

RESEARCH PAPER

Profiling the Sustainability of Journal Lists: Preliminary Results from a Tentative Approach

DR MATTHIJS DEN BESTEN

Operations, Information and Decisions Department

Montpellier Business School

Montpellier, France

Email: m.den-besten@montpellier-bs.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-4361-4278

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: The purpose of this paper is to investigate journal listings, which are commonly adopted as policy instruments by universities, and assess the alignment of the aims of the journals in these listings with research priorities regarding the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: Its approach is to characterise the editorial focus of publication outlets through the application of a tool originally developed to qualify university curricula based on course syllabi.

FINDINGS: Preliminary findings point to an incongruence between university staff's publication incentives and the societal imperative for research to contribute to achieving sustainable prosperity.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE OF THE PAPER: These findings have immediate practical value both to the bodies responsible for the compilation of journal listings and universities and other institutions that rely on these listings to manage research as they strive to ensure that the listings encompass the whole gamut of research needed to inform the implementation of the UN goals.

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RESEARCH LIMITATIONS: The results presented here are still preliminary. Further research is needed to take into account other dimensions of sustainability and to extend the analysis to other relevant journal listings.

IMPLICATIONS: The study's findings have important policy implications for business schools and the accreditation bodies they interact with as it shows the need for schools committed to specific SDGs to reconcile their research strategies with the listings they follow.

KEYWORDS: *Assessment Framework; Sustainability Attributes; Policy Coherence; Keyword Analysis; Research Policy; Scholarly Publishing*

INTRODUCTION

Institutes of higher education can play a vital role in the development of activities that contribute to the attainment of the goals set out in the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. Also, Business Schools are increasingly called upon to rise to the occasion and, while many have aired commitments in that sense, most seem to lag in the adaption of their practices (Snelson-Powell *et al.*, 2016; Vila and Moya, 2023).

This paper aims to explore how the business school can adapt their research strategies to bring them more in line with the requirements of Agenda 2030. One element that sets business schools apart from other institutes of higher education is their reliance on high-powered incentives to promote research activities among their faculty (Besancenot and Vranceanu, 2008). For instance, remuneration and opportunity for promotion are often linked to the frequency of publication in a limited set of journals. Over the years, a variety of journal listings have been developed (Mingers and Harzing, 2007) and business schools tend to link faculty research incentives to one or more of these listings (Willmott, 2011).

The question, then, is whether the choice of journal listing matters: it turns out that it does. Below, I present the findings of an analysis of summary information on almost 4,000 recently published articles in journals that feature in the 5 most restrictive journal listings. The analysis shows that the likelihood that articles are relevant to certain attributes of sustainability differs significantly depending on the choice of journal listing. As the attributes are associated with sustainable development goals (SDGs), I suggest that making sure that the choice of journal listing aligns with the SDGs it pursues is one way in which business schools can bring their practices closer to their pronouncements. As a result, research output will be more relevant and, to the extent that policy-makers act on its recommendations, wider society stands to benefit.

REVIEW

Journal listings have generally been compiled based on characteristics such as rigor, relevance, and reputation associated with the journals considered for inclusion and there is considerable overlap among them (Mingers and Harzing, 2007). Relevance, in this context, refers to coverage of management disciplines. As the compilation of most of the listings predates the formulation of Agenda 2030, there is no reason to presume the latter was taken into consideration. The assessment of the journals is typically based on the judgement of people who can claim expertise in management research. Sometimes, these people are insiders, as is in the journal listing proposed by the Erasmus Research Institute of Management (EJL 2020); in other cases, such as the Financial Times Survey of Top Business School (FT 2016), the final assessment is made by relative outsiders. Finally, in cases such as the Meta journal listing, the assessment is a synthesis of selected primary journal listings (Harzing, 2023).

Journal listings provide an alternative to algorithmic indicators of journal quality, such as the journal impact factor (Garfield, 2006) on which other disciplines rely. While a journal listing such as EJL 2020 explicitly takes account of impact factors in its assessment, in other cases the association with these indicators is less clear-cut. For instance, with regards to FT 2016, Fassin (2021) finds that the impact factor has no predictive power for inclusion in the list, whilst the predictive power of the alternative SCImago Journal Rank by Scopus is limited to journals in the field of economics. Meanwhile, Mingers and Yang (2017) find that another metric provided by Scopus, the Source-Normalized Impact per Paper, is the best indicator of journal quality if the journal listing of the Association of Business Schools (ABS) is taken as a benchmark.

