


EDITORIAL

## Imperialism in the academy? Challenges for academic journals

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I suspect many editorials begin tacitly or overtly with complaints about challenges for the editor, and (regrettably) this is no different. As the year turns to the northern summer, so finding reviewers for academic articles becomes more and more difficult – just as I noted in our previous editorial (Kelly 2023). Moreover, there has been a new discernible pattern. Articles on and from familiar locations, such as western Europe and North America, are much more readily accepted for reviewing than those from elsewhere. Even reliable reviewers who are normally kindly and collegial (for which we thank them deeply) look the other way or become immovably unavailable when asked to review articles from eastern Europe, Africa, or Asia for example. A common response when approached directly has been an avowed unfamiliarity with a country; ‘I hardly know where it is’ has been a refrain. Ignorance can be bliss. We will return to such refrains.

This middle quarter of a (Gregorian) calendar year is also always alive with action and results for the academic world, perhaps itself a testimony to the centrality of the northern hemisphere academic year which ends in July. So, not surprisingly, it is a time of the release of rankings – especially university rankings from one of the several measurement systems and also journal rankings. It is well known, and sometimes bewailed (Rider et al. 2020; Welsh 2021; Kaidesoja 2022; Ishikawa 2014; Shore and Wright 2020; Jamieson et al. 2022) that university ranking systems arose with neoliberalism across all walks of life from the late 1980s; they have been important for many scholars and administrators since the early 1990s. In one ranking system, there are over 2000 universities ordered according to reputation with employers and other scholars, with prestige (and wealth?), together with other specified and measurable criteria. Rankings have generated some fierce competition and game playing among universities across the world, but in the main, the highest rankings are to be found in western Europe and North America, with occasional top universities in the Global South making the top 500, and the lowest ranking universities largely populated by lower and middle-income countries.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, there seems to be some correlation between wealth and ranking, for example, Harvard’s endowment is only slightly smaller than the GDP of Ghana and indeed larger than at least 25 countries (World Bank Data; Harvard Endowment). In the recent rankings, my own university went up in global rankings but slightly down in the Young Universities (another ranking system) but hey the numbers look good!! And that is how many of us operate. We may deplore the game playing, and the very competitiveness of scholarship that should be cooperative and

collegial – but we play the games in any case and worry if the numbers are not right (Derrick and Benneworth 2019).

It is the same with journal rankings. At the *ELRR*, some of us aspire to continuing our recent rise in Impact Factors (IF) even daring to dream of Q1 status. We measure well against cognate unidisciplinary journals, but measuring is complicated. There are several system of measurement, perhaps 8–10 highly complex and varying methods of calculating journal excellence or prestige (When I understand them, I will let you know!). In mid-June 2023, several models of journal rankings were released as measured by citations/reputation/impact/proportional impact or a combination of some of these, and then subjected to further elaboration and analysis (Scopus Citescore; Clarivate Analytics). We found *ELRR* had moved up ever so slightly into the threes on at least one set of impact factors but stayed the same on another.

Yet, also reflecting those complexities and contradictions of the modern academic world, competitiveness takes another shift with alternative sets of rankings, such as the Academic Freedom Index (2023) or the annual Scholars At Risk (SAR), based on measures of Academic Freedom (Scholars at Risk Free to Think 2022; see also Vatansver and Kölemen 2022). The measures here are again contrived and calculated, but the five criteria of the Academic Freedom Index are core and important, in evaluating

the de facto levels of academic freedom across the world: freedom to research and teach; freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; institutional autonomy; campus integrity; and freedom of academic and cultural expression. (Academic Freedom Index 2023)

Of course, yet again, it is important to avoid binaries. Challenges to academic freedom are not wholly found in the Global South, nor is the Global North a model of academic freedom, but a review of challenges in 2022 by SAR revealed better conditions for scholarship and teaching in most western Europe/North American institutions, despite some strong exceptions in ‘subnational’ locations as the SAR delicately points out. Nevertheless, with examples of academics not being paid for months at a time, or not having research resources available, or not being permitted to undertake research critical of government, or simply not being permitted to research at all (SAR), we need to take of such measures which remind us of global inequalities in our research and teaching, disparities that are often ignored, as Connell (2020) so compellingly notes.

