frontiers in Education

TYPE Review
PUBLISHED 13 February 2026
DOI 10.3389/feduc.2026.1773655

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 22 December 2025
REVISED 24 January 2026
ACCEPTED 26 January 2026
PUBLISHED 13 February 2026

CITATION
Teymourifar A (2026) Understanding the ABS journal ranking system: a critical review.
Front. Educ. 11:1773655.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2026.1773655

Understanding the ABS journal ranking system: a critical review

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Journal ranking systems have evolved from evaluative instruments into powerful mechanisms of research governance in higher education, shaping academic careers, institutional strategies, and accreditation outcomes. Within business and management education, the Association of Business Schools (ABS) journal ranking system has become one of the most influential and contested evaluative regimes. This article offers a critical-conceptual review of the ABS journal ranking system, reframing it not as a neutral technical device but as a governance mechanism that structures legitimacy, incentives, and conformity across business schools. Integrating scholarly literature, policy documents, and accreditation frameworks, the review examines the origins, evaluative logic, global diffusion, and consequences of the ABS journal ranking system. It shows how the system reinforces Anglo-American epistemic dominance, incentivizes conservative and prestige-driven research behavior, marginalizes interdisciplinary and practice-oriented scholarship, and contributes to global academic inequalities, particularly in non-Anglophone and Global South contexts. By linking debates on journal rankings to business-school accreditation regimes and contrasting them with outcome-based engineering accreditation models, the study reveals a misalignment between journal-centric evaluation and mission-driven, impact-oriented education. A regional analytical case from Turkey further illustrates how ABS-oriented governance logics interact with national quality-assurance and accreditation systems, highlighting mechanisms of adaptation and institutional tension. Overall, the article consolidates major critiques of the ABS journal ranking system to underscore the importance of responsible research assessment and to outline pathways toward more transparent, pluralistic, and mission-aligned research evaluation in business education.

KEYWORDS
ABS journal ranking system, academic legitimacy, business school accreditation, global academic inequality, higher education governance, research evaluation, responsible research assessment

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, journal ranking systems have become central mechanisms in the governance of higher education and research evaluation. Initially, academic communities and professional bodies developed these systems as indicative tools to assist scholars and institutions in navigating increasingly complex publication landscapes; over time, they have progressively acquired regulatory authority, shaping academic careers, institutional strategies, accreditation outcomes, and national research policies (Hazelkorn, 2009, 2015; Gioia and Corley, 2002). Rather than functioning merely as informational guides, journal rankings increasingly operate as de facto standards of research quality, influencing how universities define excellence and allocate resources (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013).

Within business and management education, the Association of Business Schools (ABS) journal ranking system, produced by the Chartered Association of Business Schools, has emerged as one of the most influential and contested journal ranking systems. Although the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2021) formally presents the ABS journal ranking system as a disciplinary guide to journal quality, universities widely use it as a tool for research excellence, a benchmark for promotion and tenure, and a symbolic marker of international legitimacy (Willmott, 2011; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). As a United Kingdom (U.K.)-based classification of journals, the ABS journal ranking system has become a powerful reference point for research evaluation in business schools well beyond its original national context, shaping institutional behavior across Europe, Asia, and emerging higher-education systems (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021; Willmott, 2011; Adler and Harzing, 2009; Murphy and Zhu, 2012). Section 2.1 provides further details on its origins, definition, and evaluation logic.

While global university rankings operate at the institutional level, discipline-specific journal ranking systems, such as ABS, operate at the research output level and play a complementary role in shaping research evaluation and institutional reputation (Hazelkorn, 2009, 2015; Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013).

The growing authority of the ABS journal ranking system has generated sustained scholarly contestation. Supporters argue that it offers field-sensitive, expert-informed guidance in a heterogeneous discipline characterized by diverse methods and publication outlets (Mingers and Yang, 2017). Critics, by contrast, contend that the ABS journal ranking system reinforces Anglo-American epistemic dominance, privileges a narrow subset of journals, lacks transparency and replicability, and incentivizes conservative, prestige-driven research behavior (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Broader analyses of the globalization of social science research support these concerns, showing that increasing international collaboration does not necessarily translate into epistemic diversity, as dominant publication venues and evaluative standards continue to concentrate authority in core countries and journals (Wagner et al., 2019; Paasi, 2005). These controversies intersect with wider debates in higher-education research concerning the legitimacy of journal-based evaluation, the misuse of metrics, and the tension between symbolic reputation and substantive educational and societal impact (Gioia and Corley, 2002; Hazelkorn, 2015; Hicks et al., 2015).

Despite a substantial critical literature, existing studies of the ABS journal ranking system and other rankings exhibit several limitations. Much of the prior work treats the ABS journal ranking system primarily as a technical ranking or measurement instrument, focusing on bibliometric properties, category shifts, or methodological critiques (Mingers and Yang, 2017; Brembs et al., 2013). Other contributions remain discipline-bound, addressing management research without situating journal rankings within wider educational governance, accreditation systems, or quality-assurance frameworks (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Willmott, 2011). Comparative perspectives across disciplines and regions remain limited, and (Global South) contexts are often acknowledged only abstractly, despite clear evidence of uneven global effects (Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014). As a result, the literature lacks an integrative, conceptually grounded understanding of how the ABS journal ranking system operates as an institutionalized evaluation system within contemporary higher education.

Within this context, this article offers a critical-conceptual review of the ABS journal ranking system from an explicitly educational and governance-oriented perspective. Rather than summarizing the literature descriptively, the review synthesizes conceptual and policy-oriented scholarship to examine the origins, evaluative logic, institutional functions, and consequences of the ABS journal ranking system. In doing so, it draws on work in institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), research governance (Hazelkorn, 2009; Sivertsen, 2017), and critical studies of academic evaluation (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013).

1.1 Contributions of this review

This review advances the literature in several important ways relative to prior studies. First, it reframes the ABS journal ranking system not as a technical ranking instrument but as a governance mechanism that structures legitimacy, shapes academic behavior, and coordinates institutional conformity within higher-education systems (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Second, it integrates previously fragmented literatures on journal rankings, business-school accreditation, and educational quality assurance. This integration situates the ABS journal ranking system within broader frameworks of research governance and mission-driven education, including the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) (AACSB, 2020; EFMD, 2022; Hazelkorn, 2015). Third, the review introduces a cross-disciplinary comparison with engineering accreditation systems, such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) and the European Accredited Engineer (EUR-ACE). It demonstrates that transparent, outcome-based, and standards-driven evaluation models constitute institutionally credible alternatives to journal-centric governance (Prados et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2008; Zhang, 2021). Fourth, it foregrounds international and non-Anglophone contexts. In doing so, it illustrates how the global diffusion of the ABS journal ranking system contributes to institutional isomorphism and reproduces academic inequalities (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014). Fifth, the review incorporates a regional case focusing on Turkey. It uses this case analytically rather than descriptively to show how ABS-oriented logics interact with national quality-assurance and accreditation regimes, thereby revealing contextual variation, institutional layering, and tensions between global ranking pressures and national evaluation frameworks. Finally, the review connects critiques of the ABS journal ranking system to contemporary movements in responsible research assessment. This connection highlights initiatives such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Leiden Manifesto as reference points for future reform in the evaluation of research and education in business schools (American Society for Cell Biology, 2012; Hicks et al., 2015; Wilsdon et al., 2015). Recent scholarship further conceptualizes responsible research assessment as a professional reform movement that seeks to challenge entrenched ranking-based hierarchies rather than merely refine existing indicators, highlighting both its transformative ambitions and its institutional constraints (Rushforth and Hammarfelt, 2023; Gärtner et al., 2024; Morgan-Thomas et al., 2024).

1.2 Methodology

This study employs a critical-conceptual literature review methodology, drawing on established guidance for critical-conceptual reviews (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Grant and Booth, 2009; Paré et al., 2016; Snyder, 2019). Such approaches are appropriate when the

aim is not exhaustive aggregation of evidence but synthesis, critique, and conceptual clarification. While systematic reviews prioritize replicability and exhaustive coverage (Tranfield et al., 2003), such designs are less suited to research driven by interpretive, theory-building, and problem-framing questions. In contrast, critical-conceptual reviews emphasize synthesis, critique, and conceptual development by integrating and evaluating research streams that emerge through sustained scholarly engagement with the field (Baumeister and Leary, 1997).

The author's prior scholarly engagement with conceptual article development further shapes the design (Teymourifar, 2025). This type of research has previously been conducted in the literature (Barry et al., 2022; Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Jaakkola, 2020).

1.3 Identification of gaps and definition of the conceptual framework, scope, and focus

As discussed above, this study adopts a critical-conceptual literature review rather than a systematic review approach. Accordingly, the review is guided by predefined domain knowledge that informs the formulation of the research questions, rather than by a formal pilot phase, in line with critical interpretive synthesis methodologies (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). In this study, the research questions and the conceptual synthesis developed around them also serve to articulate the central gaps in the existing literature. The research questions were informed by the author's familiarity with the topic, developed during 2021–2025 through collaboration with and investigation of business schools. Presented as subsection titles in the Literature Review, they structure the analysis and, to avoid redundancy, are not restated here.

We iteratively refined keyword selection during the conceptual synthesis of the research questions (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Snyder, 2019). Core keyword clusters included: the ABS journal ranking system (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021); alternative business and management journal rankings, such as the Financial Times Top 50 Journals List (FT50) and the Australian Business Deans Council Journal Quality List (ABDC) lists (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), 2019); research evaluation, research governance, academic legitimacy, and institutional isomorphism; peer-review–based rankings, bibliometric indicators, and distinctions between indexing and ranking systems (Mingers and Willmott, 2013); promotion and tenure, academic careers, and research incentives; accreditation and evaluation regimes, e.g., AACSB, European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), and regional and global perspectives, including Global South scholarship and national research-evaluation frameworks. This strategy enabled balanced coverage of foundational contributions, critical debates, and contextual analyses (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Willmott, 2011; Zhang, 2021).

