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Global competition and diffusion of the "A" list

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Abstract

Focusing on the global diffusion of the "A" list consisting of predominantly U.S.-based journals, we argue that such diffusion represents an important form of professionalization in the management of business schools. The diffusion can also be viewed as an intellectual movement in the age of global competition characterized by a flat world. How can we explain the recent diffusion of the "A" list? More important, how does such diffusion impact the future of business and management scholarship? Addressing these important but underexplored questions, we identify the multilevel factors that explain the diffusion, and predict its likely trajectory and its impact on future scholarship.

Keywords: Global competition, "A" list, Business schools, Scholarship, Professionalization, Publishing

Introduction

Increasing professionalization in the management of business schools has taken place recently. One of the noticeable signs of such professionalization is the explicit adoption of an "A" journal list on which faculty members are expected to publish. Without a formal list of desirable journals, faculty members of course have always endeavored to publish in the highest quality outlets possible. What is interesting is the recent formal adoption of an "A" list by more schools around the world.

Historically, scholarly publishing and competition often took place within one region, with relatively little cross-regional penetration. For example, Chinese scholars mostly published in China-based journals,[1] and American scholars mostly published in U.S.-based journals. However, an emerging trend in the last two decades is that research, publishing, and competition in business and management scholarship have become more global (DeNisi 2010; Mangematin and Baden-Fuller 2008; Peng 2007; Peng and Dess 2010; Zoogah and Peng 2019). Specifically, U.S.-based journals have increasingly attracted scholars from around the world (Baum 2007; Leung 2007; Tsui 2007). Labeled as the "top tier," the "mainstream," and the "A" list, two sets of predominantly U.S.-based journals—compiled by the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) and *Financial Times* (*FT*)—have emerged. These journals not only attract attention from scholars, but also from university administrators, funding agencies, and government ministries.

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A case can be made that as the world of business competition becomes global, the world of scholarly competition has also become "flat" (Friedman 2005). In the age of globalization characterized by a flat world, a set of worldwide standards has emerged to assess the productivity and quality of business school research (Mangematin and Baden-Fuller 2008; Mudambi et al. 2008; Peng and Dess 2010; Peng et al. 2018a). The emergence and diffusion of these new standards have not been without controversies and resistance around the world (Adler and Harzing 2009; Macdonald and Kam 2007). Criticisms range from the objection against any formal journal list to the protest among some non-U.S.-based scholars against the use of the combined UTD/*FT* list, which is argued to be an American list cloaked under the name of a "global" list. The combined UTD/*FT* list—hereafter, the "A" list in the remainder of this article—is an unmistakably American list. Even with the 2010 addition of important European outlets such as the *Journal of Management Studies* and *Organization Studies* to the *FT* list, a majority of UTD and *FT* journals are edited by U.S.-based scholars. What is especially interesting is that the diffusion of the "A" list has recently taken place during a period of alleged American decline (in various areas such as geopolitical influence and economic competitiveness). Then, how can we explain the recent diffusion of the A(merican) list? More important, how does such diffusion impact the future of business and management scholarship?

This article addresses these two crucial but underexplored questions. Although there is "no explicit theory" underlying the development of formal journal lists (van Fleet et al. 2000: p. 842), we argue that the social movement and innovation diffusion literatures enable us to theorize about on how scholars do research, publish, and compete in an increasingly flat world. Specifically, we suggest that the global diffusion of the "A" list represents the increasing professionalization in the management of business schools and also represents the rise of an intellectual movement converging on a set of global standards of excellence. Before proceeding, it is important to note that we are not asserting whether adopting the set of global standards represented by the "A" list is appropriate or inappropriate. Whenever possible, we outline both the pros and cons associated with this phenomenon.

While there is a stream of work on professions and institutional change, most of this work has focused on professional service firms such as accounting, health care, and law firms (Brock et al. 1999; Eleazar et al. 2019; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Muzio et al. 2013; Scott 2008). There is no doubt that universities are professional organizations operating in institutionalized environments. While universities have been studied (Schofer and Meyer 2005), the specific professional schools within universities have been studied include law schools (Sauder and Espeland 2009) and medical schools (Dunn and Jones 2010). Professions and institutional change within business schools are rarely investigated. This article thus contributes to the literature on professions and institutional change by starting to fill the gap with a focus on business schools. Our aim is to first develop a multilevel model to explain the factors behind the diffusion of the "A" list, and then to predict its likely impact on future scholarship.

An intellectual movement

A social movement typically refers to "a kind of spontaneous combustion—chaotic, unplanned, and non-routinized behavior emerging around some kind of perceived

injustice" (Zald 2008: p. 569). Consumer boycotts and war protests are some examples. Zald (2008: p. 569) suggests that social movement theory typically focuses on "hot emotion, rather than cool rationality." Because scholarly decisions on how and where to publish, and administrative decisions on which journals count for faculty appointment and promotion are typically rational and calculative, we follow Frickel and Gross (2005) in refraining from calling the global diffusion of the "A" list a "social movement." Frickel and Gross (2005) suggest a useful term "scientific/intellectual movement," defined as "collective efforts to pursue research programs or projects for thought in the face of resistance from others in the scientific or intellectual community" (p. 206). In an effort to simplify the jargon, here we simply label the diffusion of the "A" list an "intellectual movement," which shares the same definition for "scientific/intellectual movement" suggested by Frickel and Gross (2005). Despite the differences between intellectual movements and social movements, there are parallels, which enable us to draw on social movement theory to better understand the global diffusion of the "A" list. Social movement theory suggests three building blocks for a movement: (1) framing, (2) differentiation, and (3) mobilization (Frickel and Gross 2005; Zoogah and Peng 2019). Framing refers to rhetorical strategies and discourses to construct meaning and legitimacy (Maguire and Hardy 2009; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). The meaning and legitimacy of the "A" list must be persuasively framed and presented to various internal and external stakeholders (George et al. 2006). While framing is important for all social and intellectual movements, it is especially crucial for business and management scholarship, whose product and value are hard to define, socially constructed, and politically contested (Peng and Dess 2010).

Differentiation refers to efforts to assert an intellectual movement's distinctiveness (Davis and Marquis 2005). For example, Hambrick and Chen (2008) document how strategic management scholars have successfully differentiated their intellectual offering within the family of business and management scholarship. Zoogah and Peng (2019) trace how management scholars passionate about Asian and African organizations emerge to demonstrate how their research differentiates from the more mainstream (Western) literature that largely draws on Western organizations. In other words, differentiation has underpinned the rise of strategic management (Hambrick and Chen 2008) and the emergence of management scholarly communities in Asia and Africa (Zoogah and Peng 2019).

Mobilization is "the process by which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for collective action" (Jenkins 1983: p. 532). Mobilization is one of the earliest, and still one of the most important, themes of social movement research (Weber et al. 2008). In scholarly competition, significant resources need to be mobilized to confer rewards to winners, such as journal space, editorships, tenures, endowed chairs, research funds, Ph.D. students, and jobs for Ph.D. graduates.

In summary, the diffusion of an intellectual movement depends on scholarly, social, and political forces underpinned by framing, differentiation, and mobilization (Frickel and Gross 2005; Zoogah and Peng 2019). Next, we leverage these ideas to analyze how an intellectual movement diffuses globally, in the face of criticisms and resistance.

