

'Sustainable Future'



Business school rankings have resulted in devotion and ridicule in equal measure since they were first developed, and yet they maintain huge popularity with prospective students and administrators alike. **Simon Linacre** looks at how the status quo could change by adopting a focus on UN Sustainable Development Goals

Do you remember those far-off days when we actually went to academic conferences? One of the many benefits we enjoyed was to meet a kindred spirit, someone who shared your thoughts and ideas, and who you looked forward to seeing again at another event on the circuit. These long-distance friendships often enabled you to develop something meaningful with your work, and also went some way towards justifying the time and expense the trips often entailed.

Such a meeting occurred at the GBSN annual conference in Lisbon, Portugal at the end of 2019 between myself and Professor David Steingard from the Haub School of Business at Saint Joseph’s University (SJU) in the US. He was at the event to present some of the work he had been doing at SJU on its SDG Dashboard (https://sdgdashboard.sju.edu/?page_id=22) – an interactive visualisation and data analytics tool demonstrating how university programmes align with the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the gala dinner I sought out Dr. Steingard and asked him something that had been buzzing inside my head ever since I had heard him speak:

What if you worked with us at Cabells and applied SDG reporting methodology to academic journals?

Cabells is a scholarly analytics company founded in 1978, and since then has maintained records of reputable, peer-reviewed business and management journals. Since the first hard copy directory the company published, the resource has grown into a fully searchable database of over 11,000 journals across multiple subject areas, but its specialism has always been in management sciences. Its

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database of journals – now called Journalytics – includes information on citations, acceptance rates, publication times and media influence, and as part of its continual product development, new metrics are always being evaluated. As such, including information based on the increasing importance of the UN SDGs was something Cabells was keen to explore.

Prof. Steingard and I met again at Davos in 2020, and from then on small teams at SJU and Cabells have been working on a methodology for analysing and assessing the extent to which a journal has engaged with the UN’s SDGs through the articles it has published over time. This has resulted in the new metric announced earlier in 2021 – SDG Impact Intensity™ – the first academic journal rating system for evaluating how journals contribute to positively impacting the SDGs (<https://blog.cabells.com/2021/03/17/cabells-launches-new-sdg-impact-intensity-journal-rating-system-in-partnership-with-saint-josephs-universitys-haub-school-of-business/>).

Using data collated from Cabells’ Journalytics database and running it through SJU’s AI-based methodology for identifying SDG relevance, SDG Impact Intensity™ provides a rating of up to five ‘SDG wheels’ to summarise the SDG relevance of articles published in the journals over a five-year period (2016-2020). For the first pilot phase of development, we chose 50 of the most storied business and management journals used for the Financial Times Global MBA ranking (<http://rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/global-mba-ranking-2021>) as well as 50 journals from Cabells’ Journalytics database most focused on sustainability, ethics, public policy and environmental management (<https://www2.cabells.com/about-journalytics>).

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It may come as no surprise to learn that the so-called top business journals lagged far behind their counterparts when it came to levels of SDG focus. For example, none of the top 26 journals in the pilot phase were from the FT50, and only four of the top ten were from the world's five biggest academic publishers. In contrast, the journals traditionally ranked at the very top of management journal rankings from the past 50 years in disciplines such as marketing, accounting, finance and management languish at bottom of the pilot phase ratings. While these results were expected, it perhaps shows that while governments, funders, and society as a whole have started to embrace the SDGs, this has yet to filter through to what has been published in journals traditionally regarded as high impact. There has long been criticism that such titles have been favoured by business school management structures over more innovative, real-world relevant journals, and this seems to be borne out by the results of Cabells' research with SJU. The very notion of what academic journal "quality" means is fundamentally challenged when we consider how journals can make an "impact" through engaging the SDGs.

So, what are the implications of this research for business schools?