The increased reliance of business schools on journal listings has not been without its critics, however: their adoption is said to suppress diversity in research (Willmott, 2011), discourage interdisciplinary research (Rafols *et al.*, 2012), and invite research for research's sake to the detriment of research tending to other stakeholders (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020). Considering that multidisciplinarity is essential for “a mature understanding of sustainability management” (Williams *et al.*, 2017), and the significant effort required to turn research on sustainable development goals and their interdependencies into actionable policy advice (Breuer *et al.*, 2019), one might question whether the use of journal listings as a research strategy aligns with the sustainability goals stated in mission statements. Nevertheless, before concluding that journal listings are unsuitable for promoting research relevant to Agenda 2030, it is worth examining whether some listings are more appropriate than others.

Regarding Agenda 2030, one journal listing can be deemed to be more appropriate than another if the journals included in the listing provide better coverage of research themes of relevance to this agenda than those included in the alternative listing. Of course, which research is most relevant to the Agenda is in itself a question that warrants in-depth research. Awaiting such research, I propose for now to adopt the framework developed by Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2019) for education.

Similar to education, research can be construed as a tool that facilitates the transformations that are needed in order to achieve the Agenda's goals. This tool should reconcile the environment with the economy and society (Elkington, 2004). At the same time, it should reconcile generations through the assessment of interventions at various timescales, distinguishing the immediate from the longer-term costs and benefits. Accordingly, Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2019) grouped SDGs based on commonalities among the things that would need to be put in place to make them happen, their "enabling conditions". The framework they developed specifies eight such groups: Safe Operating Space (SOS) for the environment, Just Operating Space (JOS) for society, Resilient Sustainable Behaviors (RSB), Alternative Economic Models (AEM), Collaboration (COL), Health and Wellbeing (HW), Diversity (DI) and Transparency and Governance (TG). Note that at least the first three groups have strong roots in systems thinking (Fiksel, 2006; Oliver *et al.*, 2022).

METHOD

The approach I propose to assess the coverage of research relevant to Agenda 2030 in journals appearing in listings is to sample recently published articles in those journals and to perform rudimentary content analysis on the article summaries.

Sample Selection

The journal quality list (Harzing, 2023) is a compilation of 10 journal listings with membership information on 953 journals. Unfortunately, the compilation does not systematically include all the journals from the listings as it excludes non-English journals and lower ranked journals that appear in only one of the ten listings.

For each journal in the journal quality list, I checked for the availability of article metadata in the collection of scholarly metadata provided by Crossref (Hendricks *et al.*, 2020). Crossref provides metadata with regard to articles published in 915 out of the 935 journals that are listed. For articles published in 554 of these journals, it also provides the text of the article abstract.

Following Pearson's Chi-squared test, there is no relationship between the probability of inclusion in a journal listing and the availability of the journal information on Crossref. In addition, the Welch two-sample t-tests find no significant differences between the distribution of Scopus cite scores among all journals in the compilation versus the distribution of scores among journals that appear in Crossref, even considering only those for which article abstracts are provided. Figure 1 depicts the density distributions for the three cases, which indeed look very similar.

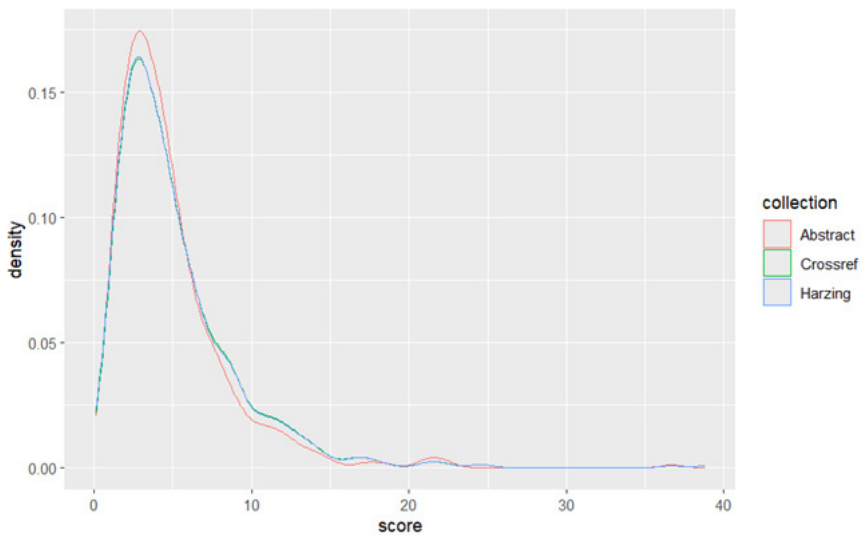


Figure 1 Density Distributions of Journal Scopus Cite-Score for all Journals Mentioned by Harzing, those among them Referenced by Crossref, and those where Article Abstracts are Included in Crossref Data

