

# THE PROFESSION

## on the use and abuse of bibliometric performance indicators: a critique of Hix's 'global ranking of political science departments'

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210136

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### **Abstract**

Bibliometric measures, as provided by the Social Science Citation Index of the Institute for Scientific Information, certainly represent a useful tool for librarians and researchers. However, although librarian scientists have shown that the use of journal impact factors to evaluate the performance of academics is misleading, some authors continue to promote bibliometric metrics to assess the productivity of academic departments and even the entire European academic community. Taking an ambitious 'global ranking of political science departments' as a reference, this article questions both the reliability and desirability of bibliometric performance indicators. The article concludes that the development of a panopticon-like audit culture in universities will not enhance their quality, but rather undermine the classical idea and purpose of the university.

**Keywords** bibliometric performance indicators; journal impact factor; political science; public policy instruments; research assessment exercise; university restructuring

### **QUANTIFYING QUALITY – ARE UNIVERSITY RANKINGS DESIRABLE?**

**I**f one defines the university according to Wilhelm von Humboldt's classic definition (Fehér, 2001), as a space

of self-formation that is characterised by a unity of research and teaching, academic freedom, collegiality and intellectual and methodological pluralism, then its quality cannot be evaluated by quantitative university rankings. While controlling governments, corporations and university

administrators are certainly keen to establish cheap performance metrics 'allowing for mechanised annual updates' (Hix, 2004a: 293), it is much more difficult to understand why some academics are facilitating the rise of managerialist rituals of verification in the university sector (Power, 1997, Shore and Wright, 2000).

Quantitative performance metrics, as they are used in industry as a technocratic tool to benchmark the performance of workers, do not play out to the advantage of academia as a whole. As emphasised by critical industrial relations and new public management research, such metrics entail perverse effects, especially regarding the performance of highly skilled employees in the public service (Clark and Newman, 1997: 80f; Crouch, 2003: 9). In contrast to non-skilled manual work, the quantity and quality of *all* aspects of work performed by highly skilled professionals cannot be monitored at the same time (Goldthorpe, 2000). As it will never be possible to design a performance measurement system that adequately captures *all* aspects of multifaceted academic work,<sup>1</sup> the introduction of quantitative performance metrics will not induce better performance of academics, but influence their distribution of effort, and of time and attention, *among* their different responsibilities. It follows that the introduction of global rankings of university departments does not represent a neutral tool to increase academic performance, but a powerful instrument that is pressuring academic departments across the world to align themselves to the criteria set by the constructors of the rankings' performance metrics. The introduction of controlling benchmarking techniques represents a fundamental shift from the management by commitment approach usually used in relation to highly skilled professionals, to the neo-Taylorist management by control approach traditionally used in relation to unskilled workers.

*'...the introduction of quantitative performance metrics will not induce better 'performance' of academics, but 'influence' their distribution of effort, and of time and attention, among their different responsibilities'*

While any ranking allows the benchmarked entities to adopt different strategies to become 'good', any ranking assumes that there is only *one* way of actually being good. By selecting the metrics of his global ranking of political science departments, Hix (2004a, b) is assuming that there is a universally acceptable definition of the discipline's boundaries and a shared definition of the activities that distinguish the best academic departments. However, how can one sustain such a bold claim? Are we now living in an academic world that is dominated by 'one meta-language, and one-intellectual style, beamed all over the universe' (Galtung, 1990: 111) or, is Johan Galtung's plea for theoretical and methodological pluralism still valid? By stating that a global ranking of research outputs 'could be constructed in political science', Hix (2005) assumes that there is a universal meta-language in political science, which would permit us to measure the performance of all political science departments across the globe. However, even if this were the case, the question remains whether one could actually construct corresponding performance measurement variables in any reliable way, given Albert Einstein's observation that 'everything that can be

counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted' (cited by Mattern, 2002: 22).