It is just the same with education expenditures, in part reflected in those university rankings but indicating much deeper issues and challenges. Unsurprisingly, low-income countries can spend less on education than middle- and high-income countries, so that:

In 2020, on average, per capita education spending in low-income countries was only 17 percent (US\$52) of the spending in lower-middle-income countries (US\$318) and 5 percent of per capita spending in upper-middle-income countries (US\$1,079). Government per capita spending was on average nearly 150 times higher in high-income countries (US\$7,787) than in low-income countries. In 2019–2020, average government per capita spending in sub-Saharan Africa (US\$254) and South Asia (US\$358) was less than one-tenth that of Europe and Central Asia (US\$6,156) and less than 5 percent of North America’s (US\$11,956). (World Bank 2022)

These are telling statistics – and the numbers can offer even greater insights when focusing on higher education on its own, although it is much more variable in some countries where funding is purposively directed toward a few institutions (see, e.g., Dlamini 2016; Biagioli and Lippman 2020; Pietrucha 2018; Rhein and Nanni 2023; Visser 2016). Of course, there are further flaws in the reliance here, on measurements and

averages. What was it they used to say about economists? If you put an economist with their feet in a freezer and their head in an oven, they would be, on average, the right temperature? Such are the problems of averaging and measuring commitment to education and research. Indeed, the uneven economic development of all countries, together with highly variable approaches of governments to the worth of education and scholarly endeavour, mean that the nature of inequalities in research and teaching in higher education is distinctly more complex than suggested in the averaged measures or elegantly derived equations.

It is a tough world out there, and made tougher with the limited access many scholars have to research and technological sources, leading *inter alia* to ‘data colonialism’ (Mejias 2023; Grieve 2021). Furthermore, there is the evident bias inherent in high-ranking journals, most of which publish in languages of western Europe, possibly with English predominating. Scholars in the periphery have the challenge of researching and writing in a second or third language. As these challenges mount up, we begin to have a measure of how tough it must be for researchers outside of the metropole (Grieve 2021; St Clair 2021).

So where do such musings of rankings and inequalities help to build scholarship in heterodox economics or employment relations or rights-based economic/social policy analysis or labour studies? What are our responsibilities as an academic journal in this world of inequality and competitiveness? To what extent should we assist/support scholars from outside of the metropole?

On the other hand, we at *ELRR* spend a good deal of time asking stressed and stretched scholars to review papers. After all, what rational scholar, especially in this competitive world, wants to spend their time and expertise, reviewing academic papers for practically no personal gain? Certainly, as academic workloads have increased, it is ever more challenging to find associate editors (AEs) to seek reviewers who might agree to read and comment collegially on an article.

But it is even more vexed than that – and here we return to the refrain of the first paragraph. What has become evident in recent months has been the considerable difficulty getting reviewers for papers written outside the metropole – for papers by researchers from Africa or South America or Eastern Europe, or Asia or the Middle East. In some cases, potential AEs or reviewers are diplomatic – they refuse because of the pressure of work, or recreation or conference leave. In other cases, they are much more forthright: ‘I do not think this paper will be much good because it comes from [a non-English speaking country or a scholar in the Global South]; they will be quite honest: ‘I do not want to spend time on that. It is hard enough writing my own paper, and really, too much work if English is a second language’; or even more baldly, a scholar recently said to me ‘No I am not interested in that paper from [x] —I doubt whether they could produce research of great moment’. (As an aside, this is not what Raewyn Connell found in her research and evident in her excellent publication *Southern Theory: the Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* which offers strong evidence, contradicting such uncomplicated views.)

But I understand – I really do – the whole growth of the audit culture, the race for rankings, and the seeming need to do more with less everywhere in higher education, already places barely tolerable stresses on academics in the metropole, the universities in the ‘global North’. But – even so – are we doing enough? Should we not try avoid reinforcing those processes and measurements which continually reproduce and reinforce scholarly imperialism?

This is an especially germane question for this journal. From the first *ELRR* was normative – it has long sought to put scholarship in the service of making the world a better/fairer place. But recently as we sought the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> reviewers for articles from ‘Global South’ countries, I began to wonder just how egalitarian we are, despite stated idealism in the journal’s carefully structured landing site:

The journal encourages articles that critically assess dominant orthodoxies, as well as alternative models, thereby facilitating informed debate. The journal particularly encourages articles that adopt a ... heterodox approach to economics, or that explore rights-, equality- or justice-based approaches to economic or social policy, employment relations or labour studies ...

There are multiple factors at play here. On the one hand, we know our readers, reviewers, and AEs are likely to take an idealistic stance to equity and fairness, but from that very stance, they must work harder than scholars in mainstream scholarship for whom funding and prestige can be rather more accessible. On the other hand, should not those of us in privileged institutions and environments ask to what extent, and how well, are we contributing to greater fairness in scholarly debates and the dissemination of ideas, to decolonising knowledge flows, to de-emphasising the power of the centre, and to providing material scholarly support to those in the peripheries? Should we just accept the tenets and practices of scholarly imperialism and reinforce the competitiveness that sees wealth rise to the top in all the 'good' rankings? Yet, the *ELRR* is an international journal, and we must continue to encourage and publish great research articles from global south, global north, and everywhere in between. I wish we all had more time and space to ponder and debate such questions. I hope that you, dear reader, might explore and advise us how to continue producing great scholarship – idealistically and ethically.