We identified sources through targeted searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, complemented by policy documents, accreditation standards, and practitioner reports central to understanding the design, diffusion, and effects of the ABS journal ranking system.

We deliberately included grey literature, in line with methodological guidance for management and organizational research (Adams et al., 2017; Paez, 2017). Here, grey literature refers to policy reports, accreditation documents, and evaluative materials not formally published as academic journal articles or books. The review covers publications from the mid-2000s, when the ABS journal ranking system emerged, through 2025, and is limited to English-language sources.

1.4 Advantages and limitations of the methodology

This critical–conceptual approach offers several advantages. First, it provides analytical depth and contextual sensitivity, enabling examination of evaluative systems such as the ABS journal ranking system as institutional and governance mechanisms rather than purely technical tools (Grant and Booth, 2009; Jaakkola, 2020). Second, the inclusion of grey literature enhances practical relevance and captures how the ABS journal ranking system operates in policy and organizational settings (Adams et al., 2017; Paez, 2017). Third, the approach supports the identification of conceptual gaps, enabling the study to move beyond description toward critique and insight (Snyder, 2019).

The methodology also entails limitations. By prioritizing interpretive synthesis over exhaustive coverage, the review does not claim replicability or statistical generalizability, as emphasized in systematic review traditions (Tranfield et al., 2003). Moreover, the analysis draws on the author's prior contextual knowledge and theoretically informed judgment in shaping the research questions, which introduces an element of subjectivity. This subjectivity is explicitly acknowledged and treated as an integral methodological resource, rather than a weakness, consistent with established critical interpretive synthesis approaches (Barry et al., 2022; Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).

Overall, these trade-offs are appropriate given the study's focus on critique, governance, and conceptual development rather than measurement or effect estimation.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Following this Introduction, the paper develops a set of subsections that synthesize and critically examine the literature on the ABS journal ranking system, including its evaluative logic, institutional functions, and consequences for research governance, accreditation, and academic careers, as well as comparisons with alternative evaluation and accreditation systems. The article concludes with a Discussion that integrates the main insights of the review, reflects critically on its limitations, and outlines implications and future directions for research and higher-education policy.

2 Understanding the ABS journal ranking system based on a critical-conceptual framework

Each subsection of this section corresponds to a distinct research question guiding the study, while collectively, these questions constitute the study's conceptual framework.

2.1 Origins, definition, and evaluation logic

The following five subsections examine the definition, origins, and purposes of the ABS journal ranking system.

2.1.1 What are the origins and intended purposes of the ABS journal ranking system within business and management education?

The ABS journal ranking system, formally articulated in the ABS Academic Journal Guide (AJG), is a U.K.-based disciplinary ranking developed by the Chartered Association of Business Schools in the mid-2000s to standardize journal evaluation in response to pressures associated with the U.K.'s Research Excellence Framework (REF) (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021; Sivertsen, 2017; Wilsdon et al., 2015). In this article, the term "AJG" refers to the formal publication, whereas "ABS journal ranking system" denotes the broader evaluative practices and institutional uses that have developed around it. The Guide rates journals from 1 to 4* using citation indicators and expert committee judgment. The system became institutionalized as British business schools increasingly used these rankings for research management, promotion, and accountability (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013), functioning as a managerial governance tool in U.K. higher education (Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Although now used internationally, especially in Europe, its methodological and cultural roots remain predominantly Anglo-centric (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Murphy and Zhu, 2012).

2.1.2 How does the abs journal ranking system evaluate journals, and how is its role interpreted and represented in academic practice?

In the AJG (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021), journals are rated 1–4* through peer-review committee judgments informed by citation indicators, editorial quality, disciplinary expertise, and evidence of scholarly influence, not solely bibliometrics (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021; Mingers and Yang, 2017). Expert panels assess journals within subfields based on rigor, standards, and international reach. Unlike indexing services such as Scopus or Web of Science, the ABS journal ranking system is a ranking, not a database. Nevertheless, many journals, especially newer or regional ones, strategically present the ABS journal ranking system as "indexing" to exploit their reputational value in research assessment, hiring, and promotion (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). This misrepresentation functions as symbolic legitimacy-seeking, aligning journals with a U.K.-centric gatekeeping mechanism and reinforcing hierarchical academic cultures (Tourish and Willmott, 2015).

2.1.3 What motivations and contextual factors shaped the development of the ABS journal ranking system, including its relationship to citation practices in business research?

The ABS journal ranking system was not created to compensate for lower citation densities in business and management research. Its origins lie in the U.K. business school evaluation environment, where it served as a standardized, expert-informed mechanism aligned with REF expectations (Sivertsen, 2017; Wilsdon et al., 2015). Although business fields exhibit lower and uneven citation patterns, this was contextual rather than a causal motivation. Scholarship likewise shows that the ABS journal ranking system emerged primarily from institutional pressures to manage research performance, accountability, and benchmarking in U.K. business schools (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). Debates about citation limitations in the social sciences developed later and were not foundational to the creation of the ABS journal ranking system (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021).

TABLE 1 Summary of key benefits and criticisms of the ABS journal ranking system.

Dimension	Arguments highlighted in the literature
Perceived benefits	Provides a structured, field-specific hierarchy that reduces uncertainty about journal prestige in a heterogeneous discipline through peer-informed assessments (Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Offers business schools a standardized evaluative tool for hiring, promotion, and benchmarking, particularly within the U.K.'s research-governance environment (Willmott, 2011). Simplifies administrative decision-making by supplying a common reference point for research evaluation across subfields and institutions (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021).
Major criticisms	Reinforces narrow Anglo-American definitions of research quality and entrenches hierarchical academic structures (Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Incentivises conformity in research topics and methods, reducing intellectual diversity and marginalizing regional and practice-oriented scholarship (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). Encourages strategic behavior, including the symbolic use and misrepresentation of ABS ratings as "indexing," thereby perpetuating structural biases in business and management research (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021; Tourish and Willmott, 2015).

2.1.4 What benefits and criticisms of the ABS journal ranking system are identified in the literature?

The literature presents a recurrent trade-off: the ABS journal ranking system is defended as an uncertainty-reduction device in a heterogeneous field, yet is criticized as a governance mechanism that redistributes legitimacy and incentives, reshaping research behavior (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Huselid, 2018). Table 1 provides a compact descriptive map of the claims that structure this debate.

It is crucial to analyze how the claimed benefits and harms are produced, namely through incentive and legitimacy mechanisms that link ABS's evaluative architecture to institutional use and downstream effects (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). As Table 1 shows, the benefits and criticisms of the ABS journal ranking system arise from the same underlying features of its institutional use. The clarity and standardization attributed to ABS stem from simplifying heterogeneous research outputs into ranked journal categories, but this also underpins criticisms that journal rank is treated as a proxy for research quality (Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Likewise, while ABS-based evaluation provides clear incentives, it is associated with

strategic publishing behavior, conformity, and reduced diversity in topics and methods (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Overall, this indicates that the trade-off intensifies with the degree of institutional coupling: the more strongly ABS is used for high-stakes evaluation, the more it reshapes research behavior and constrains intellectual diversity.

2.1.5 How does the ABS journal ranking system compare with other journal evaluation and ranking systems used in business and management research?

The ABS journal ranking system is a field-specific ranking produced by the Chartered Association of Business Schools, assigning journals to 1–4* tiers through expert-panel judgment supplemented by metrics (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021). This differentiates it from other systems with distinct purposes and methodologies. FT50 is a narrow list of inclusions used in the Financial Times research ranking (Adler and Harzing, 2009). ABDC applies mixed methods and broader, Australia-specific criteria (Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), 2019). Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (QS) incorporates journal influence only indirectly through institutional reputation metrics, whereas the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) provides a national classification for French evaluation (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; QS, 2023). The Verband der Hochschullehrer für Betriebswirtschaft Journal Quality Ranking (VHB-JOURQUAL) in Germany relies largely on perception-based community surveys (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The University of Texas at Dallas Top 24 Journals for Business School Research Rankings (UTD24) is a productivity index that counts publications in 24 elite journals rather than a tiered ranking (University of Texas at Dallas, 2023). Journal Citation Reports (JCR) offers purely bibliometric indicators (e.g., Impact Factor), making it methodologically distinct (Clarivate Analytics, n.d.).

The ABS journal ranking system exerts a powerful influence in the U.K. and Europe, shaping hiring, promotion, and research strategy, whereas FT50, ABDC, and JCR play broader global roles. The ABS journal ranking system remains unique in its hybrid model combining expert judgment with metrics, though this hybridity has been criticized for embedding Anglophone and disciplinary biases (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011; Zhang, 2021).

Table 2 provides a comparative overview of major research evaluation and ranking systems used in business and management, highlighting differences in purpose, evaluative basis, institutional use, and documented limitations.

2.2 Legitimacy, validity, and governance effects

The following four subsections address the legitimacy, branding, and scientific validity of the ABS journal ranking system.

2.2.1 What factors influence universities' adoption of the ABS journal ranking system, and how do considerations of legitimacy and research quality feature in this process?

University adoption of the ABS journal ranking system is driven more by legitimacy-seeking than by neutral assessment of research quality. Business schools use the ABS journal ranking system ratings as symbolic indicators of excellence to appeal to students, faculty, and accreditation bodies, consistent with neo-institutional accounts of organizational conformity and external legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Baden-Fuller and Ang, 2001; Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). Scholars likewise argue that the ABS journal ranking system functions as a branding device aligning institutions with British and Anglo-American research norms (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Despite persistent doubts about equating journal rank with research quality, universities continue relying on the ABS journal ranking system because of its institutional authority, indicating that its value is largely symbolic rather than grounded in intrinsic evaluative superiority (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021; Good, 2002; Gioia and Corley, 2002; Hazelkorn, 2009; Morris, 2011).