## **HIX'S RANKING – A RELIABLE 'PERFORMANCE' INDICATOR?**

University rankings are frequently based on a rather arbitrary selection of a narrow set of performance indicators and an arbitrary allocation of weightings to them (Turner, 2005). Hix's global ranking of political science departments is no exception. The ranking averages the position of departments on four sub-rankings (R1–R4), which, strikingly, are all influenced by one single measure. While the first ranking (R1) is based on the quantity of articles published by a member of an institution in the selected sixty-three 'main political science journals' (measure A), the other three rankings are based on:

- the product of measure A and Hix's journal impact factor (R2);
- the measure A per faculty member (R3);
- the product of measure A and Hix's journal impact factor per faculty member (R4).

Many flaws of this ranking exercise have already been discussed and Hix (2005) himself recognises that his model includes several biases. It is indeed noteworthy that his ranking exercise is based on only one reliable measure (number of articles), one unreliable observation (faculty size) and at least five arbitrary decisions, namely

- (1) the way by which the composite, overall ranking is constructed,
- (2) the selection of its four sub-rankings,
- (3) the selection of its key indicator to measure academic performance,
- (4) the selection of its sixty-three main political science journals,
- (5) the use of its specific journal impact factor as a performance indicator.

Henceforth, the article critically discusses these five decisions and their implications.

## **A COMPOSITE RANKING BASED ON ERRONEOUS AVERAGING OF ORDINAL SCALES**

By creating a single, easily grasped ranking of an institution, Hix is following many other university league tables, which are based on the averaging of the results from different sub-rankings. In mathematical terms, however, this process is indefensible, as the scales of the four sub-rankings do not allow the creation of a reliable composite ranking (Turner, 2005). While the first-placed department on the first sub-ranking (R1) was, for example, 61.06 articles ahead of the second, the distance between the 32nd and 33rd positions was only 0.17 articles (Hix, 2004a: 304). Hence, the creation of Hix's composite ranking is faulty as it is based on the arithmetic average of ordinal scales (Benninghaus, 1994). The way by which the composite ranking is constructed is also questionable, as its four sub-rankings are based on variables that are not mutually exclusive. In fact, measure A influences all four sub-rankings.

## **A SELECTION OF SUB-RANKINGS THAT SIMPLY FAVOURS BIG INSTITUTIONS**

The decision to base the overall, composite ranking on four sub-rankings is arbitrary for another reason. The performance indicators of any comparative benchmarking exercise should never be based on absolute, but on output per input measures. The number of published articles per institution makes no comparative sense if it is not related to the institution's resources, for example, its faculty size. It follows that the sub-rankings R1 and R2 – that are based on absolute figures – are meaningless, as they lack any denominator. Hence, the sub-rankings R1 and R2 do not measure the performance of the

institutions, but just provide a biased proxy for their size and material resources.

It follows that Hix's ranking is biased in favour of big institutions, such as Harvard and Hix's London School of Economics (LSE). While LSE ranks second and fourth in the two, denominator-less sub-rankings, it figures in the two sub-rankings that relate the number of publications to the institution's faculty size only at the 31st and 57th place, respectively. Moreover, the sub-rankings 1 and 2 also convey a distorted picture of the performance of European political science departments by comparison to their US counterparts. If one looks only at the sub-rankings that take faculty size into account, the productivity of the European political science departments is indeed much higher.

Hence, the worries of Gerald Schneider *et al* (2006), according to whom the European political science departments would be 'unproductive', are hardly justified. European political science departments hold, for instance, all top six positions in the sub-ranking (R3) (Hix, 2004a: 304). If one takes into account the smaller resources that are available to European universities, European political science departments are much more productive than implied by their overall rank on the Hix index. Yet, one must also keep in mind that even the two sub-rankings (R3; R4) that take faculty size into account face major problems. In fact, universities often manipulate their faculty size to be able to report a higher productivity per head; as might be the case in Britain due to the Research Assessment Exercise (Bull and Espíndola, 2005) and in business schools across the world, in relation to the *Financial Times* and *Economist* rankings.