In the meantime, this September 2023 issue demonstrates the continuing excellence and genuine global nature of *ELRR*. As a testament to our global reach, the authors in this issue are from Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa. Following this editorial, is a fine Guest Editorial from Dr Jenny Chan introducing the papers in the Themed Collection, Labour Conflict, Forms of Organisation, and Class. The collection has been wonderfully curated by **Maurizio Atzeni**, **Jenny Chan**, and **Devi Sacchetto** from Argentina, Hong Kong, and Italy, respectively. An excellent discussion of the research context of this Themed Collection is in Chan's guest editorial / article, titled Class, labour conflict, and workers' organisation.

The remainder of this issue comprises eight original articles, two Contested Terrains articles, and three book reviews, as well as a Call For Papers for 2024 Themed Collections. The first of the eight original articles is a top-notch argument from **Sun Haopeng** exploring the impact of trade liberalisation on the gender wage gap in urban China, which, unlike many other studies, finds a positive gender wage gap effect of trade liberalisation. Also exploring wages, **Pinto**, **Martínez**, **Delgado**, and **Murillo** offer some new perspectives on the origins of differences in migrant pay gaps in Spain, where they highlight the role of wage supplements in understanding the major problems of pay differences. Moving to the important topic of the living wage, **Kaicker** and **Mamkoottam** offer a thoughtful and insightful study of the challenges of achieving a real living wage in the face of global cost increases. They take as their case study two areas in Madhya Pradesh in central India. Also drawing on high quality qualitative research, **Angela Akorsu** uses interviews and focus group discussions to great effect, exploring the political economy of digital capitalism in Ghana, and in so doing demonstrating the sources of vulnerabilities of ride-hailing drivers. **Sorg**, **Vestena**, **Scheper**, and **Zajak** take an interesting approach in investigating communication systems based on digital technologies that allow for creating so-called 'feedback data' through different forms of information input of workers. In so doing, they extend notions of worker voice to take account of modern communication technologies, importantly differentiating between management orientations and worker-derived systems. **Alcobia** and **Barradas** assert the need for more effective wages policy in Portugal, drawing on a post-Keynesian evaluation of links between labour share growth and economic growth in Portugal, and in so doing, demonstrating the importance of enabling wages growth. Moving from Europe back to Zimbabwe in Africa, the paper from

**Ndhlovu, Mukuze, and Ndhlovu** is an excellent example of how unfamiliar regulation systems can offer macro and micro insights well beyond national boundaries. The authors explore alternative dispute resolution models and show how more thorough consultation of employees and trade unions might achieve greater effectiveness. In the final original article in this September 2023 issue of ELRR, **Sánchez-Mosquera** explores the changing environment for, and effectiveness of, employer associations in comparative perspective. Sanchez-Mosquera evaluates changing political and economic environments in southern European countries, considering the impact of changing firm sizes and the varying responses of employer associations to the new environments.

Following this wonderful array of scholarship, are five further useful and important items. We have two outstanding Contested Terrains (CT) articles. In his provocative CT piece, Rainnie engages critically with the notions of Smart Specialisation (S3), the Foundational Economy (FE), and Deep Place (DP) as tools for approaching major global challenges, especially in regions beyond the metropole. These cutting-edge concepts seek to free analysis from traditional assumptions in orthodox development approaches.

Similarly provocatively, **Quiggin** incisively analyses the recent role and effectiveness of the Reserve Bank of Australia noting that the RBA, like central banks everywhere, has found constraining inflation, rewarding, but, as he concludes, '... for those who care more about real outcomes like employment and economic welfare, the need for a serious reassessment of the current framework is evident'. We hope our Contested Terrains papers will generate discussion and debate, somewhere between the noise and fury of measurable outputs and volatile workloads.

Finally, we are deeply fortunate to offer another increasingly rare species of scholarly output, three thoughtful and expert book reviews by **Harry Glasbeek** (*Contesting Inequality and Worker Mobilization: Australia 1851–1880*), **Brett Heino** (*Democracy at Work: Contract, Status and Post-Industrial Justice*), and **Michael Quinlan** (*Work and Health: 50 Years of Regulatory Failure*). We are always appreciative of good book reviews and these three are especially insightful and stimulating. We conclude this issue with a **Call For Themed Collections**. It is rather a broad search for Themed Collections of four to seven papers on any one of the numerous urgent and important themes, relevant to the ideas and ideals of the *ELRR* for publication in 2024. Do please consider!

## Note

1 Calculated from Times Higher Education World University Rankings <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking>. See also, e.g., QS World University Rankings <https://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings>

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