2.2.2 To what extent, and under what conditions, is the ABS journal ranking system used in the evaluation of institutions, and how is its suitability assessed in the literature?

Although the ABS journal ranking system provides a structured reference for journal prestige, using it to evaluate universities, departments, or research institutes is methodologically flawed. The ABS journal ranking system is designed to assess journals, not institutions, and its expert-panel methodology introduces subjectivity, limiting its appropriateness for formal evaluation. Scholars argue that the ABS journal ranking system privileges Anglo-American journals, mainstream epistemologies, and positivist paradigms (Willmott, 2011; Alvesson et al., 2017), thereby narrowing what counts as "high-quality" research. Using the ABS journal ranking system as a mechanism for institutional performance reinforces these biases. It incentivizes publication in a restricted set of outlets rather than supporting innovative or contextually relevant work (Mingers and Willmott, 2013).

Given the heterogeneity of institutional missions, disciplines, and research activities, a journal-oriented ranking system is misaligned with responsible-assessment frameworks such as DORA (American Society for Cell Biology, 2012) and the Leiden Manifesto (Hicks et al., 2015; Wilsdon et al., 2015; Sivertsen, 2017). Thus, while the ABS journal ranking system may function as an informal indicator, its subjectivity, narrow scope, and design limitations prevent it from serving as a legitimate or comprehensive tool for institutional evaluation (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015).

2.2.3 How does the evaluative architecture of the ABS journal ranking system align with, or diverge from, Popperian criteria of universality, transparency, and replicability?

From a Popperian standpoint, the ABS journal ranking system conflicts with scientific criteria of universality, transparency, and replicability because its rankings rely on opaque expert-panel deliberations that are not publicly disclosed. The rationales, weighting procedures, and decision rules behind the ABS journal ranking system evaluations remain inaccessible, preventing independent verification or replication and contradicting Popper's emphasis on methodological openness and falsifiability. The system's reliance on selective expert judgment rather than universally applicable, replicable metrics further violates Popper's requirement for publicly testable procedures. Scholars make similar critiques: Willmott (2011) highlights the non-transparent authority structures embedded in journal lists; Mingers

TABLE 2 Comparative characteristics of major research evaluation and ranking systems.

System	Primary purpose	Evaluation basis	Geographic origin	Typical institutional use	Key limitations
ABS/AJG (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021)	Journal quality classification in business & management	Expert panel judgment informed by citation indicators	U.K.	Hiring, promotion, benchmarking, REF-oriented research management	Anglo-centric bias; opacity; incentivizes conformity; misused as proxy for institutional quality (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015)
ABDC (Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), 2019)	Journal quality guidance for business disciplines	Mixed expert judgment and bibliometrics	Australia	National research assessment; faculty evaluation	Regionally bounded criteria; partial alignment with international hierarchies (Adler and Harzing, 2009)
FT50 (Adler and Harzing, 2009)	Institutional research ranking (Financial Times)	Inclusion-based elite journal list	International (FT)	Business school reputation and ranking	Extremely narrow scope; productivity-focused; excludes disciplinary diversity
JCR/Impact Factor (Clarivate Analytics, n.d.)	Citation-based journal impact measurement	Bibliometric indicators	Global	Library selection; broad research evaluation	Discipline-insensitive; citation distortions; unsuitable as standalone quality measure
Scopus/WoS indexing	Journal inclusion and discoverability	Editorial and technical standards	Global	Visibility; baseline research assessment	Indexing often conflated with quality ranking (Mingers and Willmott, 2013)

and Willmott (2013) argue that the ABS journal ranking system lacks replicability; and Tourish and Willmott (2015) emphasize the limited universality across disciplines. Thus, although the ABS journal ranking system offers structured guidance, its evaluative architecture raises major concerns when assessed against Popperian scientific standards (Popper, 1979; Popper, 2005; Popper, 2014).

From the Popperian perspective, the core limitation of the ABS journal ranking system lies not in the possibility of isolated errors or contested judgments but in the fact that its evaluative outcomes function as authoritative classifications rather than empirically testable claims. As Willmott (2011) and Mingers and Willmott (2013) note, this structural reliance on non-replicable judgment positions ABS rankings outside the domain of falsifiable scientific evaluation, placing them in tension with Popperian standards of transparency and testability.

2.2.4 What types of organizational and academic behaviors are associated with the institutional use of the ABS journal ranking system, and how are these behaviors interpreted in existing research?

Research shows that the ABS journal ranking system generates symbolic or ritualistic behaviors in universities seeking legitimacy rather than genuine scientific improvement. Drawing on institutional theory, especially symbolic compliance, decoupling, and legitimacy-seeking (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), the literature notes that institutions adopt the ABS journal ranking system to signal conformity to field expectations. Universities often showcase their share of "ABS-listed" or "4-rated" outputs as markers of excellence, even though these metrics capture only a narrow portion of scholarly activity (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). This drives academics to target journals for prestige rather than epistemic fit, making publication strategies rank-driven rather than inquiry-driven (Morris, 2011; Edwards and Roy, 2017).

The system also encourages ritualized performance management, rigid promotion lists, exclusion of innovative but lower-ranked journals, and emphasis on producing "ranked outputs" (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Adler and Harzing, 2009). These practices reinforce institutional isomorphism, as departments emulate prestigious schools to enhance legitimacy without improving research quality, diversity, or societal relevance (Sauder and Espeland, 2009).

Overall, the ABS journal ranking system functions as a symbolic artifact that sustains reputational narratives and fosters ritualistic compliance rather than advancing deeper scientific progress.

2.2.5 How is the ABS journal ranking system implicated in processes of institutional isomorphism and the diffusion of Anglo-American academic models?

The ABS journal ranking system contributes to institutional isomorphism by pressuring universities worldwide to emulate Anglo-American business-school norms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). The ABS journal ranking system is rooted in the U.K.'s research evaluation environment (e.g., REF) and privileges journals, topics, and methodological preferences dominant in British and United States (U.S.) academia (Sivertsen, 2017; Wilsdon et al., 2015; Willmott, 2011; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). This produces normative pressure on institutions in Europe, Asia, and emerging markets to adopt the ABS journal ranking system as a presumed "global standard," despite its lack of proper international validation (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Murphy and Zhu, 2012).

Consistent with neo-institutional theory, the diffusion of the ABS journal ranking system reflects coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism: universities adopt ABS-aligned practices to gain legitimacy, enhance competitiveness, and reduce uncertainty

(DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Adler and Harzing, 2009). The literature shows that institutions increasingly embed ABS-based hiring, promotion, and incentive systems, steering research toward Anglo-American publication norms even when these conflict with local scholarly traditions, societal priorities, or epistemic diversity (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011; Tourish and Willmott, 2015).

Thus, the ABS journal ranking system functions not as a neutral evaluative mechanism but as a globalizing force that shapes what counts as legitimate research in business and management scholarship.

Table 3 summarizes the mechanisms of institutional isomorphism through which the ABS journal ranking system is adopted and stabilized within business schools. The table synthesizes coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures discussed in the literature to explain how ABS becomes institutionalized as a de facto evaluation standard, despite sustained methodological contestation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015).

2.3 Internationalization and global inequality

The following three subsections examine the internationalization of the ABS journal ranking system and its implications for global academic inequality.

2.3.1 How does the ABS journal ranking system relate to the positioning of non-English journals and global south scholars within global academic evaluation structures?

The literature shows that the ABS journal ranking system structurally disadvantages non-English journals, Global South scholars, and institutions outside the Anglosphere (Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014). The ABS journal ranking system is rooted in U.K. evaluation culture and primarily shaped by Anglo-American editorial boards and expert panels, producing linguistic and epistemic biases toward English-language journals and Western paradigms (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). Most 4 and 4* journals are U.S. or U.K. publications, with few non-English outlets represented, limiting visibility and career advancement for scholars publishing in other languages or regional contexts (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Adler and Harzing, 2009).

The literature likewise shows that global ranking infrastructures reproduce linguistic and geographical hierarchies by treating Anglo-American norms as universal (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Murphy and Zhu, 2012). Global South scholars face disadvantages due to limited access to elite networks, editorial gatekeeping, and resource constraints, making publication in top ABS journals more difficult (Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014; Adler and Harzing, 2009). Since the ABS journal ranking system strongly shapes hiring and promotion, non-Anglophone universities often prioritize Anglo-American journals over locally relevant or indigenous research, reinforcing dependence on Western evaluation systems and the symbolic dominance of U.S./U.K. institutions (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013).

Thus, although presented as neutral, the ABS journal ranking system disproportionately privileges Anglosphere epistemologies and marginalizes alternative knowledge traditions.

2.3.2 What scientific and institutional outcomes are associated with ranking-driven internationalization strategies in higher education?

Internationalization is widely viewed as a positive institutional signal, associated with global visibility, competitiveness, and alignment with international academic norms (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2006). Ranking systems, including the ABS journal ranking system, reward international partnerships, faculty diversity, and globally oriented research, making internationalization a strategic instrument for reputation-building (Hazelkorn, 2015; Adler and Harzing, 2009).

The literature shows that such efforts often reflect symbolic legitimacy-seeking rather than intrinsic scholarly goals (Deem et al., 2008; Marginson, 2006). While internationalization can produce tangible benefits, cross-cultural collaboration, methodological diversity, and stronger research networks, empirical evidence indicates these gains are uneven. Ranking-driven internationalization often prioritizes elite partnerships and English-language publishing, reinforcing existing academic hierarchies rather than democratizing knowledge

TABLE 3 Institutional isomorphism mechanisms in the adoption of the ABS journal ranking.

