are 'for free'." (H Moed and T van Leeuwen, *Nature* 381, 1996: 186)

He goes on to make the prophetic statement:

"Our analysis suggests that journal editors or scientific publishers could, in principle, artificially raise the IFs of their journals. To put it bluntly, if a scientific publisher succeeds in publishing important review articles as an editorial, or including a lively correspondence section, the IF of his or her journal may go up substantially."

Whether or not editors are trying to play the game and inflate the IF for their journal (and a few unscrupulous ones have been caught), it still highlights the problems with ISI's method of calculation. Attempts to get them to change have so far failed, though there was a session devoted to the problems in a recent international bibliometric's conference.

There is a second and chronic problem for the social sciences. The impact factor assumes a two-year citation life cycle, which is common in the natural sciences. For the social sciences 3-5 years would be more accurate.

2. *Possible Biases*

We are not a natural science or American so we are disadvantaged. There is a clear bias for northern hemisphere English language journals and against area studies,

regional and foreign language journals. The Anglo-centric bias is even more prominent for publishers. The A* band is made up only of American and British university presses. One member expressed a widespread concern:

I am concerned about the impact on the field if more Australian journals are not recognised as suitable venues for publishing. I say this as someone who does manage to publish Australian material in reputable international journals as well as Australian ones but who knows how rare this is. Basically, I can only do it when I am undertaking one of my comparative studies; for example, on Britain or the USA. Otherwise, I know that reputable international journals usually just are not interested in taking material on Australian politics. This is not because of the poor quality of the work on Australian politics but simply because of US and British intellectual biases that see work on Australia as being of little significance or interest to their readers.

I'm therefore very worried about what will happen to some of my colleagues who don't do comparative work and yet publish work on Australian politics that is just as good as the equivalent British or American work. They can't all publish every time in AJPS for example. Top ranking Australian politics experts do therefore have to publish in a range of Australian journals, some of which would not be ranked highly internationally or read by an international academic readership.

We can make a similar point by focusing on the effects of the size of American political science. We would not expect most people to publish in the A* journals, if the journals are indeed the top 5% of the world. We are competing with everyone else in the world for those spots and we probably have less than 0.5 % of the world's political scientists. So, in some journals, no one from Australia will appear and in all the others it will be rare. There are around 350 individual political scientists in Australia. The American Political Science Association lists 700+ departments as members of its departmental services program. So, there are two US departments for every single political scientist in Australia, all competing for the same outlets. And that only takes into account the departments that are affiliated to the American PSA among the 4,000 US universities. There will be many more. And after that, we can add all the political scientists in every other country in Europe, South American China, India and the rest of the world who often have the same rankings and targets.

There are two other possible biases.

- (i) For journals and against books.

The natural sciences are more easily served by metrics in the RQF. Most researchers publish primarily in journals, and bibliometrics occupy centre stage, with journal rankings an additional, but probably less important, metric. Books are in the wings. The mechanics of the RQF also favour journal articles. Electronic copies of articles are available for 2001-2006. Most books have only recently become available in electronic form. Books remain the main research output for political science.

There is also one special feature of book publishing to note that is hard to rank. The top university presses also have elite series; for example Cambridge University Press on international relations. Such series should be drawn to the assessors' attention.

APSA is not confident we can list all such series. So, we note the fact. We have advised members to make the claim in their 100-word justification for their choice of four 'best' research outputs for RQF.

(ii) Against 'public intellectuals'

The following quote makes the point cogently

I don't believe that Julie Bishop, Howard and our other political masters want the RQF to result in the major decline of Australian politics and policy as a field. ... Australian politics departments have a special responsibility to research Australian politics and policy? (We are funded by Australian taxpayers after all).

In short, we need to protect, even promote, the role of public intellectuals even though their publications tend not to be in high-ranked international journals.

3. *'Local' journals*

There are international assessors on the panels who will have views on the rankings – we must be able to defend them based on quality. Local journals may be important for Australian academics but they are not necessarily the best in the world. And the RQF is about best in the world - international quality, with rankings not weighted for or against local journals. We have included only two local journals in a top category; both are in the A category. They are middle-ranking journals on their impact factor but have international standing. For example, Simon Hix's list of top political science journals included the *Australian Journal of Political Science* (see *Political Studies Review* 3/1 2005: 293-313).

4. Related areas

Political science spans the humanities and the social sciences and overlaps with many specialised subfields. Political scientists write political history and biographies. They make a substantial contribution to area studies and gender studies. All such rankings should be available to the politics' assessors. At the instigation of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, we agreed they would rank Asian Studies journals.

5. Other uses

The danger with these rankings is that university management will use them to set targets for their staff. The rankings were not designed to do this job, and should not be so used. For example, Rod Rhodes was an external assessor recently on a promotion to lecturer B. The applicant was advised to submit to a top international journal and had done so. Not only was she asked to compete with the best in the world in the first three years of her career but she was also still waiting for referees' report six months later. To compound her problem, if accepted, she would wait at least a further 12 months for publication. The advice was unhelpful. B grade journals are good quality journal and the obvious place for the early career researcher (ECRs) to start. Any lecturer B is an apprentice. Choose your cliché – put in the miles, walk before you run, learn the craft – but senior colleagues should set ECRs practical goals. If nothing else the positive reinforcement of being accepted and getting into print boosts careers. Delay and rejection are just plain discouraging.

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