### **AN ARBITRARY SELECTION OF ITS KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR**

The choice of Hix's key performance measures, namely the quantity of articles published in mainstream journals, must also be

criticised as it does not capture all aspects of academic excellence. As emphasised by Bull and Espíndola (2005), Hix's ranking entails several biases; namely against political scientists with book publications, non-English publications and publications in non-mainstream political science journals. Furthermore, the quantitative focus of the indicators cannot capture the quality of academic publishing. On the contrary, because such indicators favour questionable publishing practices, such as salami slice publishing and self-plagiarism (Mattern, 2002; Terrier, 2002), they are likely to be inversely related to quality.

In his response to critics, Hix concedes that the English language-centricity of the method 'is difficult, and perhaps even impossible to fix'. Moreover, he effectively acknowledges the one-dimensionality of his league table by encouraging others to construct a book publication-based ranking (Hix, 2005: 30). This response, however, is rather disingenuous, as he knows that 'analysing the content of books and the number of citations to particular book series is costly, since there is not a single database of book publications and book citations like the SSCI for journal publications' (Hix, 2004a: 295). Hix also fails to address the salami slice and self-plagiarism criticism in both the *European Political Science* and the *Political Studies Review* versions of his ranking exercise (Hix, 2004a, b).

### **AN ARBITRARY SELECTION OF THE SIXTY-THREE 'MAIN POLITICAL SCIENCE JOURNALS'**

The selection of the sixty-three main political science journals is also rather arbitrary. At the outset, Hix concluded that the political science and international relations journals included in the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) Journal Citation Reports of the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) do not represent an adequate sample of the main political science journals (Hix, 2004a: 296). This

observation is not surprising, as it corresponds to researchers' perceptions in other disciplines (Lewinson, 2002). However, rather than acknowledging that it is hardly possible to reach a universally acceptable and reliable definition of the main political science journals, Hix engages in an arbitrary selection process, which eventually leads to a list of the sixty-three main political science journals.

This list excludes approximately 40 per cent of the ISI's own list of top-ranked political sciences journals,<sup>2</sup> as they would – according to Hix – 'in fact be journals in other fields of social science, such as law, economics, geography, sociology, history, psychology, social policy, communications, philosophy or management' (Hix, 2004a: 297). By tautologically defining a political science journal, 'for the sake of simplicity' as a journal that is '(a) edited by a political scientist and (b) has a majority of political scientists on its editorial board' (2004a: 297), Hix's list effectively supports a very narrow, subject area-centred view of political science, which mirrors its institutionalisation in the British context. However, if one defines the discipline rather via its approach, as a '*Integrationswissenschaft*', which according to the founders of West German political science after 1945 aims to analyse *the political* in all fields of society (Buchstein, 1992), then the exclusion of social policy, international political economy, political psychology, etc. from the remit of political science must be perceived as outrageous. As this 'integrative' understanding of political science is much more common among critical academics, Hix's selection of journals effectively serves a particular political agenda. Moreover, the rankings' concentration on narrow, discipline-limited political science journals also encourages political scientists to play very safe with narrowly defined, easily evaluated projects. Ironically, this discourages interdisciplinary

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work right at a time when innovation is happening precisely at the borders between disciplines (Hollingsworth, 2000).

It is also noteworthy that Hix's list of the sixty-three main political science journals includes a non-peer-reviewed publication, namely *Foreign Affairs*. While one can indeed make a strong case in favour of academics who act as public intellectuals and publish not only in sparsely read academic journals but also in widely distributed current affairs periodicals (Lynch, 2006), it is nevertheless striking that the only non-peer-reviewed periodical included in Hix's list is published by an established US-American think tank.