Isomorphism mechanism	Primary sources of pressure	Institutional carriers	Typical organizational responses	Governance outcome
Coercive	Research governance environments; REF-related accountability pressures	University management systems; performance evaluation frameworks	Adoption of ABS thresholds in hiring, promotion, and workload models	ABS used as a de facto compliance device
Normative	Accreditation cultures (AACSB, EQUIS); professional norms of "excellence."	Academic communities; peer expectations; accreditation discourse	Internalization of ABS categories as indicators of quality	ABS is normalized as a legitimate standard
Mimetic	Uncertainty in evaluating heterogeneous research outputs; global competition	Imitation of elite U.K./Anglo-American business schools	Replication of ABS-based evaluation practices	Diffusion of ABS across national systems

DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Willmott (2011), Mingers and Willmott (2013), Tourish and Willmott (2015).

production (Altbach and Knight, 2007; De Wit, 2019; Uzhegova and Baik, 2022).

Thus, although internationalization is positively signaled, its scientific value depends on whether institutions pursue it substantively or merely symbolically in response to global ranking incentives.

2.3.3 What role does the ABS journal ranking system play in shaping global academic hierarchies and patterns of inequality, according to the literature?

The ABS journal ranking system reinforces global academic hierarchies by privileging Western, especially Anglo-American, scholarly traditions (Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). U.S. and U.K. journals dominate the top ABS categories (3, 4, 4*), reflecting a system where English-language, Western paradigms define legitimate knowledge production (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). This disadvantages scholars and journals from non-Western regions whose theoretical traditions and local contexts are underrepresented or undervalued (Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014; Adler and Harzing, 2009).

The literature supports this critique that the ABS journal ranking system promotes a narrow Western conception of quality (Mingers and Willmott, 2013), discourages theoretical plurality (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014), and contributes to academic stratification that rewards institutions embedded in Western networks while penalizing those in resource-limited or non-English environments (Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014).

Practically, the ABS journal ranking system affects career progression for Global South scholars because regionally focused journals are often low-ranked or excluded (Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014). The literature also highlights the symbolic effects: universities outside the Western core reshape hiring, promotion, and research priorities around ABS norms even when these conflict with local societal needs (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011).

Overall, the ABS journal ranking system operates not just as a quality guide but also as a mechanism that reproduces global academic inequalities, consolidating Western epistemic dominance and English-language hegemony.

2.4 Accreditation systems and evaluation philosophies

The following seven subsections focus on accreditation systems and the underlying logic of the ABS journal ranking system.

2.4.1 How does the ABS journal ranking system relate to accreditation processes, and to what extent is its adoption driven by formal requirements versus prestige considerations?

Accreditation bodies such as AACSB, EQUIS (Urgel, 2007), and Association of MBAs (AMBA) do not require the use of the ABS journal ranking system or any other journal ranking list. Their standards emphasize faculty qualifications, research productivity, engagement, and internationalization, not specific ranking systems (AACSB, 2020; EFMD, 2022). Thus, adoption of the ABS journal ranking system is voluntary and initiated by universities, not imposed by accreditors.

In practice, institutions frequently use the ABS journal ranking system for internal evaluation, strategic planning, and branding. Its prominence, especially in the U.K. and regions shaped by British academic norms, makes it a convenient, legitimizing proxy for research quality (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Universities adopt the ABS journal ranking system for symbolic prestige, managerial convenience, and the appearance of objectivity in performance assessment and resource allocation.

Therefore, although accreditation bodies do not mandate the ABS journal ranking system, universities strategically institutionalize it, allowing a voluntary system to function as a de facto global standard in business education (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011).

2.4.2 How do the evaluative philosophies underlying the ABS journal ranking system differ from those of engineering accreditation frameworks?

The ABS journal ranking system and engineering accreditation frameworks such as ABET in the U.S. (ABET, 2024), EUR-ACE in Europe (EUR-ACE, 2022), the Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board (CEAB) in Canada (Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board, 2025), and the Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education (JABEE) in Japan (Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education, n.d.) operate under fundamentally different evaluation philosophies. The ABS journal ranking system is a selective, reputation-driven list of journals based on expert-panel judgments and lacks universal, metric-based standards. In contrast, engineering accreditors use transparent, data-driven criteria, curriculum structure, lab adequacy, faculty qualifications, learning outcomes, industry engagement, and measurable applied impact (Zhang, 2021). Engineering accreditation follows a standards-based, replicable model that emphasizes demonstrable performance against explicit benchmarks. In contrast, the ABS journal ranking system relies on a prestige-oriented, normative classification that is opaque and not publicly replicable, issues highlighted throughout the literature (Liu et al., 2008).

The systems, therefore, relate only indirectly, as engineering accreditors evaluate educational quality and competencies. In contrast, the ABS journal ranking system shapes business-school cultures by reinforcing research evaluation through journal rankings, even though bodies like AACSB and EQUIS formally emphasize mission-driven and societal-impact standards (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Overall, the ABS journal ranking system reflects a research-prestige paradigm, while engineering accreditations embody a professional-standards paradigm, with minimal conceptual overlap.

Table 4 summarizes the contrasting evaluation philosophies underlying ABS-influenced business school assessment and engineering accreditation frameworks, highlighting differences in evaluative focus, transparency, and treatment of impact.

2.4.3 How does reliance on the ABS journal ranking system interact with AACSB'S emphasis on mission alignment and societal impact?

The ABS journal ranking system promotes a narrow, journal-centric, and quantitative view of research that can conflict with accreditation bodies, especially AACSB, which emphasize mission alignment, engagement, and societal impact. Since the ABS journal ranking system assigns

TABLE 4 Contrasting evaluative logics of ABS-oriented business school assessment and accreditation frameworks (AACSB, ABET, EUR-ACE/MÜDEK).

Dimension	Business school evaluation (ABS-influenced)	Engineering accreditation (ABET/EUR-ACE)
Primary focus	Journal prestige and research outputs	Learning outcomes and professional competencies
Evaluation logic	Reputation- and hierarchy-based	Standards- and outcomes-based
Transparency	Opaque expert-panel judgments	Explicit, documented criteria
Replicability	Limited	High
Treatment of impact	Inferred from publication venue	Directly measured (industry links, applied outputs)
Alignment with mission	Often indirect	Explicit and required

AACSB and EQUIS apply mission-driven accreditation standards in business education, whereas ABET and MÜDEK exemplify outcomes-based accreditation in engineering programs. Prados et al. (2005), Liu et al. (2008), Mingers and Willmott (2013), Tourish and Willmott (2015).

numerical ratings and is widely used as a proxy for research quality, universities often incentivize publication in a small set of high-ranked journals, steering scholars away from applied, interdisciplinary, locally relevant, or socially impactful work. This contrasts with AACSB's standards, which promote pluralistic forms of impact and mission-driven evaluation (AACSB, 2020). Scholars argue that dependence on the ABS journal ranking system marginalizes research not represented in top-ranked outlets and encourages prestige-oriented publication strategies (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Consequently, heavy reliance on the ABS journal ranking system may undermine accreditation efforts to broaden conceptions of quality and support contextually meaningful scholarship.

2.4.4 How does the ABS journal ranking system evaluate practice-oriented outlets, and what criteria shape their relative positioning?

Practice-oriented, high-impact outlets such as Harvard Business Review (HBR) (Pittz, 2024; Harvard Business School, 2016) are undervalued in the ABS journal ranking system because the Academic Journal Guide prioritizes scholarly rigor, traditional peer review, and theoretical contribution over managerial relevance or real-world impact (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). The ABS journal ranking system favors journals that meet academic norms of theory development and methodological robustness, criteria HBR deliberately avoids in favor of accessibility and practitioner usefulness (Kieser and Leiner, 2009; Bartunek and Rynes, 2014).

This reflects the long-standing rigor–relevance divide in management research (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009). Given that HBR (Harvard Business Publishing, n.d.) lacks conventional academic peer review and emphasizes actionable insights rather than theoretical novelty, the ABS journal ranking system classifies it outside the "scholarly" domain, resulting in low ratings despite its substantial influence on practice and policy. Scholars argue this reinforces symbolic academic prestige by rewarding work consumed mainly by academics while marginalizing research with broader managerial or societal impact (Grey, 2010; Kieser and Leiner, 2009). Thus, the undervaluation of practice-oriented research is structurally built into the ABS journal ranking system.

2.4.5 How is social impact conceptualized and assessed within the ABS journal ranking system in comparison with engineering accreditation frameworks?

Social impact is considered "difficult" within the ABS journal ranking system because the Academic Journal Guide prioritizes theoretical rigor, methodological sophistication, and publication in elite Anglo-American journals, criteria that do not directly measure applied value (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). The ABS journal ranking system relies on panel judgments, disciplinary norms, and citation-based prestige, making societal or practitioner impact irrelevant primarily to its ranking logic (Willmott, 2011; Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021).

Engineering accreditations such as ABET differ fundamentally because they explicitly evaluate industry collaboration, applied problem-solving, professional competencies, and measurable technological or societal contributions through concrete indicators such as patents, prototypes, partnerships, and field implementation (ABET, 2024; Prados et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2008). Business research addresses socially embedded phenomena where impact is harder to attribute or quantify (Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011; Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009).

The ABS journal ranking system also emerged from a U.K. evaluation culture that equated journal prestige with research excellence, institutionalizing a model in which impact is inferred from publication venue rather than demonstrated outcomes (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). Since the ABS journal ranking system lacks mechanisms to assess practitioner uptake, policy influence, organizational improvement, or community benefit, its structure inherently renders social impact "difficult," unlike engineering accreditation systems designed to capture applied value directly (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Lockett, 2024).

