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Special Issue: Journal Impact Factors

Editorial: Chris Ryan, University of Waikato, New Zealand; email: caryan@waikato.ac.nz

and Stephen J. Page, Bournemouth University; email: spage@bournemouth.ac.uk

Introduction

As many readers will be aware, *Tourism Management* has not hosted Special Issues since 2000 when it ran a feature on the Competitive Destination and the recent Virtual Special Issue that collated the *Progress in Tourism Management: The first six years 2007-2013* review papers. Our decision to suspend Special Issues reflects the huge growth in submission and the volume of papers the Journal now publishes. In 1996 the journal was publishing around 60 papers a year from about 250-300 submissions. In 2014 this will have grown to over 900 submissions and approximately 130 papers published with acceptance rates of around 15-18%. This exponential growth in the journal's popularity means that space for Special Issues has been at a premium while the prime consideration has been the timely publication of cutting edge scholarly papers. Accompanying these changes has been a rise in the interdisciplinary content of much of the work now being published in the journal. An important ethos of the journal which the Editors espouse is that *Tourism Management* remains a broad-based journal that embraces that interdisciplinarity and encourages scholarly debate on papers that occurs from time to time in Rejoinders we publish while additionally encouraging the publication of novel and controversial topics.

This is where the origins of this special issue are rooted – the debate around a hotly contested subject – the Journal *Impact Factor* (often abbreviated to the IF). The origins of this debate are the receipt of a paper on the subject and the subsequent decision to commission commentaries from a series of academics who serve as Journal Editors in the Tourism field and who have published on the issue of Journals and ratings/metrics. The papers that are contained in this Special Issue are the opinions of the authors and do not reflect the views of the Publisher, as we encourage very open debate around a subject that has become prominent across the Sciences and Social Sciences. As a prelude to the individual papers, we provide a short discussion of the wider institutional and political context in which the Impact Factors and Journals debate has arisen.

The Institutional and Political Context of Impact Factors and Journals: The Transformation of the Higher Education sector

Increasingly the public sector has come under closer scrutiny as to its spending as the neo-liberal agenda has been adopted in much of the English speaking world. This agenda has several facets, but one key aspect has been that the market place represents a better means of resource planning than government direction, and that government should therefore reduce its intrusion into the market place. Under this ideology the premises that created the welfare state in countries such as Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Canada have been increasingly questioned – and this debate has heavily influenced the provision of services such as health and education. Combined with this ideological shift, governments in many parts of the world have sought to extend university education for numerous reasons ranging from a perceived need for more educated labour, often guided by the OECD notion of providing 50% of the youth population access to higher education to stimulate a highly educated workforce and meet the needs of a modern economy based on knowledge. In addition, there is also a belief that education can be an important means of self-fulfillment. However, in more recent times, the functional aspects of a trained labour force seem to be the more important rationale for an expansion of university education in countries such as New

Zealand, while too the internationalization of a global student market gives rise to utterances by some politicians that imply university education is to be valued primarily as an export.

Under these scenarios universities in the west have experienced growing budgets but often simultaneously lower income per student as student numbers have increased for more than 50 years (with an occasional contraction as budget cuts temporarily halted growth). Equally, and particularly in the last three decades, these stresses have been accompanied by greater demands of accountability in spending, flexibility in meeting shifting employer needs and growing competition for funding from both the public and private sectors. Conversely these factors have also led to the growth of a larger number of administrative posts in universities, and the development of university marketing initiatives that replicate processes in the corporate world in, for example, the sponsorship of sports teams, venues and events. One consequence is that, in many western universities, academics may now be less than 40% of the total workforce.

In a further duplication of the corporate world, the traditional patterns of academic employment are being increasingly eroded as greater use is made of short term contracts associated with specific courses, initiatives and research projects. Such practices are deemed to provide flexibility and to be cost effective.

These factors have all led to a wish to measure performance, and many countries have now initiated mechanisms of monitoring teaching and research at a governmental level, while individual universities, faculties and departments have instituted their own measures. As noted in the following papers, this process has become global as universities compete for higher standings in global measures such as those associated with the Times Higher Education listings and the pursuit of achieving the Top 100 rankings as a mark of prestige and standing.

This background explains the importance being attributed to Impact Factors – a metric that has come to measure research performance, and hence in turn a measure being used when seeking to employ staff at all levels. The deficiencies of the metric are generally well known among academics. As noted in the commentaries that follow, they are poor at comparing research across different

disciplines while critics also state they lead to less innovative work, an under-evaluation of work completed outside of restricted lists of journals, less holistic reporting of research as authors seek more than one publication from a project, and an under-evaluation of the other aspects of academic life including teaching, peer support and a sense of community. This has been accompanied by the marketization of higher education in many countries national government policies, meaning that Universities have employed larger numbers of administrators to manage the increased accountability agenda. This has been driven by the need for regular reporting of performance to central government agencies and internal accountability to measure performance against recruiting students for budgetary reasons and retaining them. These pressures have been increased by the growing demands imposed by the new information technologies for measuring all facets of the student experience, research performance and other areas of operations including financial performance, prudence and risk on University balance sheets. Indeed one might argue that the very soul of the university is under stresses not previously experienced in a history of centuries now that they are multi-million dollar businesses sitting within a public sector environment subject to market forces and the vagaries of competition.

These issues are not restricted to the older universities of the western world. The newer universities of Asia also strive to attract students (in some cases in face of ageing populations) and to retain good staff and offer them attractive careers. In both old and new universities the focus has to simultaneously be on maximizing revenues, achieving corporate goals and satisfying students – not as learners – but as consumers – the consequence of a gradual state transformation stimulated by the shift to fees and a more user-pays philosophy. Easily assessed units of measurement become important as a short hand by which to judge academic performance – and of these the Impact Factor that seeks to measure the value of research in terms of citations has become an important criterion.

The Impact Factor has thus come to play an increasing role for academics in university life – in some cases (as in China) it bestows through publication the required doctoral degree, and commonly it determines the nature of posts to be gained, of whether tenure might be granted and to what extent promotion might

be successfully sought. In the past decade the Impact Factor has been a major determinant in shaping academic careers. The following papers represent an analysis of these trends.

However, from one perspective the arguments and criticisms may be increasingly only partially relevant to the emerging university world of the next decade. The research assessment exercises are shifting the goal posts of research evaluation as measured by Impact Factors. The guidance of governments in the English speaking world are no longer about citations in journals, but about observable impacts on policy making, society and public engagement, about making progress in specified areas of research (the so-called STEM areas of work) and the contributions made to the achievement of government agendas. The paradox of the neo-liberal agenda is that having created a means of measuring competition – it is now turning back to increasingly directed patterns of research funding based on compliance with government determined objectives in partnership with corporate entities in some countries.

The following commentaries therefore represent both a backward and forward glance. They look at a disappearing world of academic life – a life that was transformed by changing expectation of universities and subsequent patterns of funding. These patterns of funding gave importance to the Impact Factor, but possibly the apogee of the Impact Factor has now been reached. Hence these commentaries also represent a forward glance – a glance into a future where research is increasingly assessed by criteria very different to those traditionally espoused and in a world of not only integrity but also the scam artist as represented by the predatory journals (and conferences) now being created online that prey on unsuspecting academics seeking to progress their own careers. We hope you will find the debates in these papers interesting and stimulating in relation to the issues we have outlined.