In addition, the list of the chosen sixty-three journals excludes a third of the SSCI's 'political science' journals, namely, those that received in 2002 less than 100 citations from all the journals included in the SSCI (Hix, 2004a). However, this de-selection criterion clearly favours journals that publish many issues per year. Moreover, it is also rather astonishing to define the main political science journals in relation to the citations received from a sample, 98 per cent of which consists of non-political science journals. The author also does not explain why the ISI, which according to Hix himself has not provided a reliable list of political science journals, would be in a position to provide a reliable list of all relevant social science journals. Not only the ISI's

selection of political science journals, but the whole SSCI is biased, especially in favour of British- and US-journals, but also in favour of some specific sub-fields. However, this is a problem that cannot be 'fixed' by arbitrarily adding a German, a Scandinavian and an Australian journal as well as six 'major sub-field journals' to the list of the sixty-three major political science journals (Hix, 2004b: 297). Why should one only add the journal of the German political science association to the list and not a journal from another, maybe smaller but equally interesting country? Who defines what the major sub-fields of political science actually are? The lack of consideration for this question is even more egregious in the light of Hix's own failure to acknowledge any conflict of interest as associate editor of one of the added journals, namely *European Union Politics*.

### **HIX'S 'IMPACT FACTOR' – A RELIABLE INDICATOR?**

*European Union Politics* also benefitted from the journal impact factor that has been especially created for the purpose of this ranking exercise, as the standard ISI impact factor 'would create a bias against recently established journals' (Hix, 2004a: 299). While the ISI impact factor indeed involves many biases, the introduction of a corrective in Hix's impact factor formula does not represent a solution. The ISI impact factor measures are not only biased against new journals, but also against specific journal types. Per O. Seglen, for instance, has shown that 'high impact factors are likely in journals covering large areas of basic research with a rapidly expanding but short lived literature that use many references per article' (1997: 497).

Brian D. Cameron (2005) presents the even more troubling findings of a study that analyses emerging publishing

practices in health sciences. Cameron shows that commercial publishers and academic editors are increasingly manipulating journal impact factors to enhance their journals' standing and profits. They are doing so by increasing the number of review articles, by encouraging controversial debates, by publishing serial articles and research that has in part already been published elsewhere and by requiring the inclusion of specific references. In contrast, a journal that aims to get a high impact factor should avoid publishing primary research and case studies, as they are less likely to be cited (Cameron, 2005).

Furthermore, as Seglen discovered by studying citation rates in biomedical journals, the overall impact factor of a journal is only marginally related to each individual article, as 'articles in the most cited half of articles in a journal are cited 10 times as often as the least cited half' (Seglen, 1997: 497). As it would not seem reasonable to suggest that the editors and the reviewers of an academic journal apply different quality standards to different articles in their journal, Seglen's finding fundamentally questions the belief that impact factors are reliable measures to assess the quality of academic publications. High citation rates are not a measure of the appropriateness of the research direction of a paper or a journal, but only of its capacity to generate reactions within the research community. Whenever one uses bibliometric measures, one should therefore always be very aware of their Pied Piper of Hamelin effect (Kostoff, 1998).

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has argued that Hix's global ranking of political science departments is based on several arbitrary choices. Yet, it would be wrong to assume that one could solve the problem by simply amending

the proposed performance metrics. On the one hand, any auditing exercise is deeply shaped by its underlying political assumptions and definitions. It is well established that the introduction of new, accountancy-driven public policy instruments is not a neutral and apolitical technical practice (Power, 2003: 392). Metrics-based policy instruments also constitute 'a condensed form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it' (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007). On the other hand, university rankings are in particular affected by arbitrary choices, as quantitative performance metrics will never be able to measure all aspects of multifaceted academic work. As a result, university rankings are producing perverse effects, independently of the objective pursued. Per definition, rankings assume that there is only one way to be good. The rankings' inherent unitarist logic, however, can hardly be reconciled with the principles of academic freedom and methodological and intellectual pluralism. It follows that it will never be possible to produce an objective quantitative performance ranking of academic departments. Furthermore, any ranking exercise will always produce winners and losers, and the more the outcome of ranking exercises impacts upon the distributions of research funds, departmental resources and academic salaries, the less likely it will be to attain a consensus on how to measure the performance of political science departments.