2.4.6 How does the ABS journal ranking system relate to the distinction between research-driven and education-driven accreditation models?

Research-driven accreditation prioritizes scholarly output, publication volume, journal prestige, and alignment with global research standards, whereas education-driven accreditation focuses on teaching quality, learning outcomes, curriculum relevance, and societal or industry engagement (AACSB, 2020; Thomas et al., 2013). The ABS journal-centric system reinforces the research-driven model by treating publication in high-status, theoretically oriented, English-language journals as a primary marker of institutional legitimacy. This shifts university resources toward faculty publication strategies at the expense of pedagogy, local engagement, and mission-driven educational activities (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Scholars note that this creates tension with systems such as AACSB, which emphasize mission alignment and impact (Houston, 2008; Thelwall et al., 2023). Thus, the ABS journal ranking system amplifies the divide by pushing institutions toward reputational,

research-centric behavior, even though education-driven accreditation defines academic quality far more broadly.

2.4.7 How do data use and evidentiary standards differ between engineering accreditations and business school accreditations influenced by the ABS journal ranking system?

Engineering and applied science accreditations rely on tangible, empirically verifiable criteria, laboratory quality, curriculum design, faculty qualifications, learning outcomes, safety standards, and formal industry partnerships, because these fields emphasize measurable competencies and professional standards (ABET, 2021; Prados et al., 2005).

By contrast, business school accreditations operate in a more symbolic, reputation-driven environment where journal-based research performance often plays an outsized role-especially when institutions embed the ABS journal ranking system into internal assessments. The ABS journal ranking system depends on opaque expert-committee judgments rather than transparent, data-driven metrics, leading universities to prioritize publication prestige over demonstrable societal or industry value (Zhang, 2021).

This reflects a broader epistemic divide, in which applied sciences rely on standardized, externally validated measures linked to professional practice, whereas business schools depend on subjective research-quality proxies tied to academic status hierarchies rather than measurable educational or practical outcomes (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Brembs et al., 2013).

2.5 Academic careers and institutional strategy

The following five subsections examine faculty promotion, institutional strategy, and academic careers from the perspective of the ABS journal ranking system.

2.5.1 How is the ABS journal ranking system used in promotion and career evaluation in business schools, and how does this compare with practices in engineering and applied sciences?

In many business schools, especially in the U.K. and institutions shaped by U.K. research culture, the ABS journal ranking system is deeply embedded in promotion, tenure, and performance evaluation. Universities frequently set minimum thresholds of "ABS-rated outputs," making publication in ABS 3, 4, or 4* journals a de facto requirement. The ABS journal ranking system offers administrators a codified, easily auditable proxy for quality, enabling standardized evaluations even without subject expertise. Scholars similarly describe the ABS journal ranking system as a "governing device" that shapes research agendas and academic careers (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Oravec, 2019; Tourish and Willmott, 2015).

This contrasts sharply with engineering and applied sciences, where promotion is based on quantitative, field-specific metrics, citations, patents, grants, industry collaboration, and publication in journals indexed in Web of Science, Scopus, and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). These disciplines rely on objective, data-driven indicators aligned with established citation cultures rather than a centralized qualitative list, such as the ABS journal ranking system. Engineering accreditations such as ABET evaluate tangible outputs (labs, curricula, competencies), not journal rankings (ABET, 2024; Liu et al., 2008).

Thus, while the ABS journal ranking system has become normatively necessary for career progression in many business schools, engineering and applied sciences use pluralistic, metrics-based, discipline-specific promotion systems rather than a single journal-ranking regime.

2.5.2 How does the reliance on the ABS journal ranking system in business schools compare with evaluation practices in engineering disciplines?

Business schools rely far more heavily on the ABS journal ranking system than the more pluralistic, metric-based evaluation regimes used in engineering and applied sciences. Many management schools embed the ABS journal ranking system targets directly into hiring, tenure, and promotion criteria, frequently requiring publications in ABS 3, 4, and 4* journals. Empirical studies confirm that the ABS journal ranking system shapes perceptions of quality, research strategies, and topic/method choices (Brooks et al., 2023; Serenko and Bontis, 2024; Walker et al., 2019).

By contrast, engineering and applied sciences use diversified, standardized indicators, Scopus and the Web of Science (WoS) indexing, SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) and JCR quartiles, citation counts, h-index, grants, patents, prototypes, standards, and industry collaborations, typically embedded in national frameworks rather than a single proprietary list (Mingers and Yang, 2017; Vogel et al., 2017). Journal quality matters, but it is operationalized through widely recognized bibliometrics rather than a committee-based ranking that dominates evaluation.

Thus, the ABS journal ranking system serves as a centralized evaluative shortcut in business schools (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015), whereas engineering relies on decentralized, diverse indicators that balance academic outputs with applied contributions.

2.5.3 How is the ABS journal ranking system interpreted as a source of professional prestige and symbolic capital within management academia?

The ABS journal ranking system operates as a form of professional prestige and symbolic capital in business and management scholarship. The ABS journal ranking system ratings serve as shorthand indicators of scholarly legitimacy, enabling those publishing in ABS 3, 4, and 4* journals to accumulate symbolic capital in Bourdieu (1988). Universities reinforce this prestige logic by embedding the ABS journal ranking system classifications into hiring, promotion, and evaluation. The literature likewise shows that the ABS journal ranking system structures a hierarchical symbolic order: it shapes academic identities, defines legitimate research, and channels scholars toward prestige-driven publication strategies (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Tourish and Willmott (2015) argue that the ABS journal ranking system reproduces status dynamics that privilege conformity over intellectual diversity. Thus, the ABS journal ranking system functions not merely as a ranking tool but as a cultural mechanism that communicates reputation and status within the management academic field (Serenko and Bontis, 2022; Śpiewanowski and Talavera, 2021).

2.5.4 How does the evaluative logic of the U.K. REF relate to, or diverge from, that of the ABS journal ranking system?

The U.K. REF and the ABS journal ranking system, Academic Journal Guide, are historically linked but operate with distinct evaluative logics. The ABS journal ranking system emerged within the U.K.'s performance-measurement culture, and business schools use it to anticipate REF expectations, even though REF neither requires nor endorses journal rankings. REF evaluates research outputs, environment, and societal impact through peer review and case studies, emphasizing originality, significance, and real-world influence (Sivertsen, 2017; Wilsdon et al., 2015). The ABS journal ranking system, by contrast, ranks journals through committee judgments and reputational hierarchies, treating publication venue as a proxy for quality (Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Despite REF's emphasis on the substance of outputs, universities often conflate the two systems and use the ABS journal ranking system as a simplified administrative mechanism to manage REF-related pressures. Consequently, the ABS journal ranking system imposes a narrower, codified definition of quality that diverges from REF's broader philosophy and may distort academic behavior by overemphasizing journal prestige rather than substantive contribution or societal impact (Zhang, 2021).

2.5.5 How does the use of the ABS journal ranking system relate to publication expectations and career experiences, particularly for early-career researchers?

The ABS journal ranking system reinforces a "publish in top journals or perish" culture by rewarding outputs in a narrow set of elite, predominantly Anglo-American journals. Universities use ABS 3, 4, and 4* ratings as proxies for merit and promotion, thereby intensifying pressure on early-career researchers to publish in these venues in order to signal legitimacy and secure employment. Research shows that such ranking-driven expectations heighten anxiety, weaken intrinsic motivation, and constrain creativity, as junior scholars fear deviating from established theoretical norms and evaluative expectations (Nørgård and Whitton, 2024; Mula et al., 2022; Tekeste, 2025). The ABS journal ranking system also fosters risk aversion, discouraging interdisciplinary, critical, or practice-oriented work. Career effects include delayed progression, reduced mobility, and the marginalization of scholars, particularly in the Global South, whose locally relevant research rarely aligns with the dominant templates of elite journals (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). As a result, the ABS journal ranking system contributes not only to psychological strain but also to enduring structural inequalities in the global academic labor market (Harzing, 2010; Trau, 2012).

2.6 Structural critiques and knowledge production

The following five subsections address criticisms and conceptual problems associated with the ABS journal ranking system.

2.6.1 How do Anglo-centrism and disciplinary biases associated with the ABS journal ranking system affect its global applicability?

The ABS journal ranking system is marked by Anglo-centrism, disciplinary bias, and region-specific limitations, which limit its global applicability. The ABS journal ranking system is produced by the U.K.'s Chartered Association of Business Schools and rooted in U.K. REF norms, resulting in overrepresentation of U.S. and U.K. journals and limited visibility for high-quality outlets from non-English, emerging, or alternative epistemic communities (Mingers and Yang, 2017). Scholars argue that the ABS journal ranking system privileges quantitative, theory-driven North American traditions while undervaluing practice-oriented, pluralistic, and contextually grounded scholarship common in the Global South (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Subfields aligned with mainstream U.S. and U.K. paradigms dominate the 4 and 4* tiers, while applied, interdisciplinary, and regionally focused areas are systematically under-ranked (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Rafols et al., 2012; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). By restricting journals publishing in languages other than English, the ABS journal ranking system reinforces linguistic hierarchies and marginalizes non-English scholarly communities (Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014). Thus, despite widespread adoption, the ABS journal ranking system remains regionally anchored and often distorts evaluations of research quality across diverse academic systems and cultural contexts (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Mingers and Yang, 2017; Willmott, 2011).

2.6.2 How are transparency and data-driven criteria addressed in the ABS journal ranking system, and how do these features relate to assessments of its scientific credibility?