Source: Own elaboration

I then decided to focus on the five most restrictive journal listings in Harzing's compilation and collect article data for all journals in those listings. The five most restrictive listings in the compilation are EJL 2020, FT 2016, FNege 2022, JourQual 2015 and Meta (Harzing, 2023). For the sake of brevity, I will refer to these listings by their letter acronym only from now on. Among the 658 journals associated with these listings in the compilation, there are 383 for which Crossref provides article abstracts. For 370 of these, Harzing (2023) also provides the Scopus cite-score. These

370 journals constitute the final sample. Table 1 presents a breakdown of numbers per journal listing and Figure 2 shows how the journals listed overlap among the listings.

Table 1 Journal in Listing for which Information is available

	Harzing	Crossref	Cr/Abstract	Cr/A/Scopus
FT	50	48	37	37
EJL	246	242	146	144
Meta	346	341	201	198
JourQual	456	442	265	257
Fnege	529	520	312	308

Source: Own elaboration

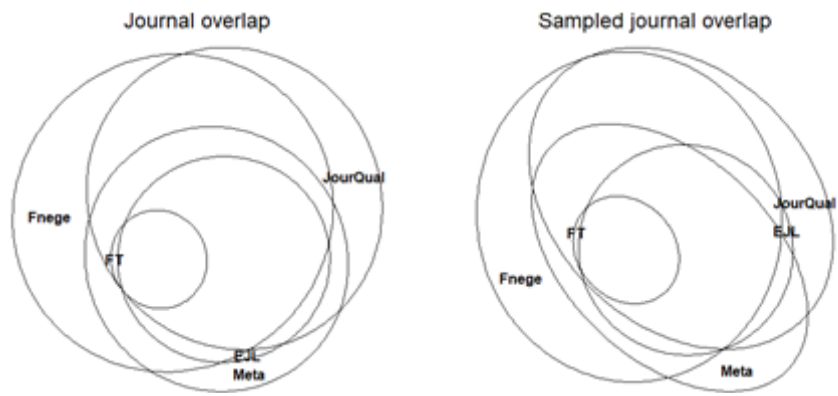


Figure 2 Euler Diagram Depicting Overlap among Journals in Listings (Left: All Journals; Right: Journals in Sample)

Source: Own elaboration

Measurement

For each journal in the sample, I collected metadata for 100 randomly selected recent articles within that journal through the Crossref API (the publication date of the articles the API selected ranges from 2013 to 2024 with over 70% in 2023 or later). I then collated the title and abstract text of these articles into one document per journal and constructed two document-term matrices indicating the relative frequencies of terms within each document. Specifically, after putting the text in lowercase and the removal of punctuation as well as common English words identified by Lewis *et al.* (2004,

appendix 11), I created one matrix with information on the frequency of occurrence for words obtained and another for bi-grams, that is, occurrences of two adjacent words. The frequency of the terms, be it single words or word couples, was weighted by the prevalence of the terms within the corpus of all journal documents (TF-IDF) to distinguish terms that are specific to certain outlets from more generic terms (Wu *et al.*, 2008).

The purpose of the efforts described above was to come up with data allowing for the measurement of indicators of the extent to which recently published articles in the selected journals deal with sustainability. Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2020) list keywords related to the sustainability attributes within the framework they defined earlier, and assess the extent to which degree curricula cover these attributes based on the occurrences of these keywords among the learning objectives described in course syllabi. For the current analysis, I deduce the sustainability attributions from the Crossref data in a similar fashion: for each keyword Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2020) associate with a sustainability attribute, I take the TF-IDF value for the corresponding term in the document-term-matrix. For hyphenated keywords, such as “climate-change”, the de-hyphenated bi-gram is also taken. The sum of the values of the keywords associated with an attribute then constitutes its indicator.