Diffusion and resistance

As a tool for the professionalization of the management of business schools, adopting any formal list of journals entails both pros and cons (van Fleet et al. 2000). On the

positive side, there is clear value in the emergence of a globally acknowledged, explicit certification measure, as opposed to engaging in the time-consuming and politically sensitive process of generating journal lists locally (Graffin and Ward 2010). In contrast to the UTD list of 24 journals and the *FT* list of 50 journals, the UK-based Association of Business Schools maintains a list for *Academic Journal Quality Guide* with 1040 journals (Harvey et al. 2007). A survey of U.S. management departments reports 1008 outlets on the lists compiled by 35 departments (van Fleet et al. 2000, p. 851). The average list has 72 journals, with one institution reporting 287 outlets. Obviously, such proliferation of items on journal lists contributes to the continued fragmentation of business and management disciplines that have little consensus on standards of excellence (Pfeffer 1993).

Adopting and diffusing the shorter and more globally acknowledged "A" list helps reduce such fragmentation.[2] In a scholarly flat world (Fourcade 2006; Friedman 2005), advocates of the "A" list argue that excellence as represented by the hits on the list is transparent for all to see, success is global, and reward is justified (Peng and Dess 2010). In other words, truly world-class scholars are able to score "hits" in these globally competitive journals, and globally mediocre scholars (as defined by their lack of appearance on the "A" list), who may be regionally outstanding, may lose (at least some) credibility even in the eyes of peers and administrators in their *own* regions (Meyer 2006).[3]

However, on the negative side, there is no shortage of criticisms on the recent transformation toward focusing more on the "global" top tier (Jack et al. 2008). Chief among these are (1) reduced global diversity in business and management scholarship as scholars elsewhere endeavor to conform to U.S. research interests and norms (Meyer 2006); (2) discounted appreciation for journals not appearing on the "A" list, for books, and for publications in non-English languages (Adler and Harzing 2009); and (3) distorted incentives that force scholars to deviate from the pursuit of knowledge and to focus on the "publishing game" (Macdonald and Kam 2007).

For schools, resistance strategies include not adopting any journal lists at all or not adopting the specific "A" list (but generating local lists). For individual scholars, they often continue to publish in journals outside the "A" list. Because the "A" list is so hard to get into, most scholars who have "cracked" the "A" list, of necessity, continue to publish some work outside the list. More active forms of resistance include publishing articles skeptical of the quality of the "A" journals (Starbuck 2005) and ridiculing the gamesmanship (Macdonald and Kam 2007). In an Asia Pacific context, Meyer (2006: p. 134) suggests a "more radical measure:" "Business schools in Asia Pacific ought to collude and commit to recognizing one or two management journals based in the region as 'A' journals for recruitment and promotion purposes," such as the *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*. However, in the face of the powerful global diffusion of the "A" list, "there are no generally agreed upon alternative criteria" (Meyer 2006: p. 133; Nkomo 2009: p. 110). In other words, powerful pressures seduce and coerce schools to conform to the "A" list (Muzio et al. 2013; Sauder and Espeland 2009). It is thus useful to understand the drivers of such diffusion in the first place.

Multilevel drivers of the global diffusion

An "innovation" is "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new" (Rogers 1983: p. 11). Accordingly, the practice of adopting the "A" list in business schools that

previously have not endorsed it can be regarded as an innovation. Why has the "A" list, despite its shortcomings, gained such expanding influence lately? Inspired by Ansari et al. (2010), we develop a *multilevel* model that focuses on innovation-specific, environmental, and organizational levels.

Innovation-specific factors

The innovation diffusion literature identifies three characteristics of an innovation, as perceived by users, which can help explain its diffusion: (1) perceived advantage, (2) compatibility, and (3) simplicity (Rogers 1983: p. 15). First, the greater the perceived relative advantage of an innovation, the more rapid its diffusion. In this age of globalization, the "A" list has been framed by its proponents as the global mainstream—the "academic Olympics" according to Peng and Dess (2010). In other words, the "A" list can be viewed as a relatively straightforward (academic) "medal count" (Peng and Dess 2010). Schools adopting it can claim more credibility as "world-class" schools in an effort to attract better faculty and students and more plentiful funding from public and private sources. Schools not adopting the "A" list may be unable to derive such advantage (Graffin and Ward 2010).

Rhetorical strategies center on framing and facilitating organizational change by introducing and articulating new vocabularies (Kim et al. 2007; Maguire and Hardy 2009; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). As the world becomes flat, competition among business schools heats up. Thus, presidents, deans, and other academic leaders often embrace new vocabularies centered on "globalization," "competitiveness," and "world class" in an effort to confer legitimacy when first introducing the "A" list. Especially in the early stage of an innovation, "legitimacy is based on comprehensibility, or the degree to which attributes of the innovation connect with prevailing institutional logics" (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005: p. 58). While faculty members are largely familiar with the scholarly content of the "A" list (although not all of them support its formal adoption), most other stakeholders, such as students, parents, advisory council members, donors, funding agency officers, and government officials, are unfamiliar with the obscure world of journal publishing. However, most stakeholders are likely to share an interest in enhancing a school's competitiveness and world-class status (Leung 2007). Thus, rhetorical strategies communicating a school's aspiration to be world class make it easier to adopt the "A" list (George et al. 2006). Specifically:

Proposition 1 The more often the president, the dean, and other academic leaders in a school communicate its mission to be enhancing its competitiveness among peer schools and aspiring for a world-class status, the more likely it will adopt the "A" list.

Second, the compatibility of an innovation with existing values also drives its diffusion (Hambrick and Chen 2008). Although previously, many schools outside North America had not required or expected their faculty to publish in "A" journals, these journals have always been widely read (and typically admired)—even in many non-English-speaking countries (Baum 2007; Xu 2009). Therefore, explicitly adopting the "A" list does not significantly deviate from the existing scholarly values espoused by most business schools. As a form of professionalization (Scott 2008), the practice of adopting the "A" list has merely transformed informal values and norms into formal policy.

Empirically, one can survey scholars about existing values. But as any experienced survey researcher will confess, survey results may be messy. Operationally, a more objective measure may be to collect information on the number of subscriptions. This measure can capture the worldwide voting results by hundreds of thousands of individual subscribers (typically faculty and Ph.D. students) and thousands of institutional subscribers (typically libraries and databases). It seems reasonable to assume that the more widely subscribed journals are more likely to be more widely read and more influential.

Proposition 2 The larger the worldwide number of individual and institutional subscriptions to the journals, the more likely the "A" list consisting of such journals will be adopted around the world.

Third, simple innovations will be adopted more rapidly (Rogers 1983). While journals on the "A" list are notoriously hard to get into, the list is simple to implement by any school. As shared by Dan Worrell (2009), Dean of the Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas, "The dean may not know much about research, but at least she or he can count" (p. 127). Critics argue that such simple (bean) counting is indicative of an unhealthy trend in evaluating faculty research because deans and senior colleagues no longer carefully read candidates' work (Adler and Harzing 2009). However, given the low level of paradigmatic development in business and management disciplines (Pfeffer 1993) and the frequent reviewer disagreements on a single paper (Starbuck 2005), involving deans and senior colleagues to read and evaluate candidates' work for tenure and promotion purposes will not only be labor-intensive, but will also ensure endless disagreements and political arguments about the definition of excellence (van Fleet et al. 2000).[4] In short, it is hardly practical. Not surprisingly, a simple and relatively short "A" list is viewed as a solution to the intractable problem of defining excellence, not only by deans, senior colleagues, and university administrators, but also by officials at funding agencies and education ministries who are even more unlikely to read and judge the work (Peng and Dess 2010).[5] Again, this is not to say that the "A" list (or any list) is an optimal way to measure scholarly excellence. We merely suggest that the "A" list represents a relatively simple and straightforward professional metric that can be objectively used. Thus:

Proposition 3 The shorter the "A" list, the more likely it will be adopted around the world.