The scientific credibility of the ABS journal ranking system is contested due to its limited transparency and reliance on committee-based, non-replicable judgments rather than explicit, data-driven criteria. The ABS journal ranking system panel deliberations are undisclosed, and its evaluative rules are only vaguely described, preventing scholars from understanding or verifying how ratings are assigned. This contrasts with scientometric systems such as JCR or SJR, which use clear, quantifiable, reproducible metrics. Because the ABS journal ranking system functions more as a reputational hierarchy than a scientific assessment tool, its claims to objectivity and generalizability are undermined. Scholars argue that this opacity violates norms of universality, clarity, and replicability (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). The literature likewise shows that the ABS journal ranking system operates as a "black box," deriving authority from institutional adoption rather than methodological rigor. Consequently, despite its strong influence on hiring, promotion, and research strategy, ABS's opaque architecture raises concerns about fairness, validity, and the perpetuation of disciplinary and regional biases, rather than about the reliable evaluation of research quality (Tourish and Willmott, 2015).

2.6.3 What patterns of research behavior are associated with the ABS journal ranking system, particularly regarding innovation and intellectual risk-taking?

Evidence from the literature shows that the ABS journal ranking system encourages conservative, incremental, and derivative research rather than innovation (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). High-ranked ABS journals (4 and 4*) prioritize theoretical rigor, methodological orthodoxy, and adherence to dominant paradigms, reducing incentives to pursue unconventional or high-risk ideas. Ranking regimes, such as the ABS journal

ranking system, create standardization pressures that reward conformity and penalize novelty, as innovative work is more likely to challenge mainstream assumptions and face rejection (Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Tourish (2020) argues that ranking culture fosters "intellectual conservatism," pushing scholars to shape their work around elite journal expectations rather than socially relevant or disruptive questions. Elite journals demand methodological conformity, steering especially early-career researchers toward predictable, incremental contributions. Institutional reliance on the ABS journal ranking system for promotion and tenure reinforces this publish-to-survive logic, privileging extensions of existing theories over interdisciplinary, practice-oriented, or innovative research. Consequently, the ABS journal ranking system restricts epistemic diversity, delays theoretical breakthroughs, and marginalizes research outside dominant Western academic paradigms (Bohlens, 2026; Butler et al., 2017; Tourish, 2011a).

2.6.4 What forms of strategic behavior, political influence, or threshold effects are discussed in relation to the ABS journal ranking system?

Structural features of the ABS journal ranking system make it vulnerable to manipulation, political influence, and non-linear threshold effects, even without systemic corruption. Given that the ABS journal ranking system blends bibliometric indicators with opaque expert-panel judgments, journal upgrades and downgrades can be shaped by disciplinary lobbying, status competition, and strategic behavior by influential schools and editorial networks (Morris et al., 2009; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Rowlinson et al., 2011; Rowlinson et al., 2015). Small shifts in categories (e.g., 2 → 3 or 3 → 4) have disproportionate consequences for hiring, promotion, and REF eligibility, producing the "journal list fetishism" noted by Willmott (2011). Case studies show academics excluded from REF solely for lacking outputs above ABS 2, regardless of citation or societal impact (Tourish and Willmott, 2015). As the literature highlights, the opacity of the ABS journal ranking system enables symbolic and political uses, such as lobbying for reclassification or concentrating submissions in "safe" journals just above institutional thresholds. Because universities encode ABS cut-offs (e.g., requiring "3* or 4* outputs" for promotion), an ordinal list becomes a quasi-legal gatekeeping device shaping behavior and inviting tactical responses (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Mingers and Yang, 2017; Rowlinson et al., 2011; Rowlinson et al., 2015). Thus, the ABS journal ranking system functions not as a neutral metric but as a performative device prone to manipulation and threshold distortions that reshape scholarly evaluation and career trajectories.

2.6.5 How does the concentration of evaluative attention within the ABS journal ranking system relate to research diversity and disciplinary pluralism?

The ABS journal ranking system can be criticized for placing disproportionate weight on a small group of elite, largely Anglo-American journals. Its four-tier structure, mainly the exclusive 4* category, creates a "winner-take-all" dynamic that designates these outlets as the primary legitimate targets for high-status research (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). This concentration implicitly devalues most disciplinary journals and drives scholars and institutions to converge on the same epistemically homogeneous venues. The result is monocultural, isomorphic behavior: publication strategies become legitimacy- and prestige-driven rather than guided by scientific inquiry. Empirical work shows that this concentration crowds out intellectual diversity, privileges U.S.-centric theoretical traditions, and marginalizes regional, interdisciplinary, and practice-oriented scholarship (Tourish and Willmott, 2015; Adler and Harzing, 2009). Researchers increasingly "write for the list," tailoring projects to the expectations of a small set of journals rather than pursuing innovative or societally relevant questions (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). Thus, ABS's structural and prestige mechanisms concentrate symbolic value in a narrow set of outlets, promoting monocultural research behaviors and narrowing the epistemic landscape of global management scholarship (Butler et al., 2017; Tourish and Willmott, 2015).

2.7 Long-term consequences

The following six subsections examine the long-term consequences of the ABS journal ranking system for knowledge production and academic practices.

2.7.1 How does the ABS journal ranking system relate to interdisciplinary, emerging, and niche fields?

The ABS journal ranking system contributes to the neglect of interdisciplinary, emerging, and niche fields by privileging established disciplinary boundaries and a narrow set of institutionalized journals (Rafols et al., 2012). The ABS journal ranking system's field-specific panels emphasize traditional sub-disciplines, such as strategy and finance, and systematically undervalue journals that fall outside these categories. Interdisciplinary outlets are frequently excluded or ranked low, even when they address significant societal challenges or demonstrate strong scholarly impact. Scholars argue that the ABS journal ranking system promotes "paradigmatic conformity" (Mingers and Willmott, 2013) and pushes researchers toward established theory-driven journals rather than innovative or cross-boundary work (Tourish, 2020). Emerging fields, often situated in newer or specialist journals, are disadvantaged because the ABS journal ranking system evolves slowly and conservatively, shaping hiring, promotion, and funding decisions. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: universities reward ABS-targeted outputs, scholars avoid lower-ranked interdisciplinary venues, and the ABS journal ranking system continues to under-recognize new specialties. The outcome is "prestige-driven homogeneity" and institutional isomorphism, narrowing intellectual diversity in management research (Anderson et al., 2021).

2.7.2 How does the ABS journal ranking system relate to applied research and societal impact?

The ABS journal ranking system weakens motivation for applied research and reduces university–industry collaboration by privileging theoretical rigor, elite-journal norms, and mainstream disciplinary debates over practical relevance. Practitioner-oriented outlets, such as Harvard Business Review (Harvard Business Publishing, n.d.) and MIT Sloan Management Review (MIT Sloan Management Review, n.d.), are rated low or excluded, thereby incentivizing scholars to prioritize ABS-recognized theoretical work rather than industry

engagement or applied problem-solving. The literature shows that the ABS journal ranking system reinforces a "theory-first" model that discourages practitioner collaboration and undervalues applied outputs such as policy reports, patents, consulting, and community projects (Hazelkorn, 2015; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015), shifting academic behavior toward publication prestige instead of societal or industrial relevance. The ABS journal ranking system correlates poorly with broader scientific or societal impact, since high ABS ratings reflect conformity to elite journal hierarchies and symbolic prestige (Willmott, 2011; Adler and Harzing, 2009), not real-world influence. Given that the ABS journal ranking system relies on non-transparent committee judgments rather than transparent impact metrics, its link to societal or industrial outcomes is weak. Overall, the ABS journal ranking system incentivizes internally oriented academic prestige while discouraging applied, collaborative, and socially impactful research (Bohlens, 2026; Panigrahi and Srivastava, 2018; Zhang, 2021).

2.7.3 How does the ABS journal ranking system relate to research incentives and societal needs?

The ABS journal ranking system incentivizes research driven by ranking logic rather than societal relevance. It channels scholars toward elite, theory-heavy journals that reward conceptual rigor and methodological density over applied impact, pushing academics to "write for the rankings rather than for practice." Willmott (2011) argues that the ABS journal ranking system creates "coercive ranking-driven conformity," narrowing management scholarship's intellectual agenda; Mingers and Willmott (2013) show that journal hierarchies steer researchers toward topics, methods, and theories favored by elite Anglo-American outlets while undervaluing work addressing local problems, practitioner needs, or social challenges. Tourish and Willmott (2015) add that the ABS journal ranking system incentives foster incremental, low-risk theoretical contributions optimized for publication rather than relevance. Overall, the ABS journal ranking system generates directional, biased research shaped by prestige incentives rather than societal needs, privileging academia's internal status economy over public value.

2.7.4 How does the ABS journal ranking system relate to patterns of scholarship and epistemic diversity?

The ABS journal ranking system reinforces a narrow, single-voiced research culture that privileges dominant Anglo-American paradigms and restricts epistemic diversity. The ABS journal ranking system relies on expert-panel judgments and opaque evaluation processes that favor mainstream theories and conventional methods while marginalizing qualitative, practice-oriented, heterodox, and regionally grounded scholarship. This reflects critiques that ranking regimes discipline academics into producing "safe," incremental work aligned with elite journal expectations (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Willmott (2011) characterizes the ABS journal ranking system as a form of epistemic governance that defines legitimate knowledge and sidelines alternatives. These effects intensify as universities link hiring, promotion, and resource allocation to ABS-rated outputs, reducing incentives for innovative or interdisciplinary inquiry (Oravec, 2019). Overall, the ABS journal ranking system sustains a one-dimensional, methodologically orthodox research culture that prioritizes theoretical conformity and Western academic standards at the expense of global scholarly plurality and real-world relevance (Tourish, 2011b).

2.7.5 How does the ABS journal ranking system relate to conformity, institutional isomorphism, and global homogenization?