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the sustainability attribute indicators thus obtained. The table shows some disparities among the sustainability attributes: first, looking at the left-most column, the number of keywords targeted differs greatly from one attribute to the other. For each attribute, one or more keywords are left unmatched. For keywords such as “just” and “needs”, this is by design as these terms also feature in the list of stopwords by Lewis *et al.* (2004, appendix 11). In contrast, other keywords, “hydrology” comes to mind, are too remote from management concerns as none of the authors of the articles in our sample has used the term in either title or abstract. The values close to zero in the next column from the left indicate that there are journals for which keywords associated with an attribute are mentioned only a couple of times among the 100 titles and abstracts associated with a journal, or alternatively are mentioned at least once in virtually every journal. From the quantiles, it appears that the indicator values tend to be distributed quite evenly around the mean even though there are extreme outliers as is evident from the relatively elevated maxima. Finally, the Cronbach values in the right-most columns provide an indication of the internal consistency among the keywords associated with the sustainability attributes. The internal consistency among the keywords associated with Safe Operating Spaces (SOS) is good and for Just Operating Spaces (JOS) and Resilient Sustainable Behavior

(RSB) it is acceptable. In contrast, the internal consistency is questionable in the case of Diversity (DI), poor for Health-and-Wellbeing (HW) and unacceptable for Collaboration (COL), Alternative Economic Models (AEM) and Transparency and Governance (TG).

Table 2 Term Frequency Distributions for Items Associated with Sustainability Attributes

	Items	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.	Cronbach α
SOS	73/84	0.00044	0.00578	0.00823	0.01008	0.01171	0.10054	0.81
COL	50/51	0.00019	0.00412	0.00580	0.00729	0.00854	0.06660	0.43
JOS	75/78	0.00150	0.00827	0.01226	0.01526	0.01838	0.07695	0.76
AEM	36/37	0.00070	0.00414	0.00755	0.00904	0.01141	0.07916	0.46
RSB	64/67	0.00000	0.00635	0.01075	0.01139	0.01511	0.05490	0.74
DI	41/43	0.00000	0.00207	0.00376	0.00473	0.00646	0.03388	0.61
HW	49/50	0.00015	0.00519	0.00839	0.00991	0.01307	0.05081	0.57
TG	30/33	0.00021	0.00385	0.00575	0.00685	0.00817	0.05114	0.40

Note: Statistics concern TF-IDF values per journal in the Crossref sample. “Items” indicates the number of matched terms in the sample relative to the number of keywords specified by Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2020) for each sustainability attribute.

Source: Own elaboration

ANALYSIS

To shed light on the relationship between sustainability attributes on the one hand and journal listings on the other hand, I estimate logit regression models with inclusion in a journal listing as a dependent variable and sustainability attribute indicators as independent variables. Following common practice, I focus on indicators for which the internal consistency is acceptable or good. In addition, I include the Scopus cite-score, a proxy for journal quality (Guz and Rushchitsky, 2009), as a control variable.

RESULTS

Before embarking on the regression analysis, I did some validity checks on the data. First, it was important to ascertain that the sustainability attribute scores attributed to the journals make sense. Table 3 gives summary information on the journals with the highest value for the sustainability attributes in the Crossref sample. Just by looking at the titles and their associated subject area, the identified journals seem to fit the sustainability attribute rather nicely, even though they might not be the key journals for research on that attribute. None of the journals in Table 3 are associated with the top-tier journals in the journal listings. It is not the case, however, that relevant journals are ignored: the FT journal listing includes the *Journal of Business Ethics*, which scores 0.02 on SOS and JOS and 0.05 on RSB, whilst another journal in the listing, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, also appears within the top quartile for SOS and JOS with scores of 0.014 and 0.033 respectively, even as it is in the lowest quartile for RSB with a score of 0.006. In fact, tests I subsequently carried out did not find any evidence for correlation among the independent variables with none of the indices exceeding 1.

Table 3 Journals Within Sample that best match Sustainability Attributes with Ranking when Available

	ISSN	Title	Area	FN	JQ	Meta
SOS	0924-6460	Environmental and Resource Economics	Economics	2		
COL	1046-4964	Small Group Research	OS/OB, HRM/IR	4		
JOS	0891-2432	Gender and Society	PSM	3		B
AEM	0198-9073	Journal of the American Taxation Association	F&A		B	
RSB	1052-150X	Business Ethics Quarterly	OS/OB, HRM/IR	2	B	B
DI	0361-6843	Psychology of Women Quarterly	OS/OB, HRM/IR			B
HW	0022-0221	Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology	Psychology		C	
TG	1742-7150	Leadership	OS/OB, HRM/IR	4	D	

Note: Subject areas from Harzing (2023): OS/OB, HRM/IR corresponds to Organisation Behaviour/Studies, Human Resource Management, Industrial Relations; PSM to Public Sector Management; and F&A to Finance and Accounting. FN is short for Fnege and JQ for JourQual; Fnege qualifies journals with ranks 2–4 as “Highly selective journals with a very demanding peer review process”, “Very good journals with a good scientific reputation and significant contributions”, and “Good journals with good selectivity and original contributions”, respectively; JQ rank B, C and D correspond to “Important and respected”, “Recognised” and “Peer reviewed”, respectively; and META rank B corresponds to the 250 lowest ranked journals in the listing.