In terms of simplicity, in addition to being shorter, a list that is easy to access may have wider appeal. The UTD list clearly excels in being user-friendly, by reporting continuously updated, real-time information for publications in the 24 tracked journals at http://top100.utdallas.edu. It allows for searches for any combination of years (since 1990), journals, schools, and authors (see Table 1). *FT* does not offer this search capability. *FT*'s research rankings based on 50 tracked journals are only reported as part of the various program-specific rankings (such as EMBA and MBA programs). In comparison, the UTD list is dedicated to reporting real-time research rankings. In part due to its user-friendly design, the UTD list, unleashed in 2005, has now been widely adopted (and used in recruitment materials by schools that have done well on the UTD rankings).[6] To generalize:

Proposition 4 The easier it is to access research ranking information on the "A" list on a real time basis, the more likely the "A" list will be adopted around the world.

Table 1 Global competition in business and management scholarship: UTD Top 100 Business School Research Worldwide Rankings™

1990	2010	2018
1. U. of Pennsylvania	1. U. of Pennsylvania	1. U. of Pennsylvania
2. U. of Texas at Austin	2. Northwestern U.	2. New York U.
3. U. of Michigan	3. U. of Maryland	3. U. of Texas at Dallas
4. U. of Chicago	4. U. of Michigan	4. Columbia U.
5. New York U.	5. U. of Texas at Austin	5. U. of Southern California
6. Harvard U.	6. Stanford U.	6. Stanford U.
6. Duke U.	7. U. of Southern California	7. U. of Michigan
8. Stanford U.	8. U. of Chicago	8. U. of Chicago
9. Northwestern U.	9. Harvard U.	9. U. of Minnesota, Twin Cities
10. MIT	10. MIT	10. Harvard U.
11. Columbia U.	**10. INSEAD**	11. Washington U. in St. Louis
12. U. of Minnesota	12. Duke U.	12. U. of California, Los Angeles
13. U. of California, Los Angeles	13. New York U.	13. Indiana U.
14. Ohio State U.	14. U. of California, Los Angeles	14. U. of Texas at Austin
15. U. of Washington, Seattle	**15. Hong Kong U. of Science & Technology**	**15. London Business School**
16. U. of Wisconsin—Madison	16. U. of South Carolina	16. U. of Maryland at College Park
16. Arizona State U.	17. Columbia U.	17. Duke U.
18. U. of British Columbia	18. Pennsylvania State U.	**18. INSEAD**
19. U. of Southern California	**19. U. of British Columbia**	19. Ohio State U.
20. U. of Rochester	20. U. of Texas at Dallas	20. MIT
21. U. of Arizona	21. Emory U.	21. U. of Washington, Seattle
22. Purdue U.	22. U. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	22. Carnegie Mellon U.
23. U. of California, Berkeley	23. U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	23. Boston U.
24. U. of Florida	24. Washington U. in St. Louis	24. U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
25. U. of Houston	25. U. of Florida	25. Northwestern U.
25. Texas A&M U.	26. U. of Minnesota	**26. Hong Kong U. of Science & Technology**
25. Cornell U.	**27. London Business School**	27. Arizona State U.
28. Dartmouth College	**28. Erasmus U.**	**28. Erasmus U.**
29. Pennsylvania State U.	28. Ohio State U.	**29. HEC France**
29. U. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	30. Michigan State U.	30. U. of California, Berkeley
31. U. of Colorado at Boulder	**31. National U. of Singapore**	**31. National U. of Singapore**
32. U. of Pittsburgh	**32. Nanyang Technology U.**	32. Georgia State U.
33. Indiana U.	33. U. of California, Berkeley	33. U. of Florida
34. Rutgers U.	34. Carnegie Mellon U.	34. Yale U.
34. Southern Methodist U.	35. Arizona State U.	35. Purdue U.
36. Louisiana State U.	36. Purdue U.	36. Cornell U.
36. McGill U.	**37. Tilburg U.**	37. Pennsylvania State U.
36. U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	38. Texas A&M U.	**38. U. of Toronto**
36. Virginia Tech	39. U. of Miami	39. U. of Colorado at Boulder
40. U. of South Carolina	40. Dartmouth College	40. U. of Wisconsin—Madison

Table 1 Global competition in business and management scholarship: UTD Top 100 Business School Research Worldwide Rankings™ *(Continued)*

1990	2010	2018
41. Carnegie Mellon U.	41. Yale U.	**41. Nanyang Technology U.**
42. U. of Iowa	42. Cornell U.	**42. Singapore Management U.**
43. Baruch College—CUNY	43. U. of Georgia	43. U. of South Carolina
44. Yale U.	44. U. of Houston	44. Boston College
45. U. of Maryland	45. U. of Connecticut	45. Georgia Inst. of Tech.
46. U. of Utah	46. Rice U.	46. Texas A&M U.
47. U. of Georgia	47. U. of Pittsburg	47. U. of Arizona
47. Tel Aviv U.	48. Indiana U.	48. Temple U.
47. Case Western Reserve U.	**49. U. of Alberta**	**49. Chinese U. of Hong Kong**
47. London Business School	**50. U. of Toronto**	**50. McGill U.**
51. U. of California, Irvine	**51. Hong Kong Polytechnic U.**	51. Dartmouth College
51. Vanderbilt U.	52. U. of Wisconsin—Madison	52. U. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
53. State U. of New York at Buffalo	53. Boston College	53. Johns Hopkins U.
54. Florida State U.	54. Georgia State U.	**54. U. of Warwick**
55. Northeastern U.	**54. U. of Western Ontario**	55. Rice U.
56. North Carolina State U.	**56. HEC France**	**56. Copenhagen Business School**
57. U. of Oklahoma	57. U. of California, Irvine	57. U. of Pittsburgh
58. U. of Connecticut	**58. York U.**	**58. Tilburg U.**
59. Boston U.	59. U. of Utah	**59. City U. of Hong Kong**
59. U. of Notre Dame	60. Boston U.	**60. Bocconi U.**
59. U. of New South Wales	61. Georgia Tech.	61. U. of Georgia
59. U. of Texas at Arlington	**62. Singapore Management U.**	**62. U. of Hong Kong**
63. U. of Toronto	62. U. of Virginia, McIntire	63. U. of Miami
64. Boston College	**64. City U. of Hong Kong**	64. U. of Utah
64. INSEAD	65. U. of Colorado at Boulder	65. Emory U.
66. American U.	**66. McGill U.**	**66. Western U.**
66. Universite Laval	**67. Simon Fraser U.**	67. U. of Notre Dame
66. U. of Alberta	**68. U. of Groningen**	**68. U. of British Columbia**
66. U. of Tennessee at Knoxville	69. U. of Arizona	69. U. of California, San Diego
70. U. of Texas at Dallas	70. Vanderbilt U.	70. Northeastern U.
70. York U.	**71. U. of Hong Kong**	71. U. of Houston
70. U. of Missouri—Columbia	72. Temple U.	**72. U. of New South Wales**
70. Emory U.	73. Georgetown U.	**73. U. of Cambridge**
70. Oklahoma State U.	74. U. of Washington, Seattle	74. U. of California, Irvine
75. Georgia State U.	**75. Chinese U. of Hong Kong**	**75. Indian School of Business**
75. Texas Tech U.	**76. Korea U.**	76. Virginia Tech.
75. Santa Clara U.	76. U. of Notre Dame	**77. U. of Montreal**
78. San Jose State U.	**78. Peking U.**	**78. Hong Kong Polytechnic U.**
78. U. of Baltimore	79. U. of Missouri—Columbia	79. Michigan State U.
80. Baylor U.	80. Brigham Young U.	**80. City U. London**
81. Hebrew U. of Jerusalem	81. Rensselaer Polytechnic Inst.	**81. U. of Navarra**
81. U. of Cincinnati	82. Texas Christian U.	82. U. of Kentucky