For this very reason, it is not surprising that the same governmental, corporate and university administrators that are promoting quantitative university rankings, are also at the forefront of another battle, which is currently shaking the university sector across Europe. Be it Oxford University, the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich or University College Dublin, in all three cases, the university presidents and vice chan-

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cellor have proposed – with more or less success – far-reaching restructurings of the university's governance structures, which aim to replace collegial by authoritarian decision-making mechanisms. Apparently, the promotion of quantitative performance metrics in higher education can hardly be reconciled with a classical understanding of the *college*, as a space in which we approach and respect each other as *colleagues*. While the creative destruction of collegiality within academia will certainly benefit some academics, such as the new corporate university presidents and their associates,<sup>3</sup> it is very doubtful that such a process will enhance the quality of higher education.

The particular way by which institutions are held to account says much about dominant political and socio-economic values (Power, 1997). The same seems to be true also in relation to the creation of global university rankings. In fact, the rise of such market-emulating mechanisms in the university sector is no coincidence. They mirror the growing marketisation of higher education in many corners of the world (Lynch, 2006). In fact, according to UNESCO's International Ranking Expert Group, global university rankings above all serve to promote customer choice and to stimulate competition among higher education institutions (IREG, 2006). As rankings

aim to construct a new currency for the evaluation of academic excellence, the promotion of Hix's global university rankings should not be analysed as a mere technology transfer, but as a very political tool, with potentially far-reaching consequences for both academic life and the life of academics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank John Baker, Colin Crouch, Stefan Klein, Oscar Molina, Sabina Stan and Tobias Theiler for valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper. The usual disclaimer applies.

## Notes

1 For instance, according to Article 12 of the Irish Universities Act, 1997, the objectives of universities are: '(a) to advance knowledge through teaching, scholarly research and scientific investigation, (b) to promote learning in its student body and in society generally, (c) to promote the cultural and social life of society, while fostering and respecting the diversity of the university's traditions, (d) to foster a capacity for independent critical thinking amongst its students, (e) to promote the official languages of the State, with special regard to the preservation, promotion and use of the Irish language and the preservation and promotion of the distinctive cultures of Ireland, (f) to support and contribute to the realisation of national economic and social development, (g) to educate, train and retrain higher level professional, technical and managerial personnel, (h) to promote the highest standards in, and quality of, teaching and research, (i) to disseminate the outcomes of its research in the general community, (j) to facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education, and (k) to promote gender balance and equality of opportunity among students and employees of the university' (Irish Statute Book, 2007).

2 Incidentally, the following journals, which all figured among the top twenty 'political science' journals according to the ISI impact factor analysis in 2003, have not been included in Hix's list of the main political science journals: *Political Geography* (second ranked), *Annual Review of Political Science* (fifth), *Public Opinion Quarterly* (seventh), *Political Physiology* (eleventh), *New Left Review* (twelfth), *Survival* (thirteenth), *Review of International Political Economy* (seventeenth) and *Policy and Politics* (nineteenth).

3 It goes without saying that the €320,000 p.a. pay claim by the presidents of the seven Irish universities (University College, Dublin (UCD), Trinity, Dublin City University, Cork, Maynooth, Galway and Limerick) – representing a 55 per cent pay rise of up to €135,000 p.a. – is corroding staff morale and the above cited, egalitarian objectives of the Irish university sector. Incidentally, UCD president, Hugh Brady, justified his wage claim by suggesting that his role was now more 'akin to that of the corporate chief executive who must develop and drive strategically and position their business to grow' (Gleeson, 2007). While the Irish universities have always had a majority of unelected non-academics on their governing bodies, it is noteworthy that a corresponding, corporate takeover of Oxford University dramatically failed in December 2006, as a clear majority of its academic staff rejected a set of controversial governance proposals in an internal referendum, despite huge governmental and corporate pressures (MacNamara, 2006).

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