Source: Own elaboration

Table 4 shows the results of the logit regressions on inclusion in a journal listing. In line with the correlation tests, the variance inflation factor (VIF) values for the variables are close to 1 so we can rule out issues of multicollinearity. The significance of the constants in most regressions together with the low log-likelihood values suggests however, that the models are subject to omitted variable bias. With this caveat in mind, these preliminary results suggest that there are considerable differences among journal listings in the attention that listed journals give to attributes of sustainability. Specifically, scholars interested in Resilient Sustainable Behavior (RSB) will find it harder to find publications outlets for the research in the FT journal listing and easier if they take the JourQual listing as a reference. In contrast, scholars interested in just operating spaces (JOS) should steer clear of JourQual or EJL.

Table 4 Logit Regression of Effect of Selected Journal Properties on Inclusion in Journal Listing

	Dependent Variable:				
	EJL	FT	Fnege	JourQual	Meta
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
SOS	217.651	245.820	27.608	228.312*	225.287*
	(16.349)	(39.489)	(15.192)	(16.031)	(14.592)
JOS	272.754***	239.419	27.566	285.593***	215.637
	(15.812)	(26.098)	(12.749)	(13.717)	(10.571)
RSB	24.768	273.957*	26.145	61.901***	21.704
	(16.636)	(39.118)	(23.161)	(21.691)	(15.804)
Scopus	0.126***	0.268***	0.071	0.075**	0.165***
	(0.033)	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.038)	(0.037)
Constant	0.139	22.212***	1.165***	1.433***	20.174
	(0.337)	(0.628)	(0.409)	(0.383)	(0.322)
Observations	370	370	370	370	370
Log Likelihood	2223.930	293.837	2164.699	2191.857	2240.874
Akaike Inf. Crit.	457.859	197.674	339.398	393.715	491.748

Note: *p**p***p,0.01

Source: Own elaboration

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The significant positive and negative relationships between sustainability focus and journal listings found here have clear policy implications. As business schools

commit themselves to contribute to certain SDGs, the results provide a preliminary check for the compatibility of the research strategy with these goals. For instance, any school committing to “Quality Education”, “Sustainable Cities and Communities” or “Responsible Consumption and Production”, which are the SDGs associated with RSB, whose research policy consists of encouraging its faculty to publish in journals included in the FT 2016 list, will need to come up with an explanation how it squares these conflicting objectives. Similarly, a school cannot at the same time contribute to SDGs “No Poverty”, “Zero Hunger”, “Gender Equality”, “Reduced Inequalities” or “Peace Justice and Strong Institutions” (Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2019) and adhere to EIJ 2020 or JourQual 2015, unless it provides complementary research incentives to compensate from the disincentive of the relative exclusion of those topics from those listings.

The results presented here are preliminary, however, and have some obvious limitations. Further research should establish what kind of research is needed to facilitate the implementation of Agenda 2030, beyond the systemic perspective on sustainable development which was our focus here. In addition, it would be useful to have a more complete model of what it takes to be included in one journal listing rather than another. Increasing the scale and scope of the analysis of this paper can go some way to address these limitations. That is, it might be easier to predict what it takes to get into restrictive journal listings after the inclusion of observations on journals outside these listings. In addition, one could try to include other characterisations of article content, either within the scope of sustainability or with respect to management in general. Finally, and most trivially, one could improve the quality of the estimates by increasing the sample size.

In short, these results are a call for action on multiple levels. For deans and boards of business schools, as well as their accreditors, it is a call to check for the consistency of research strategies and for researchers who care about Agenda 2030 it is a call to spell out research priorities more clearly and to improve indicators that show to what extent these priorities are addressed. To move forward on the latter, a combination of expert judgements and more computationally expensive methods are probably required.

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BIOGRAPHY



Dr Matthijs den Besten co-ordinates the Sustainability Lab at Montpellier Business School, that has adopted policies that tie career opportunities and bonuses to publication in listed journals. His research covers a wide range of topics including early work on how science can leverage digital transformation.