Table 1 Global competition in business and management scholarship: UTD Top 100 Business School Research Worldwide Rankings™ *(Continued)*

1990	2010	2018
81. U. of Delaware	83. U. of Arkansas	83. Texas Christian U.
81. U. of Massachusetts at Amherst	83. U. of Virginia, Darden	84. U. of Iowa
81. U. of Warwick	85. Southern Methodist U.	85. Georgetown U.
81. U. of Wisconsin—Milwaukee	86. Florida International U.	**86. U. College of London**
81. Wayne State U.	87. U. of Central Florida	**87. U. of Melbourne**
88. Marquette U.	**88. HEC Montreal**	88. State U. of New York at Buffalo
89. U. of Oregon	**89. Universidad Carlos III de Madrid**	89. Case Western Reserve U.
90. Texas Christian U.	90. Rutgers U.	90. U. of Connecticut
91. Temple U.	90. Washington State U.	**91. Fudan U.**
91. HEC France	90. George Washington U.	92. Southern Methodist U.
91. U. of Virginia, Darden	90. American U.	93. U. of Rochester
91. Washington State U.	94. U. of Oklahoma	**94. Imperial College London**
95. La Salle U.	**94. U. of Navarra**	95. U. of Virginia, Darden
95. Brock U.	96. U. of Rochester	96. U. of Oregon
95. College of William and Mary	97. U. of Iowa	**97. U. of Amsterdam**
95. Georgia Institute of Technology	**98. Tel Aviv U.**	**98. Cheung Kong Grad School of Bus**
95. Concordia U.	**99. Catholic U. of Leuven**	99. U. of Virginia, McIntire
95. U. of Illinois at Chicago	**100. Koc U.**	100. U. of Massachusetts at Amherst
	100. Case Western Reserve U.	

Notes. **Bold** typeface indicates a non-U.S. school: 15% in 1990, 29% in 2010, and 31% in 2018
© University of Texas at Dallas. Reprinted with permission from Dr. Hasan Pirkul, Dean, Jindal School of Management. Adapted from three search results (for 1990, 2010, and 2018) from http://top100.utdallas.edu (the first two performed on December 31, 2010; and the last on February 20, 2019). The rankings are based on total number of adjusted author appearances in 24 top journals on the UTD list:
• Three in accounting (*Accounting Review, Journal of Accounting and Economics, Journal of Accounting Research*)
• Three in finance (*Journal of Finance, Journal of Financial Economics, Review of Financial Studies*)
• Three in information systems (*Information Systems Research, Journal on Computing, Management Information System Quarterly*)
• Four in marketing (*Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Marketing Science*)
• Five in management science and operations (*Management Science, Operation Research, Journal of Operations Management, Manufacturing and Service Operations Management, Production and Operations Management*)
• Six in management (*Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly, Journal of International Business Studies, Organization Science, Strategic Management Journal*)
The interactive website can search by university, author, and article. To obtain the third search result (for 2018):
• Go to "Rankings by journal"
• Select "from 2018" and "to 2018" (it is possible to select any year or any combination of certain years since 1990)
• "Select all" to include all the 24 journals (any single journal or any combination of the journals can be selected)
• Click "Worldwide rankings" (the other alternative is "North American rankings")

Environmental factors

To the extent that business schools can be viewed as competing in a business school industry, obviously external environmental factors of this industry are important (Dunn and Jones 2010; Kim et al. 2007; Sauder and Espeland 2009). However, its boundaries are hard to define, because of the variety of stakeholders—ranging from students and parents to national educational authorities and international organizations (such as The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business [AACSB]). Thus, the industry may be better viewed as an organizational field, defined as "an arena—a system of actors, actions, and relations—whose participants take one another into account as they carry out interrelated activities" (McAdam and Scott 2005, p. 10). In other words, there

is a "global field of business schools" (Pederzini and Barraza 2019). Institutional theory provides a powerful lens through which we can understand the professionalization of business schools and the diffusion of the "A" list (Muzio et al. 2013; Scott 2008).

Institutional theory suggests that organizations adopt similar practices due to the isomorphic pressures for conformance (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These pressures are especially likely to be strong when organizations face performance uncertainty (Brock et al. 1999; Muzio et al. 2013). In the business school industry, *BusinessWeek* (*BW*—now *Bloomberg Businessweek*) started to publish MBA rankings in 1988. *FT* similarly followed in 1999. More recently, UTD unleashed its research rankings in 2005. While some of these rankings confirm that historically prestigious schools have continued to do well, others report some pleasant or nasty surprises. These rankings are continuous and ongoing. *BW* reports them every 2 years, *FT* every year, and UTD continuously. In addition, formal government efforts to gauge the research productivity of universities have recently been launched in Australia, Britain, China (mainland and Hong Kong), Denmark, and Poland, to name a few. As a result, even schools that have done well in one round need to find ways to be more competitive, in fear that other schools may catch up in the next round (Sauder and Espeland 2009). Under intense competitive pressures, schools often benchmark against and imitate each other (Guler et al. 2002; Peng and Dess 2010). Adopting the global "A" list is often one of the major efforts of such benchmarking and imitation. Thus:

Proposition 5 The greater the competitive pressures in terms of rankings and evaluations that a school experiences, the more likely it will adopt the "A" list.

As more schools adopt the "A" list in a country (or region), a powerful bandwagon effect emerges (Bass 2004; Staw and Epstein 2000). A key insight of institutional theory focuses on the rationale behind the emergence of certain practices without obvious economic value (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Since organizations act to enhance or protect their legitimacy, copying other reputable organizations—even without knowing the direct performance benefits of doing so—may simply be a low-cost heuristic to gain legitimacy (Pederzini and Barraza 2019). New practices (such as adopting the "A" list) are generally regarded as state-of-the-art techniques (Guler et al. 2002). Therefore, jumping on such a "bandwagon" may be perceived "as a form of innovation when it is contrasted with the more passive act of ignoring industry trends or the more active stance of rejecting them altogether" (Staw and Epstein 2000: p. 528). Specifically, deans at adopting schools are likely to view the "A" list as a signaling device to keep up with competition—at least symbolically. When there is so much ambiguity in attributing the causes of organizational outcome such as business school rankings, outside stakeholders, such as government officials and prospective students, often rely on positively valued behavior as a signal in making their judgments about schools. These tendencies thus gradually fuel schools' interest in engaging in certain desirable behavior (Sauder and Espeland 2009). Therefore:

Proposition 6 The greater the number of schools in one country (or region) that have adopted the "A" list, the more likely that the "A" list will be adopted by more schools in that country (or region).

Organizational factors

While many schools face the rising normative pressures for adopting the "A" list, they are not equally likely to do so. Adopting an explicit list may be a function of the size of

the school (van Fleet et al. 2000). The benefits of adopting a list may be greater for large schools because of the economies of scale in faculty evaluation. Without such a list, every tenure and promotion case will have to go through a lengthy, ad hoc, and contestable process whose outcome is uncertain. Given the much larger number of tenure and promotion cases, there is a greater need for larger schools to codify standards.

