

IFSAM Conversation Letter 1 – February 15 2021
On the First Webinar, January 29, 2021
of IFSAM Webinar Series on Management Research Evaluation

When the Financial Times launched a [questionnaire](#) late last year on how it assesses academic research, it unleashed a fierce reaction.

Editors and the professional bodies behind some publications got in touch to plead the case for inclusion of their particular journals in the [FT50 list](#), and circulated petitions via email, online and via social media to urge their contributors and supporters to lobby on their behalf.

Professors wrote in to express concerns about manipulation. One blog argued: “Journal mafias are rallying to make their journals remain and/or join the FT journal ranking. They've been sending unashamed e-mail messages to their affiliates asking to favourably answer an on-line survey.”

IFSAM itself announced a [webinar](#) with a statement saying it was “concerned” about the process, which it characterised as a “vote” on scientific and practitioner journals. It criticised an “apparently democratic procedure which is asymmetrically reaching the field”.

I was happy to engage in that discussion, as part of an extensive broader range of consultations that we have launched with business schools and those who interact with them - from students and recruiters, to external individuals and organisations that speak at, train with or seek the best thought leadership from academia.

The FT recognises and takes very seriously its relationship with business schools, and the rigour with which it attempts to assess them through both quantifiable measures such as our [rankings](#) and qualitatively through extensive wider reporting. We are mindful that the FT50 is widely used and has an influence in publishing, recruitment, promotion and funding.

Academic output - as currently captured by the FT50 - is an important part of our rankings, as an indicator of research and its translation into teaching. As society and academia evolves, specialisms and interests change and reputations shift, it seems

reasonable to periodically re-examine the list - especially since the last just revisions took place six years ago.

But our consultation is not simply limited to scrutinising the composition of the journals currently listed in the FT50. Those who have completed the questionnaire will see that it ranges far more widely. It includes a request for assessments of the journals included, whether some should be removed and others added, whether the list should be made longer and what themes should be a focus.

More fundamentally, it asks whether using journals at all is the best form of assessment of output; whether individual articles and citations should be taken into account alongside or instead; how to balance credit between multiple authors; and how to attribute between the institution where the authors were based at the time of publication versus where they are currently employed.

It seeks to explore ways to capture other, broader forms of academic work such as books, chapters and case studies; and to canvass views not just on the significance of academic rigour but also the relevance of topics covered and the wider resonance that insights have with practitioners and society beyond academia.

In other words, our questionnaire is part of a much broader [consultation](#) about our rankings, assessments and coverage of business education to make them as useful as possible, taking into account factors such as societal impact and reflecting the thinking of important initiatives including the [Responsible Research in Business & Management](#) network and the [UN PRME](#) initiative, as well as DORA and Open Science.

That is reflected in editorial activities we have launched in recent months to capture best practices. There is little consensus around what and how to measure output. Our contributions so far include an FT series on [responsible business education](#) with a mixture of self-assessments and judgements by third parties. We plan further efforts to explore these areas more deeply.

As to the process, our questionnaire is not designed as a simplistic vote at the end of which the loudest or largest number of voices will “win” admission for journals to a new FT50 list. It distinguishes between individual opinions and institutional responses from business school leaders.

But surely it is reasonable to encourage a broad, transparent consultation and debate rather than simply to discuss in private with a select few? Analysis of the responses of the questionnaire from many thousands of academics is still underway. We have, and will continue, to explore different approaches including through [articles](#) and invitations to groups to share alternative approaches. Any changes will be carefully analysed and modelled. We are mindful that reforms could bring discomfort and disruption.

There are many critiques of the current approach - far more than there are well defined and better alternatives. We certainly will not introduce changes simply based on the view of the majority. Whatever we ultimately decide needs to take into account multiple different perspectives from existing and new users, to identify approaches that are consistent and measurable, and are feasible to collect and analyse.

We welcome further input as we proceed: notably of tangible alternatives.

Do send ideas to respbus@ft.com

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