Ranking Journals in the Humanities: An Australian Case Study

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ABSTRACT This article reviews the methods commonly used to evaluate journals, looking particularly at indicators relevant to journals in the humanities. It then applies these methods to a sample of Australian humanities journals. The indicators used are: level of holdings in large overseas academic libraries, coverage in international databases, standards of refereeing, peer evaluation by researchers, and frequency of citation in ISI source journals. The results obtained from each indicator are compared to establish the validity of the indicators.

Librarians have been engaged in the evaluation of journals for almost as long as journals have been published. The methods which we have used for evaluation have often been rather homespun – sometimes little more sophisticated than 'I know my users and I know what they want'. However in recent years, with dramatically rising serial prices, the evaluation of the journal collection has become more of a challenge for academic librarians, and we have had to look for more intellectually rigorous methods.

Somewhat to our surprise, we have discovered that journal evaluation is an issue which is now of interest to many of our clients as well. As funding bodies put pressure on universities to demonstrate the value of their work, the question of how to measure the quality of research outputs has become critical for universities and for those who work in them. The Australian Government, for example, has recently established the Research Quality Framework 'to develop the basis for a more consistent and comprehensive approach to assessing the quality and impact of publicly funded research.'[1]

Any such assessment must be influenced by a variety of factors, but inevitably outputs in the form of scholarly publications will play a significant role, and in many disciplines the journal article is the standard form of publication. As Butler has demonstrated, pressure from funding bodies has led to an increase in journal publication by Australian academics during the last decade, but much of that increase has occurred in journals of lower quality.[2] This has inevitably prompted a closer scrutiny of the quality of the journals in which academics are publishing. The report on consultations held in Australia early in 2005 concerning the Research Quality Framework records that:

> The most contentious area of discussion was around whether rankings of journals could be provided for different disciplines that would allow review panels to rate publication performance without having to actually read publications. Some (primarily in the humanities and social sciences) suggested that this was not possible and that panels must actually assess papers put forward. Others (primarily

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> in the sciences) maintained that it was unrealistic to expect panels to review papers and that it should be possible to reach broadly agreed lists of journals for each research field.[3]

Methods of Journal Evaluation in the Humanities

As the passage quoted immediately above makes clear, journal ranking is a particularly thorny issue in the humanities. At the most fundamental level, some academics would argue that evaluation of journal output is an unprofitable exercise, as the most important research outputs in the humanities are published in books. For example, a recent report from the (Australian) Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences states that 'standard bibliometric practices do not capture the variety of research outputs (for instance books, documentaries, policy reports) in the humanities and social sciences, and are clearly absurd in the creative arts'[4] and a recent Canadian review of bibliometric practice in the social sciences and humanities concluded that 'the research article clearly does not play as central a role in the SSH [social sciences and humanities] as it does in the NSE [natural sciences and engineering].'[5]

Let us put aside these objections and accept, for argument's sake, that journal articles are a significant output medium in the humanities, even if they are not necessarily the dominant medium. Are there methods which can be used to evaluate and rank journals in the humanities? And how applicable are those methods to Australian journals?

Citation Counts and Impact Factors

The citation indexes developed by the Institute for Scientific Information (hereafter ISI) have established themselves as the major tool for bibliometric evaluation of scholarly journals. The impact factors which ISI calculates for journals in the sciences and social sciences are widely quoted as measures of the quality of those journals and, by extension, of the articles which they publish.

However, in the arts and humanities no such impact factors are calculated. The method used for calculating impact factors in the sciences and social sciences is based on a three-year cycle of publication and citation. As ISI have found,

> citations in the Arts and Humanities … do not necessarily follow this same predictable pattern as citations to Social Sciences and Natural Sciences articles. Citations to an article on the 19th Century Romantic novel, for example, may accrue slowly at first, and then slacken, fluctuating over time in cycles consistent with scholars' varying interest in the topic.[6]

Thus, for want of an agreed methodology, no impact factors are available in the humanities, although it is certainly possible to use the data in the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* to count citations to humanities journals. The problem lies in deciding how to analyse such data so as to provide meaningful comparisons between journals.