Proposition 7 The larger the size of a school, the more likely it will adopt the "A" list.

Adopting a global "A" list reflects schools' confidence that they can effectively compete in the most prestigious and most selective journals. Lower quality schools may be less confident (van Fleet et al. 2000). In contrast, higher quality schools, prior to formally adopting the "A" list, are likely to house some faculty members who have already hit journals on the list. While the U.S. dominance in the "A" journals continues, "this position is being contested" (Mangematin and Baden-Fuller 2008: p. 121). Primary non-U.S. contestants are high quality schools in Canada (such as the Universities of Alberta, Toronto, and Western Ontario), Europe (such as Erasmus, INSEAD, and London Business School [LBS]), and Asia (such as Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), Hong Kong University of Science and Technology [HKUST], and National University of Singapore [NUS]). Table 1 shows that on the UTD list, the U.S. market share among the top 100 schools dropped from 85% in 1990 to 71% in 2010 and 68% in 2018. These high quality non-U.S. schools making the top 100 have a high likelihood of formally adopting the "A" list. Thus:

Proposition 8 The higher the quality of a school (based on quality measures other than publications on the "A" list), the more likely it will adopt the "A" list.

One indicator of quality is AACSB accreditation (Durand and McGuire 2005). Founded in the United States in 1916, AACSB is the most prestigious accreditation organization for business schools. It has approximately 1600 member schools, of which more than 800 are accredited (AACSB 2019). In the 1990s, AACSB launched its drive to accredit non-U.S. schools (Zammuto 2008).[7] In 2001, AACSB, in an effort to appeal to non-U.S. schools, changed its name from "American Assembly of Collegiate School of Business" to "Association to Advance Collegiate School of Business." At present, non-U.S. schools collectively represent a nontrivial 18% of AACSB member schools. Virtually all AACSB-accredited non-U.S. schools are institutions known in their region for their high quality (prior to the AACSB accreditation), such as University of Alberta, CUHK, HKUST, INSEAD, LBS, NUS, Renmin University of China, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, University of Toronto, Tsinghua University, Waseda University, and Xi'an Jiaotong University.

AACSB does not explicitly subscribe to any specific set of journals. In fact, it encourages diversity of research (AACSB 2008). Nevertheless, given that AACSB primarily reflects and promotes the norms and values of U.S. business schools, it is plausible to argue that the time a school is affiliated with AACSB—first as a non-accredited member and then (possibly) as an accredited member—is positively correlated with its likelihood of adopting the "A" list. Through conferences, visits, networking, and other forms of socialization, AACSB may have inadvertently served as a powerful platform for mobilization behind the diffusion of the "A" list. Specifically:

Proposition 9 The longer a school is affiliated with AACSB (as a non-accredited member and/or as an accredited member), the more likely it will adopt the "A" list.

Especially for non-U.S. schools, the adoption of the global "A" list is not likely to be without struggle. Many schools are populated with faculty members with Ph.D.s from the United States, Europe, Asia, and other regions (including the home country) (Fourcade 2006). Faculty members with U.S. Ph.D.s are more likely to have been socialized into the belief that the (mostly) U.S.-based "A" journals are legitimate targets for publishing. They may view their mission to be to help the local academia "integrate into the international academic community and play a leading role in the process" (Xu 2009: p. 31). However, faculty members with their Ph.D. training in other countries and from other intellectual traditions do not necessarily share the same conviction (Adler and Harzing 2009). Therefore:

Proposition 10 The higher the percentage of faculty members with U.S. Ph.D.s in a non-U.S. school, the more likely it will adopt the "A" list.

If this proposition is empirically tested, in addition to testing its effect as a main independent variable, it may be advisable to also test it as an interaction variable—in interaction with some other factors such as the increasing competitive pressures (Proposition 5) outlined above. In the first few postwar decades, schools in South Korea and Chinese Taiwan had a large percentage of faculty members with U.S. Ph.D.s, but—in contrast to Proposition 10—they rarely published in "A" journals. In the last decade, schools in South Korea and Chinese Taiwan have increasingly emphasized "international" publications, especially those on the "A" list. This change has been stimulated in part by the strong competition unleashed by schools in Chinese Hong Kong, Singapore, and more recently Chinese mainland (Mudambi et al. 2008). In summary, the diffusion of the "A" list, as an intellectual movement, has been framed by its proponents as a leading source of differentiation separating the current and would-be world-class schools from the less globally capable and less ambitious crowd. Shared interests among academic and political leaders in promoting competitiveness and world-class status of schools, among schools interested in seeking AACSB accreditation, and among faculty members with U.S. Ph.D.s have provided powerful forces for mobilization behind the global diffusion of the "A" list.

Predicting the future

Given the path dependent nature of the evolution of business and management disciplines, the road toward more widespread diffusion of the "A" list has significant ramifications for the future of the field. Doing research, publishing, and competing centered on the "A" list will not only impact how knowledge production is organized, but will also affect what kind of theories will be developed and how (Leung 2007; Mao 2018; Shaw 2017; Tsui 2007; Wang et al. 2018). Next, we speculate along a series of dimensions, culminating in testable propositions.

Dominant organizations that successfully export their standards will gain more power, prestige, and resources (Djelic 1993; Fourcade 2006). What are the dominant organizations in this case? Most research on the competition on standards focuses on focal, for-profit firms as institutional entrepreneurs (Greenwood and Suddaby 2006). One can argue that AACSB is such an institutional entrepreneur (Durand and McGuire 2005). However, AACSB has not explicitly promoted the "A" (or any) list, and has recently promoted more diversity of measures for research excellence (AACSB 2008). It is also difficult to argue that *FT* is a dominant organization in the business school

industry, in which *FT* does not compete. While the UTD Jindal School of Management, which has publicized its rankings (see Table 1), is a U.S. business school aspiring to gain more publicity and attain higher rankings, in the business school industry UTD is certainly not as dominant as the Big Five in the accounting industry (Greenwood and Suddaby 2006).

To the extent that the UTD list has become widely used, it is plausible to suggest that UTD has codified the long-held beliefs and values regarding legitimate scholarship espoused by (most) U.S. business schools. Therefore, we argue that U.S. business schools, especially leading ones, are dominant organizations whose standards are exported around the world (Djelic 1993). Of course, the "hegemonic influence" of U.S. scholarship has long been acknowledged by scholars both inside (Palmer 2006) and outside (Mao 2018; Meyer 2006) the United States. We suggest that with the more widespread formal adoption and diffusion of the A(merican) list, U.S. business schools, as a group, stand to benefit more and to more significantly influence the future development of business and management scholarship. In other words, U.S. business schools add value, enhance their reputation, and strengthen their power by diffusing and exporting their scholarly standards to the rest of world. As scholarly competition becomes more global, the power of leading U.S. business schools—and the power of leading U.S. scholars who are able to hit the "A" list—will increase. From a resource-based view (Barney 2001), the capabilities to publish in these tough outlets become more valuable now that more non-U.S. schools have adopted the "A" list, more submissions are launched from around the world, and rejection rates are even higher than before. Therefore, there will be a strong interest in inviting leading U.S. contributors who publish on the "A" list to visit non-U.S. schools in an effort to bring up the level of local research competence.

Another manifestation of power will be an increasing interest in having leading U.S. scholars write letters for tenure and promotion cases for candidates at non-U.S. schools. Such certification will positively influence the reputation of these candidates (Graffin and Ward 2010).[8] From a scholarly standpoint, this makes sense because U.S. scholars are more likely to have insightful comments on publications appearing in "A" journals due to their familiarity and experience with these journals. Typically unacknowledged behind this practice is the political nature of such an exercise of hegemonic power—essentially a scholar based in a non-U.S. business school (say, in Israel) is a good scholar only when his/her work is certified by U.S. colleagues as excellent. Thus.

Proposition 11 The more schools adopting the "A" list around the world, (1) the more U.S. faculty members who can hit the "A" list will be invited to take on visiting professorships in non-U.S. schools, and (2) the more U.S. faculty members who can hit the "A" list will be invited to write letters for tenure and promotion cases in non-U.S. schools.

An extension of Proposition 11 is that there will be a growing interest among faculty and Ph.D. students around the world in visiting U.S. schools in an effort to learn how to crack the elusive "A" list. One example is the recent Chinese government policy to push Chinese schools to become "world class" by generously funding overseas visits—not only for faculty members, but also for Ph.D. students. In peak season, leading U.S. scholars have been receiving inquiries from China for sponsoring visits on a weekly or daily basis from "cold emails." These anecdotes suggest:

Proposition 12 The more schools adopting the "A" list around the world, the more U.S. schools will receive inquiries about hosting visiting faculty members and Ph.D. students paid for by the non-U.S. sponsoring schools and governments.

For non-U.S. schools adopting the "A" list, hosting U.S. visitors and sending their own faculty members and Ph.D. students to visit U.S. schools are a short-term solution. A long-term solution will be to hire U.S. Ph.D. graduates. Of course, prior to adopting the "A" list, some U.S. Ph.D. graduates have always been hired by non-U.S. schools. Their sheer number is already large. In 2005, 52% of the faculty at 15 leading schools in Asia and Australia possessed Ph.D.s from the United States. This high percentage contrasts with 10% with Ph.D.s from Australia, 9% from the United Kingdom, 5% from Canada, and 1% from Germany (Meyer 2006, p. 128). However, one ramification for the future composition of faculty as a result of the diffusion of the "A" list is the rising percentage of U.S. Ph.D. graduates. For example, in Hong Kong schools, there was a sizable percentage of UK Ph.D. graduates on their faculty—the maximum was 15% at the City University of Hong Kong as of 2005 (Meyer 2006, p. 128). Such a colonial influence is not surprising, given that until 1997, Hong Kong had been a British colony. However, since 1997, Hong Kong schools have essentially stopped hiring UK Ph.D. graduates and almost exclusively hired U.S. Ph.D. graduates. Conversations with Hong Kong colleagues suggest that they view UK Ph.D. graduates to be less competitive in hitting the "A" list. Under intense competitive pressures, hiring U.S. Ph.D. graduates, who in turn will displace graduates from other countries (and other intellectual traditions), is viewed as inevitable by Hong Kong schools. Overall:

Proposition 13 The more schools adopting the "A" list around the world, the more U.S. Ph.D. graduates will be hired by non-U.S. schools and the fewer non-U.S. Ph.D. graduates will be hired.

The competition for top faculty who can hit the "A" list leads to a "bidding war" for valuable, rare, and hard-to-imitate talents (Barney 2001). The upshot is the widening of income differential between faculty members who can hit the "A" list and those who cannot—at both U.S. and non-U.S. schools. Many schools have adopted a "two-track" system, with separate salary schemes for (1) highly paid, tenure-track faculty members and (2) lowly paid, non-tenure-track faculty members. Even among the tenure-track ranks, the income differential between the productive and non-productive scholars will widen, because, in addition to paying productive scholars higher salary, many schools have resorted to direct cash bonuses for "A" hits. In some French institutions, an "A" hit comes with approximately USD16,000, and Melbourne Business School pays USD10,000 for every paper on the *FT* list (Macdonald and Kam 2007: p. 644).[9] Thus :

Proposition 14 The more schools adopting the "A" list around the world, the higher the income differential between faculty members who can hit the "A" list and those who cannot—at both U.S. and non-U.S. schools.

Given the traditional income differential between U.S. and non-U.S. schools (of faculty members of the equivalent rank), non-U.S. schools interested in hiring U.S. Ph.D. graduates, especially those with the ability (or potential) to hit the "A" list, will face an uphill battle in the bidding war to attract these graduates. Similar to the rationale behind the creation of tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty members at both U.S. and non-U.S. schools outlined above, non-U.S. schools often have to create a "two-track" system within its tenure-track ranks in order to attract U.S. Ph.D. graduates. At

China's Peking University (PKU), Xu (2009, p. 30) discloses, without referring to concrete monetary figures, that although the salary commanded by U.S. Ph.D. graduates who form a separate career and compensation track is "still substantially lower than the North American standards, it is at a level unimaginable to an average university professor in China" (at least during that time). Overall:

Proposition 15 The more schools adopting the "A" list around the world, the higher the salary differential there will be between U.S. Ph.D. graduates and non-U.S. Ph.D. graduates in non-U.S. schools.

Given the "shock" of U.S.-level faculty income introduced to many non-U.S. schools, a crucial question is whether the highly paid U.S. Ph.D. graduates, who are typically younger, less experienced, newer hires, generate sufficient value to justify their high pay. As the "A" list gradually diffuses, success on the "A" list will widen the performance gap between leading and non-leading schools, thus potentially justifying the high pay commanded by U.S. Ph.D. graduates. For example, 90% of the faculty members at HKUST have U.S. Ph.D.s—the highest among 15 leading Asian and Australian schools surveyed by Meyer (2006, p. 128). During the 1990–2006 period, HKUST's output on the UTD list doubled the output of the second highest ranked Asia Pacific business school, NUS (Mudambi et al. 2008, p. 177). In 2010 and 2018, HKUST was ranked 15th and 26th on the UTD lists—respectively, the second and third highest ranked non-U.S. school in the world (see Table 1). More broadly.

Proposition 16 The more non-U.S. schools adopting the "A" list, the wider the performance gap—measured by output published on the "A" list—there will be between the leading adopting schools and other non-adopting schools.

To add more precision to this prediction, we believe that Proposition 16 is especially likely to hold during the initial period of adopting the "A" list in a given country (or region). Institutional theory suggests that early adopters of an innovation are likely to be driven by the real performance enhancement such an adoption brings (Tolbert and Zucker 1983)—as evidenced by HKUST in Hong Kong. However, late adopters are likely to be driven by a bandwagon effect (Staw and Epstein 2000). Over time, the performance gap between late- and non-adopting schools may diminish.

The diffusion of the "A" list also has strong ramifications for the future of business and management scholarship. Specifically, the explicit adoption of the "A" list at non-U.S. schools may encourage non-U.S. authors to "write for U.S. audiences" (Meyer 2006: p. 130).

> The problem is *not* that U.S. journals prefer to publish U.S. materials; after all, this is what their—mostly U.S.-based—readers are interested in. Most people in most countries are most interested in their own country—ranging from large countries such as China to small countries such as Singapore. The problem is that U.S. journals are regarded as superior when it comes to research assessment exercises and promotion criteria in places other than the USA.. . To publish in these journals, authors would not necessarily have to use U.S. data. Yet, they would have to present their research such that it appeals to U.S. audiences, for instance in terms of the literature they embed their work in and the theories they use. New theoretical developments would be of interest *if* they can be shown (or argued) to be of relevance to issues of concern to U.S. audiences (Meyer 2006: p. 130, original italics).

There is no shortage of the calls for developing more relevant and often context-specific theories (Jack et al. 2008; Mao 2018; Tsui 2007). However, the reality of

publishing in journals on the "A" list, especially by non-U.S. authors bringing in non-U.S. materials, as described by Meyer (2006), suggests that efforts to develop indigenous, context-specific theories may be marginalized—even in countries where such contexts are important. In the context of developing indigenous theories from China, Ji-Ye Mao (2018), Dean of Renmin Business School at Renmin University of China, reports that "no well-known management tool, method, concept, or theory has emerged from best practices of Chinese firms, let alone anything generalizable and adopted beyond a single country" (p. 325). Li and Peng (2008, p. 570) put it bluntly: "the 'go native' approach offers little hope of establishing theory developed in China as part of the global knowledge structure." Given the changing incentive structure associated with the adoption of the "A" list in many non-U.S. schools, scholars—especially younger, untenured junior faculty members—would be viewed "irrational" if they risk their career to develop indigenous theories. More broadly:

Proposition 17 The more non-U.S. schools adopting the "A" list, the more marginalized the efforts to develop indigenous, context-specific theories will be even in countries where such contexts are important.

However, for scholars interested in fostering global diversity in business and management scholarship and frustrated by the U.S. dominance (or hegemony) of the "A" list (Jack et al. 2008; Mao 2018; Meyer 2006; Nkomo 2009; Pederzini and Barraza 2019; Zoogah and Peng 2019), the outlook may not be totally bleak. In an essay commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Administrative Science Quarterly* (*ASQ*), Palmer (2006: p. 552) notes that "building general theory about organizations is not inconsistent with constructing context-specific theory."

Increasingly, "general" theories derived from the U.S. experience are found to be inconsistent with the realities in other contexts (Davis and Marquis 2005), and further theorizing has resulted in "A" publications. Consider two recent examples from China research—one micro and one macro. In micro research, Xiao and Tsui (2007) theorize and substantiate the case that exploiting structural hole positions has a negative effect on employees' career achievements in China. This stands in radical contrast with Burt's (1992) U.S.-based theory of structural holes that hypothesizes a positive effect on employees' career achievements. In macro research, Lin et al. (2009) conduct a first comparative study contrasting the drivers behind mergers and acquisitions (M&As) in China and the United States. Lin et al. (2009) theorize that U.S. firms with a high level of centrality in their alliance networks may feel little need to acquire alliance partners (consistent with Burt's [1992] theory), but that Chinese firms with such a high level of centrality may be more motivated to acquire alliance partners (in contrast to Burt [1992]). Lin et al. (2009) attribute such differences to the underdeveloped nature of market institutions in governing alliances in China, which expose firms with a high level of centrality in alliance networks to a lot of potential risk of opportunism and thus encourage such firms to acquire partners. In other words, Lin et al. (2009) have identified the limits of Burt's (1992) theory and painted the broad contours of an institution-based theory of M&As advocated by Peng et al. (2009). Of course, Xiao and Tsui (2007) and Lin et al. (2009) are merely two examples. The fact that these two studies not conforming to the expectations of U.S.-derived theories are published in U.S.-based "A" journals—Xiao and Tsui (2007) in *Administrative Science Quarterly* and Lin et al. (2009) in *Strategic Management Journal*—is indicative of the increasing non-U.S. flavors penetrating the "A" journals.

As more non-U.S. scholars target these outlets, the U.S.-based journals will become less U.S.-centric and more global in a flat world (DeNisi 2010). In other words, the diffusion of the "A" list around the world may generate two-way influences (instead of a one-way influence) in business and management scholarship (Ansari et al. 2010). It is plausible that adopting the "A" list will influence the ways of theorizing by many non-U.S. scholars eager to publish their work in these journals (Proposition 17). However, these same non-U.S. scholars may engage in what Schumpeter calls "creative destruction," by engineering a reconstruction of these very journals that will have to take on more non-U.S. flavors. Thus:

Proposition 18 The more non-U.S. schools adopting the "A" list, the more non-U.S. elements—such as theories, samples, authors, editors, and reviewers—will be found in the journals on the "A" list.

Discussion

Contributions and research implications

Overall, three contributions emerge. Specifically, this article contributes to the literature by (1) arguing that the diffusion of the "A" list is an intellectual movement in a flat world, (2) identifying the multilevel factors that may explain the diffusion, and (3) predicting its likely trajectory and its impact on future business and management scholarship. In a broad sense, this article highlights an important aspect of the professionalization of business schools (Muzio et al. 2013; Scott 2008). Previous work on professions and institutional change in professional schools such as law schools (Sauder and Espeland 2009) and medical schools (Dunn and Jones 2010) has not focused on the research dimension by investigating the diffusion of the "A" list that serves to define excellence and orient faculty behavior, as we have done here.

This article also fosters theorizing at the institutional field level—an especially fruitful direction for theorizing in the twenty-first century as suggested by Davis and Marquis (2005). Instead of endeavoring to generate a "general theory," we focus on the mechanisms underlying the global diffusion of the "A" list. The global diffusion of the "A" list is broadly consistent with Frickel and Gross's (2005) theory of social/intellectual movements centered on framing, differentiation, and mobilization. It also resonates with Hambrick and Chen's (2008) theory of admittance-seeking social movements and with Zoogah and Peng's (2019) model of the emergence of scholarly communities. The articulation of the benefits associated with the "A" list highlights the importance of rhetorical and discursive strategies behind the framing necessary for an intellectual movement (Maguire and Hardy 2009; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). The identification of differentiation between adopting and non-adopting schools in terms of perceived quality differences highlights the importance of using symbolic vocabularies, such as "world class," to gain advantage. Finally, we highlight the mobilization of resources (Kim et al. 2007), in terms of joining AACSB, hiring more U.S. Ph.D. graduates, and widening income differential between faculty members who can hit the "A" list and those who cannot.

This article also leverages and extends the insights from the innovation diffusion literature, by focusing on the attributes of a particular innovation (Rogers 1983), by highlighting the competitive pressure schools increasingly face in a flat world (Guler et

al. 2002; Sauder and Espeland 2009; Zammuto 2008), and by drawing attention to the legitimacy-seeking imperative that is at the heart of institutional theory (Durand and McGuire 2005; Scott 2008). Overall, we have endeavored to push the field forward by theorizing about such a central part of our scholarly life.

In terms of the implications for future research, we believe that the powerful theoretical and empirical tools that business and management scholars often deploy to study other organizations can be deployed to enhance our understanding of our own profession. While there is no shortage of critiques about the alleged pathologies of adopting the "A" list, especially at non-U.S. schools that experience the shock of voluntarily giving up local standards in search of global definitions of excellence (Adler and Harzing 2009. Macdonald and Kam 2007; Meyer 2006; Nkomo 2009), there is little systematic, balanced research probing into the antecedents, processes, and consequences of adopting the "A" list. Our propositions are designed to facilitate such future testing and debate. Struggles associated with the adoption of the "A" list and its ramifications for future faculty behavior, scientific progress, and university standing may unfold at a particular school or in a particular country such as China (Li and Peng 2008; Mao 2018; Peng 2012; Wang et al. 2018; Xu 2009), South Korea (Kim et al. 2007), and Mexico (Pederzini and Barraza 2019); or a region such as Africa (Zoogah and Peng 2019), Asia (Leung 2007; Meyer 2006; Peng 2007; Tsui 2007), and Europe (Macdonald and Kam 2007). While global competition is likely to assert its pressures, local logics and traditions may ultimately impact the adoption (or non-adoption) decision (Ansari et al. 2010; Greenwood et al. 2010), thus necessitating studies at both global and local levels.

Practical implications

There are different practical implications for the three groups—scholars, gatekeepers, and schools. For individual scholars, of course, a strategy of resistance is possible (Adler and Harzing 2009; Nkomo 2009; Pederzini and Barraza 2019). But the scholarly impulse to have our voice heard, the bureaucratic imperative of schools to compete in the rankings game, and the personal career interest make it difficult to resist the prevailing norms in the long run—unless one does not mind being isolated and marginalized by peers.

A more positive coping strategy for individual scholars may be to know the rules of the game, play hard, and play smart (Peng and Dess 2010; Zoogah and Peng 2019). For scholars struggling to publish their work in, and frustrated by, the notoriously tough "A" journals, it is important to note that most of the leading paradigms currently dominating the journals, such as five forces, transaction costs, resource dependency, population ecology, and agency theory, can trace their roots to the stereotypical large U.S. corporation of the mid-1970s (or before). Believing that the "mine" for such theories may be nearing exhaustion, Davis and Marquis (2005) argue that some of these theories may not even be able to capture a sizeable chunk of the new organizational phenomena in the United States of the twenty-first century. It does not require a huge leap of faith to believe that the applicability of some of these theories may be significantly reduced outside the United States, which would generate fertile ground for new forms of theorizing (Li and Peng 2008; Lin et al. 2009; Mao 2018; Peng et al. 2018b; Xiao and Tsui 2007). In other words, even the conservative "A" journals are constantly looking for a balance between exploitation and exploration (Daft and Lewin 2008). Decades of

exploitation may force these "A" journals to confront the inevitable need for new exploration, which can be brought by more non-U.S.-based scholars with more novel approaches and data—indicated by the rising non-U.S. representation on the UTD list over the last two decades (see Table 1). Of course, U.S.-based scholars also need to play hard and play smart, now that their proximity-based advantage has been eroded in a flat world.

For gatekeepers, the question is: How can we promote scholarly diversity in "A" journals while maintaining standards? Palmer (2006: p. 556) asks "Can we embrace non-North-American scholarship without simultaneously stripping it of its unique attributes?" Daft and Lewin (2008) would argue this will be a must. Specifically, Daft and Lewin (2008: p. 182) argue that an "A" journal's "primary mission should be exploration more than exploitation." This requires gatekeepers to take risk by enhancing the variety of the papers that they publish (Daft and Lewin 2008: p. 182).

For schools, it is important to note that despite the powerful isomorphic and normative forces, adopting the "A" list is not inevitable (Greenwood et al. 2010). Strategic choices are possible. AACSB (2008: p. 13) suggests that "defining its research priorities is a right and responsibility of the school." Not every U.S. school subscribes to the "A" list (AACSB 2008, 2019). Thus, there is no imperative for every non-U.S. school to adopt the "A" list. For example, among 130 Asia Pacific business schools, Mudambi et al. (2008) identify a distinct publishing strategy that focuses on region-specific outlets—an approach that would be endorsed by Meyer (2006) and Nkomo (2009). Such region-specific outlets, such as *Frontiers of Business Research in China* co-published by Higher Education Press, Renmin University of China, and Springer Nature, hold potential to become significant forums for scholarly voices.

Conclusion

How we choose to do research, publish, and compete as a community of scholars in a flat world reveals a lot about how our profession organizes the discipline and how we value knowledge production in a certain fashion. Clearly, as members of a professional school community, we are familiar with the professionalization processes affecting numerous other organizations. Yet, interestingly, relatively little research attention has been paid to the professionalization of our own profession (Peng et al. 2018b: p. 271). This article argues that we need to devote some attention on how we organize our world of scholarship in an era of global competition. In theoretical terms, the diffusion and adoption of a formal "A" list can be conceptualized as the formalization of informal norms. "Professions are, themselves, institutions that, over the last 30 years, have experienced profound changes" (Muzio et al. 2013: p. 699). Therefore, a better understanding of how scholars, schools, and stakeholders strategically respond to such changing institutional environments has potential to significantly contribute to the institution-based view from a previously underexplored angle (Peng 2003; Peng et al. 2009; Peng et al. 2018b; Peng et al. 2008; Scott 2008).

Broadly, the debate on the rise and diffusion of the "A" list seems to be one more episode of the debate on convergence versus divergence in the larger context of globalization. While proponents of convergence celebrate the glory of the "A" list, advocates of divergence critique its tyranny. To non-U.S. scholars complaining about the U.S. hegemony, such as their need to cite U.S. theories and authors, we need to remind

them that not too long ago, U.S. sociologists, in an effort to enhance the legitimacy of their work, needed to "cite a dead German who said it first" (Davis and Zald 2008: p. 635).[10] While how German scholarship lost such a prestigious intellectual leadership position around the world is outside the scope of this article, suffice it to say that if history is any guide, no competitive advantage—in academia or in business—will be forever in global competition.

Endnotes

[1]With a few exceptions such as *Frontiers of Business Research in China*, *Nankai Business Review*, and *Journal of Zhejiang University Science*, most China-based journals are published in Chinese.

[2]It is important to note that we are not asserting that reducing fragmentation of business and management disciplines is good or fostering fragmentation (which is often labeled "diversity" by advocates) is good. We are simply addressing the consequences of adopting the "A" list on fragmentation.

[3]Nkomo (2009) reports that South Africa-based scholars who publish only in local, South Africa-based journals "will at best result in a 'C' rating" centrally administered by the Department of Education (p. 107). An "A" rating can only be achieved by publishing in "high-impact international journals on the accredited journal list" (p. 107).

[4]Some deans whose area of expertise is not in the candidates' area may not be fully qualified to judge the scholarly merits of these colleagues' work. If a strategy professor becomes the dean and if he/she is willing to read and judge all the work published by a faculty member in finance going up for tenure and promotion (but the dean has previously never read a paper in finance), how much weight can we place on the dean's evaluation based on his/her reading?

[5]In the 2001 UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), 14 members on the Management and Business Studies Panel faced nearly 10,000 publications submitted by about 2500 assessed academics, with about 70% of them journal articles. If each piece had been read, each Panel member would have read an average of 18 pieces a day for 40 days (and nights) in addition to their day job. Although RAE provided no formal journal lists, "inevitably, the Panel assessed the quality of papers by the quality of the journals in which they were published"—in other words, a list (Macdonald and Kam 2007: p. 646).

[6]The UTD list has been mentioned by Adler and Harzing (2009), Leung (2007), and Mangematin and Baden-Fuller (2008). Its data have been directly used in Mitra and Golder (2008), Mudambi et al. (2008), and Peng and Dess (2010).

[7]For example, in June 2019, for the first time AACSB offered accreditation training workshops at the Asia Academy of Management conference in Bali, Indonesia.

[8]Your author has written numerous tenure and promotions letters to evaluate colleagues in business schools in Australia, Canada, China (mainland and Hong Kong), France, Israel, Italy, and Singapore—in addition to the United States.

[9]For a single "A" hit on the UTD list, the world record, to the best of the author's knowledge, is USD100,000, according to my conversations with colleagues at Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

[10]Davis and Zald (2008, p. 635) observe that "some influential neoclassical scholars manage to get this requirement out of the way in the very first sentence." For example,

DiMaggio and Powell (1983: p. 147) open their paper with: "In the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber warned …"

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