The ABS journal ranking system promotes conformity, institutional isomorphism, and homogenization across business schools globally. Universities increasingly align hiring, promotion, and research strategies with ABS ratings, not because these reflect institutional missions, but because the ABS journal ranking system functions as a legitimacy signal and marker of international competitiveness. This reflects institutional theory, which holds that organizations mimic "elite" models to gain legitimacy rather than improve performance (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). By privileging a narrow set of Anglo-American journals and epistemic traditions, the ABS journal ranking system pressures universities in Europe, Asia, and emerging regions to pursue the same topics, methods, and outlets, producing a global academic monoculture (Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). This mimicry is especially strong in non-Anglophone contexts, where institutions replicate U.K. and U.S. research norms instead of supporting locally relevant scholarship (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Adler and Harzing, 2009). Thus, the ABS journal ranking system amplifies normative and mimetic pressures, reducing epistemic diversity and encouraging standardized, ranking-driven behavior across management academia (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Rafols et al., 2012; Tourish, 2020).

2.7.6 What long-term global consequences are associated with the dominance of the ABS journal ranking system in business and management research?

The long-term consequences of the dominance of the ABS journal ranking system are largely negative for innovation, research diversity, and global knowledge creation. ABS drives scholars toward a narrow set of elite Anglo-American journals, fostering disciplinary convergence, methodological standardization, and incremental theorizing governed by a small group of editorial gatekeepers (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). The ABS journal ranking system encourages predictable, risk-averse publication strategies and discourages novel, heterodox, or interdisciplinary inquiry. These incentives suppress emerging fields, non-Western scholarship, and practice-oriented research, reinforcing hierarchical global knowledge structures and reducing the pluralism essential for theoretical and methodological breakthroughs (Rafols et al., 2012; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). The system ultimately risks a monoculture of topics and methods, as academics optimize for the ABS journal ranking system rather than scientific or societal relevance. Over time, this narrows the global research agenda, weakens interdisciplinary problem-solving capacity, and reduces innovation, undermining the intellectual vitality and societal legitimacy of business and management scholarship (Rafols et al., 2012).

TABLE 5 Layered governance of evaluation and accreditation systems in Turkish business schools.

Governance layer	System	Primary function	Evaluative logic	Status in Turkey	Key references
National regulatory core	YÖKAK	System-wide quality assurance, institutional accountability, compliance with national and ESG standards	Standards-based institutional quality assurance; periodic self-evaluation and external review	Mandatory for all higher-education institutions	Hazelkorn (2009, 2015), Bugday Ince and Gounko (2014), Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (2023), European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2022)
International accreditation layer	AACSB/EQUIS	Business school accreditation and international legitimacy	Mission-driven, peer-review-based standards emphasizing research, education quality, and societal impact	Voluntary, strategically pursued by leading universities	AACSB (2020), Urgel (2007), EFMD (2022), Hazelkorn (2015), Thomas et al. (2013)
Research-evaluation overlay	AJG	Symbolic signaling of research quality through journal hierarchies	Prestige- and hierarchy-based journal classification informed by expert judgment	Informal, selectively embedded in internal evaluation	Willmott (2011), Mingers and Willmott (2013), Tourish and Willmott (2015), Adler and Harzing (2009)
Global ranking signal	FT50	International reputation and benchmarking in business-school rankings	Inclusion-based elite journal list tied to institutional rankings	Voluntary, reputational and strategic	Adler and Harzing (2009), Hazelkorn (2015), Financial Times (2025)

2.8 Regional application and institutional context: the case of Turkey

The following three subsections discuss the application of the ABS journal ranking system in Turkey as a regional case study.

2.8.1 How do Turkish business schools navigate global ranking pressures alongside national accreditation and quality-assurance systems?

Business schools in Turkey respond to global pressures (ABS, FT50, AACSB) by layering them onto national accreditation requirements, especially those of the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC; Yükseköğretim Kalite Kurulu, YÖKAK), rather than replacing domestic frameworks (Hazelkorn, 2015; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Adler and Harzing, 2009). YÖKAK provides the system-wide baseline: institutions must maintain internal quality-assurance systems, conduct self-evaluations, and undergo external reviews aligned with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) (Turkish Higher Education Quality Council, 2023; European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2022; Bugday Ince and Gounko, 2014). Within this core, leading Turkish business schools pursue international accreditations, primarily AACSB and, for some, EQUIS and AMBA, to signal global status and access FT rankings, which require AACSB and EQUIS participation (AACSB, 2019; EFMD, 2022; Urgel, 2007; Financial Times, 2025; Study.eu, 2025). At the research level, many schools informally adopt the ABS journal ranking system and FT50 as proxies for "high-quality" output in hiring, promotion, and workload allocation, despite the absence of a YÖKAK mandate (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011; Adler and Harzing, 2009; Vogel et al., 2017). Empirical studies show Turkish faculties increasingly seek AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA to differentiate themselves domestically while remaining compliant with YÖKAK (Can and Önal, 2017; Bugday Ince and Gounko, 2014). Engineering and applied-science programs instead pursue the Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of Engineering Programs in Turkey (MÜDEK), an outcomes-based, data-driven accreditation that grants equivalence with the EUR-ACE, European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAEE) (Augusti, 2007; de Azevedo, 2009; ENAEE, 2021; Prados et al., 2005) and the Washington Accord (MÜDEK, 2020, 2025), thereby tying these fields to technical rather than journal-based standards. The result is a hybrid regime: business schools emphasize impact and mission alignment in YÖKAK reporting while, internally, relying on ABS, FT50, and international accreditation to structure research expectations and competitiveness (Lockett, 2024; Thomas et al., 2013). Thus, institutions overlay global ranking and accreditation logics onto a YÖKAK-centered regulatory core, producing a layered and sometimes contradictory governance environment (Study.eu, 2025; Turkish Higher Education Quality Council, 2023; Hazelkorn, 2009).

Table 5 summarizes the layered configuration of evaluation and accreditation systems operating in Turkish business schools.

2.8.2 How do leading Turkish universities pursue global accreditation, and what role does the ABS journal ranking system play in this process?

Top Turkish institutions such as Koç University obtain AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA accreditation without relying on the ABS journal ranking system because these accreditors assess research through mission alignment, impact, and faculty qualifications rather than U.K.-style journal hierarchies (AACSB, 2020; EFMD, 2022; Urgel, 2007; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). AACSB (2020) accepts applied research, consultancy,

outreach, patents, and societal contributions as indicators of quality, in contrast to ABS's narrow, Anglo-centric journal logic (Willmott, 2011; Adler and Harzing, 2009; Mingers and Yang, 2017). Elite Turkish universities instead use global bibliometric indicators, such as Scopus, Web of Science, JCR/SSCI, citations, h-index, and significant grants, aligning with international rankings (Hazelkorn, 2009, 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2008). National systems such as YÖKAK and MÜDEK emphasize learning outcomes, governance, productivity, and industry engagement, offering little incentive to adopt a subjective, panel-based list such as the ABS journal ranking system (Turkish Higher Education Quality Council, 2023; Bugday Ince and Gounko, 2014; MÜDEK, 2020, 2025). Institutional legitimacy in Turkey derives from AACSB/EQUIS status, QS, Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE) performance, and national evaluation success, rendering the ABS journal ranking system of limited relevance outside the U.K. (Hazelkorn, 2015; Study.eu, 2025; Financial Times, 2025). Strong internal research cultures, internationally trained faculty, and broad excellence in indexed journals further reduce any dependence on the ABS journal ranking system (Aguinis et al., 2014; Harzing and Adler, 2016). Overall, the ABS journal ranking system is seen as culturally specific, insufficiently international, and misaligned with Turkish accreditation philosophies; leading universities thus succeed globally through diverse, data-driven research excellence rather than adherence to the U.K.-centric ABS list (Bugday Ince and Gounko, 2014; Mingers and Willmott, 2013).

2.8.3 How do regional indexing systems compare with the ABS journal ranking system in terms of evaluative logic and institutional objectives?

Regional systems such as Turkish Academic Index (TR Dizin) (Aslan, 2019), Regional Online Information System for Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain, and Portugal (Latindex) (Abejón Peña et al., 2024), Iranian Scientific Information Database (SID) (Scientific Information Database, n.d.), and Islamic World Science Citation Center (ISC) (Islamic World Science Citation Center, n.d.) follow principles that are fundamentally different from those of the ABS journal ranking system. They prioritize accessibility, inclusivity, editorial quality, ethical standards, regional relevance, and multilingual scholarship rather than hierarchical tiers or prestige. Their logic strengthens local research ecosystems and supports knowledge pluralism instead of reinforcing Global North dominance. The literature shows that these systems are designed to build regional capacity and reduce reliance on Anglo-American evaluation regimes (Curry and Lillis, 2007; Chavarro et al., 2016). They offer transparent, less status-driven alternatives aligned with regional scientific priorities, in contrast to ABS's prestige-oriented model. Nevertheless, their global influence is limited because universities, especially business schools, continue to pursue symbolic legitimacy through Western rankings such as ABS, FT50, and JCR (Clarivate Analytics, n.d.). Consequently, regional indexes promote more equitable and pluralistic frameworks but operate within a landscape still shaped by Anglo-centric standards (Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014; Murphy and Zhu, 2012; Adler and Harzing, 2009).

3 Discussion

This review has examined the ABS journal ranking system as an institutionalized mechanism of research evaluation and educational governance rather than as a purely technical ranking tool. In doing so, it addresses several gaps in the existing literature and clarifies their implications for higher education.