Traditionally, business schools have been viewed through the prism of university rankings, which have become an essential part of the marketing mix for outfits such as THE, the *Financial Times* and QS. Metrics such as research publications, graduate salaries and employability have been the staple of such rankings for many years. However, some are concerned at the imbalance that exists between the importance placed on rankings by institutions and the transparency and/or relevance of the rankings themselves. A perpetual case, perhaps, of the tail wagging the dog.

The list of 50 journals used by the *Financial Times* as the basis for one of its numerous criteria for assessing business schools for its annual rankings (<https://www.ft.com/content/3405a512-5cbb-11e1-8f1f-00144feabdc0>) is currently under review after not changing since 2016, and even then it only added five journals from the 45 it used prior to that date, which was itself an upgrade from 40 used in the 2000s. In other words, despite the massive changes seen in business and business education – from Enron to the global financial crisis to globalisation to the COVID pandemic – there has been barely any change in the journals used to assess publications from business schools to determine whether they are of high quality. Rumour has it that the FT has been inundated by thousands of suggestions about how the list could change, so it will be interesting to see if the paper decides to do more than simply add another five journals, especially when the time seems to be right to embrace much greater change.

However, when the FT's Global Education Editor Andrew Jack (<https://www.ft.com/stream/b359c1e1-f7ed-4239-816c-1720f99df8b4>) was questioned about the relevance of the FT50 and the rankings in general on a panel session in Davos in 2020, he answered that to change the criteria would endanger the comparability of the rankings. The previous intransigence by the FT and other actors in higher education and scholarly communications was in part the motivation behind Cabells' pilot study with SJU using the SDGs. Maintaining the status quo reinforces paradigms and restricts diversity, marginalising those in vulnerable and alternative environments.





Business schools – already facing an uncertain future from the fallout the coronavirus pandemic and looming climate change impacts – find themselves torn between sticking with the familiar metrics and rankings as a core part of their marketing strategy and pursuing mission-driven research which may run counter to these traditional measures. For example, what should a business school dean advise when a department head asks about suggested publications for his team’s large, multidisciplinary research project. Should she recommend FT50 journals to boost the scores for the FT’s MBA rankings, or should she recommend a selection of SDG-focused journals that will amplify research impact?

Adopting a focus on the SDGs and grand challenges is of course not alien to business schools, with many institutions keen to stress their environmental, social and governance credentials for several years now. Indeed, this push has started to inject a new energy into university rankings as well. A story in *Times Higher Education* (THE) in April 2021 reported

that the status of a university vis-à-vis sustainability was now the primary consideration for international students, ahead of academic reputation, location and job prospects (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/sustainability-more-important-location-mobile-students>). THE then produced a ranking just a week later providing students with a ranking of universities based on their sustainability credentials (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/undefined). Aligned with the UN’s SDGs, the ranking is now established, and this year proclaimed the University of Manchester in the UK as the number one university with the highest impact ranking across all 17 SDGs, although it was somewhat of an outlier for the UK, with four of the top ten universities based in Australia.

If the story in THE was true and students and authors do want information on SDGs and sustainability to make their education choices, it is beholden on business schools – as well as publishers and the scholarly communications industry as a whole – to try and supply it in as many ways as possible. Worrying about how well the numbers stack up seems to belong to a world we left behind a long time ago – a world that some agencies seem to want to cling onto despite evident shortcomings. Business schools are forever talking the talk when it comes to sustainability issues and being progressive, but by ignoring the old game of rankings and embracing new games such as sustainability and climate change, they can move towards a broader encouragement of research and publication that generates a positive impact on bettering society. In turn, we should see academia and scholarly communications play their part in ensuring that the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development moves forward that much quicker.



About the Author

Simon Linacre is Marketing Director at Cabells, having spent 15 years in publishing at Emerald, where he led the business and management journals division. His background is in journalism and he has been published in academic journals on the topics of research impact and publication ethics. He holds master’s degrees in philosophy and international business and has global experience lecturing to researchers on publishing strategies.