There are other problems in using the ISI indexes for journal evaluation. Much humanities research is published in books, but the ISI indexes only record citations in journals, so citations in books to the journal literature are not represented in the indexes. The 1,100 source journals scanned for the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* are only a fraction of the scholarly journals currently published, and they are predominantly English-language journals with an international focus. As the founder of ISI has stated, 'unless a journal of interest to only a small region of the world is exceptional in some way, we are less likely to cover it' and 'we do cover a large number of foreign-language journals, but the presence of informative abstracts or summaries in English is essential.'[7]

Journals dealing with topics such as Australian literature or Australian history are most likely to be cited in other Australian journals. Only 13 Australian journals in the humanities are currently ISI source journals (see Table 1). The result is that citations to Australian journals are often poorly covered in the ISI citation indexes.

The development of large full-text databases of humanities journals (such as Blackwell Synergy or Oxford Journals) opens up new possibilities for citation counts, because journal titles appearing in reference lists and footnotes can be searched using such databases. Full-text databases of books (such as Google Print or a9.com) can similarly be used to retrieve citations to journals in the monographic literature. These databases will not supplant the ISI citation indexes, but they may prove to be a useful supplement to them, at least when evaluating journals which have distinctive titles, and in disciplines where journal titles are not normally abbreviated when referencing.

Standards of Refereeing

In the guidelines for selecting journals for inclusion in their citation indexes, ISI state that 'application of the peer review process is another indication of the journal's standards and indicates overall quality of the research presented and the completeness of cited references.'[8]

The significance of refereeing practices as a measure of journal quality was examined in some detail in Penelope Murphy's 1996 report for the (Australian) National Board of Employment, Education and Training.[9] That report went as far as to advocate surveying journal editors as to their refereeing and quality control practices, and the ranking of journals on the basis of the responses. This proposal seems a little too much like 'self assessment' and does not seem to have been adopted, but there can be little argument with the proposition that rigorous refereeing is a strong indicator of journal quality. The problem is to find an objective way to measure it.

Coverage in International Databases

As all databases have to be selective about the journals which they index, coverage of a journal in a large, international database can be regarded as some indicator of quality. Regular indexing in such a database is certainly likely to increase the visibility (and thus the impact) of articles published in a journal.

To use coverage in a particular database as an indicator of quality, we would need to know more about the criteria used by the database editors for selection of journals. The fact that a journal has not been recently indexed in a database may represent a deliberate decision to exclude it, or may simply result from a breakdown in the supply of issues for indexing. The stringent criteria used by ISI for journal selection have already been referred to, and as Murphy has remarked, 'the status of a journal as being comprised within ISI indexes is itself sometimes construed as a form of "quality assurance".'[10]

Peer Evaluation

Researchers in the humanities seem to hold considerable suspicions about the value of bibliometric evaluation of research output. The Expert Advisory Group established to support the Australian Research Quality Framework concluded that 'in the humanities, arts and social sciences … numerical proxies for summative judgments of research quality are less valued. Expert judgment of the quality of research and its impact is, therefore, the ultimate authority.'[11] Similarly, in their study of bibliometric methods in the social sciences and humanities, Archambault and Vignola Gagné concluded that 'an indicator based on peer judgment may enjoy greater legitimacy in the eyes of the research community than a statistical one.'[12]

Nonetheless, questions exist about the value of peer assessment of journal quality. Murphy states that 'several factors may influence [peer] ratings of journals which may not necessarily reflect journal quality, such as respondents' knowledge of a journal, personal subscription, previous rejection of a manuscript.'[13] Archambault and Vignola Gagné argue that 'experts tend to give similar rating to the vast majority of academic journals'[14] and Thomas and Watkins point to a 'tendency for researchers to be expert in only one area, such that their knowledge of sub-fields outside their own speciality tends to be relatively poor.'[15]

For these reasons, Moed and his colleagues maintain that 'the developer of bibliometric indicators should have independent tools to examine and test scholars' perceptions'[16] or, as Moed puts it more bluntly in a recent publication, the role of bibliometrics is 'to keep the peer review process honest.'[17]

Whatever the merits of peer ranking of journal quality, the greatest objection to this method of evaluation lies in the practical problems and expense of organising a sufficiently broadly based survey of academics in each discipline. It would be difficult even to define the boundaries of those

disciplines in an era of increasingly cross-disciplinary research. Furthermore, although researchers certainly have some impression of the quality of journals in their field, there does not seem to be any agreed survey instrument that could be used to guide academics to provide more specific evaluations or rankings of those journals.

Holdings in Libraries

An indicator that has received little, if any, attention in the bibliometric literature is the extent to which a journal is represented in academic libraries. Are journals which are widely held in academic libraries of higher quality than those which are not? Do libraries make subscription and retention decisions on strictly rational criteria, driven by client demand and evaluation, or are such decisions more arbitrary and erratic?

Even if we accept that surveying library holdings might be a useful way of ranking journal quality, there are several caveats to be borne in mind. The first is that, if we are trying to evaluate the current quality of the journal, we should be counting only libraries which have current subscriptions to it. The second is that we should be counting only print subscriptions, since electronic subscriptions tend to form part of large package deals. A print subscription usually represents a decision to acquire the specific journal in question, whereas an electronic subscription often does not. Of course, a library may decide to cancel a print subscription because it is now accessing the journal electronically, a factor which would invalidate any methodology based on counting print subscriptions.

What application could this method play in the evaluation of Australian journals in the humanities? We would expect Australian journals to be widely held in Australian libraries, so surveying holdings in Australian libraries is unlikely to be profitable. An alternative approach is to survey holdings in a sample of large overseas university libraries, working on the assumption that significant Australian journals are likely to be well represented in such libraries, and that Australian journals which are not held in major overseas libraries can be having little international impact.

This method of evaluation smacks of the traditional Australian 'cultural cringe' – the belief that nothing Australian is of value unless it has received international approbation – but it seems to conform to the expectations of funding bodies. The Research Quality Framework's *Advanced Approaches Paper* speaks of 'international benchmarking' and maintains that 'Australian research must be assessed against the best research in the world.'[18]

Testing the Indicators: Case Study

Having discussed the indicators that are normally used to assess journal quality, let us now test these against a sample of Australian journals in the humanities. If these indicators are valid measures of quality, then there should be considerable similarities in the rankings achieved by using each method. As the

indicator based on holdings in large overseas libraries is novel and apparently untested in other bibliometric studies, it will form the starting point for this case study.

Selecting the Sample

The sample was selected from the list of journals chosen by the National Library of Australia for comprehensive indexing in the *APAIS* database.[19] *APAIS* is the premier Australian database in the social sciences and humanities, and one would expect it to comprehensively index all important Australian journals in those fields. From that list, all journals in the humanities whose content consists mainly of substantial contributions by academic researchers were selected. These are all considered to be Australian journals, although some are now published by international publishers on behalf of an Australian organisation. Only journals which are currently being published were included. The sample contained 59 titles which are listed in Table 1. A brief indication of the subject coverage has been added where this is not obvious from the title.

Holdings in Large Overseas Libraries

It was decided to check the holdings of the journals in a sample of 10 very large university libraries in the English-speaking world. Those 10 libraries comprised the six largest university libraries in the United States (Harvard, Yale, Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, California at Berkeley, Texas at Austin, Stanford), the largest university library in Canada (Toronto), and the three largest university libraries in the United Kingdom (Oxford, Cambridge and the University of London System).

Use of a union catalogue such as WorldCat or COPAC would have simplified the checking procedure, and would have made it possible to check holdings in a much larger sample of libraries, but an essential aspect of the methodology was to check for current print holdings, and the only way to do this accurately was to check each of the 59 titles individually in each of the 10 library catalogues.

As stated above, a potential methodological weakness lies in the fact that libraries surveyed may have cancelled print subscriptions because the journals are now available as part of e-journal packages. The checking revealed that there were certainly cases where libraries had cancelled their subscriptions to journals in the sample, but there was little evidence that these had been replaced by electronic subscriptions.

Another obvious methodological weakness lies in the choice of the sample libraries. There are many variables which determine the journals to which a library subscribes. It was hoped to minimise the distortion caused by these variables by selecting very large libraries with strong collections in all disciplines, but clearly a different sample of libraries would yield somewhat different results.

It also seems clear that journals dealing with topics of more widespread interest (philosophy, theology, classical studies, medieval studies) are likely to be better represented in overseas libraries than journals focussing on purely Australian topics. Another potential source of distortion stems from the budgetary restrictions of recent years, which have made even the largest of libraries reluctant to place new serial subscriptions. Under these circumstances, overseas libraries are more likely to be subscribing to long-established Australian journals than to those which have only recently commenced publication.

The results of the survey are set out in Table 1.

Coverage in International Databases

The journals in the sample were checked against the ISI Master Journals List to establish if they are currently ISI source journals. Only 13 of the 59 titles met this criterion (see Table 1).

It would also be possible to check each journal to see if it is indexed in the standard international database in its field. This would not help us to rank journals across disciplines, as the databases in some disciplines are more comprehensive than those in others. Within the one discipline, however, it should be informative to see which journals are indexed in the standard database, and this has been done for a subset of history journals. These were checked to see whether they are currently indexed in the *Historical Abstracts* database, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Standards of Refereeing

Peer review is today the norm for all journals with any pretence to scholarly status. All but six of the journals in the sample were identified as refereed (peer reviewed) in either *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory* or the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training's *Register of Refereed Journals*[20] or from the journal's own website (see Table 1). The existence of a peer review process is too widespread to be of much value as an indicator of quality. The rigour of the peer review process would be a much better indicator, if we had any objective way of measuring it.

Table 1
All Journals in Descending Order of Library Holdings

JOURNAL	LIBRARY HOLDINGS	ISI SOURCE JOURNAL	REFEREED	UQ ARTS FACULTY 'TIER ONE'
Australasian Journal of Philosophy	10	X	X	X
Australian Journal of French Studies	10	X	X	X
Journal of Religious History	10	X	X	X
Antichthon (Classics/Ancient History)	10		X	X

Australian Literary Studies	9	X	X	X
Meanjin (Literature)	9	X	X	X
Australian Journal of Linguistics	9		X	X
Musicology Australia	9		X	X
AUMLA (Modern Languages & Literatures)	8	X	X	X
Australian Historical Studies	8	X	X	X
Australian Journal of Politics and History	8	X	X	X
Overland (Literature)	8	X	X	X
South Asia	8	X	X	
Southerly (Literature)	8	X	X	X
Parergon (Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies)	7	X	X	X
Asian Studies Review	7		X	X
Australasian Drama Studies	7		X	X
Labour History	7		X	
Sophia (Philosophy)	7		X	X
Westerly (Literature)	6	X	X	X
Australian Economic History Review	6		X	
Continuum (Cultural Studies)	6		X	X
Sydney Studies in English	6			
Aboriginal History	5		X	X
Historical Records of Australian Science	5		X	
History of Education Review	5		X	
Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society	5		X	
Australasian Music Research	4		X	
Journal of Australian Studies	4		X	X
Meridian (Literature)	4		X	
New Literatures Review	4		X	
Papers and Proceedings (Tasmanian Historical Research Association)	4			
Art and Australia	3			
Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art	3		X	X
Early Days (History)	3			
Great Circle (Maritime History)	3		X	
St. Mark's Review (Theology)	3		X	
Victorian Historical Journal	3		X	
Colloquium (Theology)	2		X	
Health and History	2		X	
History Australia	2		X	X
Journal (Australian Jewish Historical Society)	2			
Studies in Western Australian History	2		X	
Antithesis (English/Cultural Studies)	1		X	
Australasian Catholic Record	1		X	
Australian Cultural History	1		X	X
Journal of Australian Colonial History	1		X	X
Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (JASAL)	1		X	X
Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society	1			
Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia	1		X	
Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Qld	1		X	
Public History Review	1		X	X
Span (Literature)	1		X	
Tasmanian Historical Studies	1		X	

Australian Folklore	0		X	
Australian Religion Studies Review	0		X	X
Journal of Northern Territory History	0		X	
Lilith (Feminist History)	0		X	
LiNQ (Literature)	0		X	

Peer Evaluation

In August 2005, as part of the preparations for the Research Quality Framework exercise, researchers at the University of Queensland (UQ) were asked to nominate the 'Tier One' journals in their field. 'Tier One' was defined as the top 20 percent of journals in each discipline. A survey team divided the Arts Faculty into 10 disciplinary areas and established a notional number of refereed journals in each discipline, based mainly on figures obtained from *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory*. This figure was divided by five to set a target number of 'Tier One' journals for each disciplinary area. After a process of consultation, each discipline then produced a list containing the target number of journals, listing the titles which they considered to be the most significant in their field.

The 59 journals in the current case study were checked to see if they appeared in the University of Queensland Arts Faculty 'Tier One' Journals list (see Table 1). It should be stressed that the UQ list reflects the research interests of staff at that one institution only. Obviously a more broadly based survey would have produced more reliable results.

Citation Counts

The problems of using the ISI citation indexes for evaluating Australian journals in the humanities have already been discussed. Nonetheless it seemed worthwhile to trial this indicator to see if any meaningful results could be obtained.

Citation counts cannot be compared across disciplines, as citation practices vary from discipline to discipline. For this reason, a subset of 14 journals in the same discipline (history) was extracted from the sample. The ISI citation indexes were checked to locate any entries for articles published in those journals over a ten-year period from 1993 to 2002. All citations to such articles in ISI source journals up to the present time (2005) were counted.

A ten-year period was chosen partly because the number of citations to most Australian journals is so small that a fairly long period is required to achieve useable data, and partly because it provides for a citation time lag of at least three years (2002 to 2005) and up to 12 years (1993 to 2005). As discussed earlier, articles in the humanities may achieve maximum impact some years after publication. The disadvantage of this procedure is that it is not measuring the impact of articles recently published in the journals, but rather evaluating the quality of the journals as they were some years ago.

It should be mentioned that such citation counts can be quite difficult to make because of the inconsistencies in the journal abbreviations used by the ISI indexers (and perhaps also by the citing authors).

The results are shown in Table 2. These figures for total citations may give a measure of the impact of the journal, but they cannot be used as a measure of impact for individual articles, as they have not been weighted to take account of the number of articles published in each journal during the survey period. In many cases, the figures are so small as to be useless for comparative purposes. It should be noted that the citation counts for journals which are ISI source journals are inflated because they will include self-citations. A significant proportion of the citations to any journal are self-citations, that is, citations from later articles published in the same journal.

Discussion

In Table 1 the journals are arranged in descending order of the number of libraries in which they are currently received in print format, from a maximum of 10 (the total number of libraries surveyed) down to zero. This measure of holdings in large overseas university libraries is proposed as an indicator of journal quality. How does it compare with other measures of quality? If we look at the column showing which journals are ISI source journals, we can see that there are certainly correlations with library holdings, as the ISI journals are clustered at the top of the table.

The column indicating which journals are refereed is of little interest, as virtually all the journals are refereed. As already stated, this indicator seems of little value in ranking scholarly journals.

The final column of Table 1, showing which journals were nominated as 'Tier One' by researchers in the Arts Faculty of the University of Queensland, shows close correlation with status as an ISI source journal. The only ISI source journal not in the UQ list is *South Asia*, a fact that can be attributed to lack of current research interest in Indian studies at the University of Queensland. A more broadly based peer assessment would remove such aberrations.

The UQ list also shows considerable correlation with the ranking by library holdings. Twenty-three of the sample journals are held in six or more of the libraries surveyed, and only four of these widely held journals are not on the UQ list. The absence of two of those titles, *South Asia* and *Australian Economic History Review*, can be attributed to lack of research interest in the UQ Arts Faculty. The absence of *Labour History* seems anomalous and is further examined below. *Sydney Studies in English* is mainly a vehicle for publication of research by academics and postgraduate students at the University of Sydney, so its absence from the UQ list is not unexpected. As already stated, the peer review process must involve researchers from a range of universities if it is to produce reliable results.

Table 2
Selected History Journals in Descending Order of Library Holdings

JOURNAL	LIBRARY HOLDINGS	ISI SOURCE JOURNAL	UQ ARTS FACULTY 'TIER ONE'	TOTAL CITES TO ARTICLES PUBLISHED 1993-2002	INDEXED IN HISTORICAL ABSTRACTS
Australian Historical Studies	8	X	X	218	X
Australian Journal of Politics and History	8	X	X	170	X
Labour History	7			46	X
Australian Economic History Review	6	X*		77	X
Aboriginal History	5		X	50	X
Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society	5			13	X
Papers and Proceedings / Tasmanian Historical Research Association	4			8	
Great Circle	3			7	X
Victorian Historical Journal	3			6	
Studies in Western Australian History	2			0	
Australian Cultural History	1		X	36	X
Public History Review	1		X	30	
Tasmanian Historical Studies	1			12	
Journal of Northern Territory History	0			5	

* *Australian Economic History Review* was an ISI source journal until 2000.

Six titles on the UQ list are held in fewer than three of the surveyed libraries. Do these aberrations reflect a limitation of the library holdings as an indicator, or do they reflect an error of judgment on the part of the UQ researchers, which would be corrected by a more broadly based peer evaluation? The survey of the history journals (Table 2) may help to answer this question.

Table 2 shows a subset of 14 history journals, arranged in descending order by the number of libraries in which they are currently received in print format. As with the full set of journals, we can see that the current and former

ISI source journals are clustered near the top of the table, seeming to confirm the validity of the library holdings indicator.

The UQ list, however, shows some discrepancies with the library holdings survey. The absence of *Australian Economic History Review* from the UQ list has already been accounted for, but the failure of the UQ academics to nominate *Labour History* is not so easily explained. At the other end of the scale, the UQ list includes two titles, *Australian Cultural History* and *Public History Review*, which were only held in one of the surveyed libraries.

If we move to the column showing the citation counts we can see that, at the upper end of the scale, there are again fairly close correlations with the library holdings indicator. At the lower end of the scale the figures are probably too small to be statistically significant, but note the markedly higher citation counts for *Australian Cultural History* and *Public History Review*, the two titles on the UQ list. The citation count indicator thus seems to partially vindicate the peer assessment of the UQ academics and tends to invalidate the figures obtained from the library holdings survey.

The final column, showing the journals currently indexed in the *Historical Abstracts* database, again shows quite close correlation with the library holdings survey, but also vindicates the UQ academics' nomination of *Australian Cultural History*. Both the database indicator and the citation count indicator suggest that *Labour History* should have been included on the UQ list.

Conclusion

This paper has examined five indicators that might be used to rank Australian journals in the humanities:

- level of holdings in large overseas academic libraries,
- coverage in international databases,
- standards of refereeing,
- peer evaluation by researchers, and
- frequency of citation in ISI source journals.

The third indicator (standards of refereeing) did not appear to be of much practical use as a measure of quality. With the other four indicators, there are considerable correlations between the rankings obtained by each method, so it appears that each of these methods has some validity. However, if the correlations between the results are significant, the discrepancies are just as instructive, and point to the fact that no single method provides infallible results. Reliable ranking will require a combination of as many indicators as possible. It is hoped that the findings of this Australian case study will have relevance for information professionals in other countries as well.

The journals listed in Table 1 cover all disciplines in the humanities, but this does not mean that ranking journals across multiple disciplines is desirable, or even feasible. Effective ranking only becomes possible when the journals

being compared are all from the same subject area, as demonstrated with the sample of history journals in Table 2.

The most valid ranking method is probably large-scale peer evaluation, but such exercises are expensive to conduct and need to be regularly repeated. This is why administrators are interested in finding easier and cheaper methods of ranking research outputs. As the search for the perfect bibliometric indicator continues, we can expect the literature on the subject, already voluminous, to expand even further.

Notes

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2 L Butler 'Modifying Publication Practices in Response to Funding Formulas' *Research Evaluation* vol 12 no 1 2003 pp39-46

3 Australia Department of Education, Science and Training *Research Quality Framework* p37

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10 ibid pxxi

11 Australia Department of Education, Science and Training *Research Quality Framework* p12

12 Archambault and Vignola Gagné *The Use of Bibliometrics* p37

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14 Archambault and Vignola Gagné *The Use of Bibliometrics* p37

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