3.1 Addressing gaps in the existing literature

Prior studies have mainly treated the ABS journal ranking system as either a bibliometric artifact or an object of normative critique within management research. This review advances the literature by reframing the ABS journal ranking system as a governance mechanism, demonstrating how it coordinates legitimacy, shapes academic behavior, and structures institutional conformity within higher education systems. This governance-oriented perspective remains underdeveloped in earlier work, which often isolates methodological flaws without examining institutional effects.

The literature has rarely integrated journal rankings with educational accreditation. By situating the ABS journal ranking system alongside accreditation regimes such as AACSB and contrasting it with outcome-based engineering accreditations, the review highlights a structural misalignment between journal-centric evaluation and mission-driven educational models. This integrative perspective extends existing critiques beyond research performance to include educational purpose and institutional strategy.

Although Anglo-centrism and inequality are frequently acknowledged, they are often discussed abstractly. This review contextualizes the global diffusion of the ABS journal ranking system and illustrates how ranking logics interact with national evaluation systems and reinforce institutional isomorphism, particularly in non-Anglophone and Global South contexts. This shifts the discussion from generalized bias to concrete governance consequences.

Previous critiques of the ABS journal ranking system have rarely been connected to responsible research assessment frameworks. By linking the ABS journal ranking system debates to principles articulated in DORA and the Leiden Manifesto, this review positions journal-ranking critique within a broader reform agenda, moving beyond diagnosis toward conceptual pathways for change.

It should be noted that the ABS journal ranking system has also evolved in response to sustained criticism, as reflected in the Guide's own documentation discussed above. Recent editions emphasize the advisory nature of the rankings, clarify that journal grades should not be used as mechanical proxies for individual evaluation, and more explicitly describe review procedures and committee processes. The Guide also highlights broader consultation with disciplinary communities and the use of contextual information to support more responsible interpretation. While these adjustments signal responsiveness to concerns about transparency and misuse, debates persist over whether they sufficiently address deeper issues of hierarchy and epistemic bias (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021, 2024).

It is also important to distinguish between the ABS journal ranking system as designed and how it is used in practice. While some business schools may apply the Guide flexibly and contextually, others can employ journal grades more rigidly, intensifying their evaluative and disciplinary effects.

In light of these variations in institutional use, journal ranking systems also shape educational quality indirectly by influencing how faculty allocate time and define academic merit. Research incentives tied to elite journal publication can crowd out pedagogical innovation, narrow curricular content, and reduce engagement with practice-oriented teaching, with implications for student learning and the societal relevance of business education.

3.2 Limitations of the review

Several limitations should be acknowledged. As a critical-conceptual review, the analysis relies on interpretive synthesis rather than systematic or quantitative aggregation. While this approach provides theoretical depth and cross-domain integration, it does not yield empirical estimates of the magnitude of the ABS journal ranking system's effects on educational outcomes or research behavior. In addition, although the review draws on international literature and a regional analytical case, it does not offer a comprehensive cross-country comparison or longitudinal evidence. These constraints limit generalizability but are consistent with the study's conceptual framework.

Another limitation concerns author positionality: prior engagement with business schools between 2021 and 2025 provides valuable insider insight but may also influence interpretive emphasis and critical framing, thereby introducing perspective bias.

The generalizability of the Turkey case also raises another concern about limitations. Although this case provides analytically rich insight into the interaction between global evaluation regimes and national governance, it is not intended to represent all Global South or non-Anglophone contexts and should be interpreted as a theoretical illustration.

A further limitation of this review concerns the linguistic scope of the sources analyzed. Although the article advances a critique of Anglo-American dominance in research evaluation and journal ranking systems (Willmott, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015), the literature reviewed is drawn exclusively from English-language sources. This reliance reflects a practical constraint rather than a normative judgment about the value of non-Anglophone scholarship. Meaningful engagement with Spanish-, Portuguese-, French-, German-, or Chinese-language literatures, such as Brazilian debates on Qualis rankings (Barata, 2017), Latin American discussions linking Latindex (Abejón Peña et al., 2024) to international evaluation regimes, German scholarship surrounding VHB-JOURQUAL (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), or Asian accounts of navigating dual ranking systems, requires not only linguistic competence but also deep contextual familiarity to avoid superficial or tokenistic incorporation. Given these constraints, the present review prioritizes analytical coherence and interpretive depth over broader linguistic coverage.

3.3 Future research directions

The findings point to several directions for future research. Comparative empirical studies are needed to examine how different evaluation regimes, journal-based, accreditation-driven, and hybrid models, affect research quality, teaching priorities, and societal impact across institutional contexts. Further work should explore alternative governance models for business education that decouple research evaluation from narrow journal hierarchies while maintaining rigor and accountability. To develop a more comprehensive perspective, additional studies should also examine the limitations and unintended consequences of outcome-based accreditation frameworks, such as ABET and EUR-ACE. While these systems offer greater transparency and replicability than journal-centric evaluation, their potential drawbacks, including standardization pressures, compliance burdens, and constraints on curricular or institutional diversity, warrant closer scrutiny.

Empirical inquiry would also benefit from comparative case-study designs that examine how institutions and national systems adopt, adapt to, or resist journal-centric evaluation regimes. Longitudinal evidence on hiring practices, promotion criteria, and publication patterns would help assess how alternative evaluation systems shape academic behavior and institutional strategy over time.

Greater attention is needed to Global South contexts to better understand how imported ranking systems interact with national quality-assurance frameworks and shape academic development trajectories. As noted in the limitations of this review, multilingual and context-sensitive approaches that integrate non-Anglophone scholarship more fully and comparatively would extend and refine the governance-based critique developed here.

At the institutional level, in-depth case studies could illuminate how universities in contexts such as Turkey navigate layered evaluation environments. Detailed analysis of institutional policies, hiring and promotion criteria, and research strategies would clarify how global ranking pressures, international accreditation standards, and national quality-assurance frameworks are negotiated in practice.

Relatedly, further investigation is needed into whether and how national journals and locally grounded research traditions in contexts such as Turkey are marginalized by ABS-oriented evaluation regimes.

Equity-oriented research remains essential for understanding the intra-institutional consequences of ABS-based evaluation systems. Although this review highlights global and systemic inequalities associated with journal-centric governance, further work is needed to examine differential effects on early-career researchers, women, scholars from underrepresented groups, and those working in applied, interdisciplinary, or undervalued subfields.

A more explicit focus on power and politics would also deepen the analysis of the ABS journal ranking system. Building on the institutional perspective adopted here, future studies could examine how power asymmetries among elite institutions, editorial networks, disciplinary communities, and accreditation actors shape ranking criteria, journal hierarchies, and downstream consequences for knowledge production and academic careers.

Engagement with scholarship on epistemic justice and epistemic oppression offers another promising avenue. Drawing on theories of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007) and epistemic oppression (Dotson, 2014) could deepen analysis of how ranking regimes privilege some forms of knowledge while marginalizing others, situating journal rankings within broader debates on epistemic inequality.

Further conceptual and empirical work could also distinguish between institutions that substantively embed ABS-based evaluation in internal decision-making and those that adopt it primarily as a symbolic or legitimacy-seeking device. Examining how these different modes of adoption, ranging from deep integration into promotion and workload systems to more superficial external signalling, shape research behavior, institutional strategy, and academic careers would extend the institutional-theory perspective advanced in this review.

Finally, attention to resistance and alternatives remains critical. Empirical studies could explore whether and how institutions, departments, or individual scholars have challenged or selectively decoupled from ABS-oriented evaluation practices, and which strategies, such as mission-driven assessment, pluralistic evaluation criteria, or alignment with responsible research assessment frameworks, enable alternatives to journal-centric governance to emerge and be sustained.

Broader policy and cross-disciplinary implications of journal-centric research evaluation also merit investigation, particularly

regarding how insights from business and management education translate to other disciplinary contexts.

Overall, this review underscores that journal rankings such as the ABS journal ranking system are not neutral instruments but powerful governance devices with educational consequences. Recognizing and critically engaging with these consequences is essential for developing more pluralistic, transparent, and mission-aligned systems of research and educational evaluation.

Author contributions

AT: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the editor and the referees for their valuable comments, which significantly improved the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. ChatGPT-5.2 was employed solely to enhance the English writing, limited to improvements in grammar, style, and overall clarity.

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Publisher's note

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Glossary

Journal rankings and evaluation systems

ABDC - Australian Business Deans Council Journal Quality List

ABS - Association of Business Schools

AJG - Academic Journal Guide (published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools)

CNRS - Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (French national research classification)

FT50 - Financial Times Top 50 Journals List

JCR - Journal Citation Reports (Clarivate Analytics)

SJR - SCImago Journal Rank

UTD24 - University of Texas at Dallas Top 24 Journals for Business School Research Rankings

VHB-JOURQUAL - Verband der Hochschullehrer für Betriebswirtschaft Journal Quality Ranking (Germany)

WoS - Web of Science (Clarivate Analytics)

Accreditation bodies (Business and Engineering)

AACSB - Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

ABET - Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology

AMBA - Association of MBAs

CEAB - Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board

EFMD - European Foundation for Management Development

ENAEE - European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education

EQUIS - European Quality Improvement System

EUR-ACE - European Accredited Engineer

JABEE - Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education

MÜDEK - Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of Engineering Programs in Turkey

Higher education quality agencies

ESG 2015 - European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015)

YÖKAK/THEQC - Turkish Higher Education Quality Council

Global university rankings

QS - Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings

THE - Times Higher Education World University Rankings

Regional indexes

ISC - Islamic World Science Citation Center

Latindex - Regional Online Information System for Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain, and Portugal

SID - Scientific Information Database (Iran)

TR Dizin - Turkish Academic Index

Responsible assessment frameworks

DORA - San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment

REF - Research Excellence Framework in the U.K

Country abbreviations

U.S. - United States

U.K. - United Kingdom

Other abbreviations

IEEE - Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers