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Rankings as Indicator of Quality?

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'The University itself is ranked among the top UK universities for the quality of its teaching'

'Top of the ... Student Satisfaction table'

'Our position is clearly the second Finnish University in international rankings'

'The number one destination for international students studying in Australia'

'Institution accredited by FIMPES, Excelencia académica SEP, x Place in academic program of...'

Themes

1. Why Rankings?
2. Can/Do Rankings Measure Quality?
3. How are Rankings Impacting on Higher Education?
4. Who Decides?

1. Why Rankings?

Global and Policy Context

- Globalisation and knowledge society
 - Knowledge is key 'factor in international competitiveness'
 - Desire to increase presence in knowledge marketplace
 - Battle for 'world class excellence'
- Competition between HEIs for students, faculty, finance, researchers
 - Internationalisation of higher education
- Trend towards market-steering governance mechanisms
 - Increased emphasis on accountability/quality assurance
- Increasing desire for comparative or benchmarking data
 - 'Consumer' information for students, parents and other key stakeholders

Rise in Popularity and Notoriety

- Rankings part of US academic system for 100 yrs, but today increasing popularity worldwide
- Use/audience for national rankings on the rise, but worldwide rankings having increasingly wider penetration
 - Near-obsession with rankings
 - Coverage in popular press rising
 - Statements by politicians, policy-makers, etc

Why?

- Satisfy a 'public demand for transparency and information that institutions and government have not been able to meet on their own.' (Usher & Savino, 2006, p38)
 - Cue to consumers re: conversion potential for occupational & graduate school attainment
 - Cue to employers what they can expect from graduates
 - Cue to government/policymakers regarding international standards & economic credibility
 - Cue to public because they are perceived as independent of the sector or individual universities

2. Can/Do Rankings Measure Quality?

What do Rankings Measure?

- 'Beginning Characteristics'/Student Ability – entry scores
- Learning Inputs/Staff – qualifications; teaching ratios
- Learning Inputs/Resources – expenditure on infrastructure
- Learning Outputs – graduation & retention rates
- Final Outcomes – employment rates, further education
- Research – publications/citations, awards, budgets, patents
- Reputation – peer appraisal; opinions of other stakeholders

Difficulties with League Tables

- Technical and Methodological Difficulties
 - Indicators as proxies for quality?
 - Quality and appropriateness of the metrics
- Usefulness of the results as 'consumer' information
 - Rater bias? Halo effect? Reputational ranking?
 - Quality and appropriateness of the information
- Comparability of complex institutions
 - One-size-fits-all? Diversity of missions, complex organisations
 - Matthew effect?
- Influence on higher education, policy and public opinion?
 - Distorting academic values or Providing transparent information
 - Setting strategic goals or encouraging HEIs to become what is measured?

Indicators as Proxies for Quality?

- Student Selectivity = Institutional Selectivity
- Citations & Publications = Academic Quality
- Budget & Expenditure = Quality of Infrastructure
- Employment = Quality of Graduates
- Reputation = Overall Status and Standing
- Nobel Winners = Quality of Research/Research Standing'

Measuring Reputation?

- Rater bias? Halo effect? Reputational ranking? Self-referential or 'self-perpetuating quality'
 - *Times*: 40% overall criteria
 - *US News & World Report*: 25% overall criteria

'I filled it out more honestly this year than I did in the past...I [used to] check "don't know" for every college except [my own]...' (Finder, *NY Times*, 17/04/07)

Single Definition of Quality?

- Institutional rankings may not measure what authors think they are measuring
 - Does institutional 'volatility' = changes in quality?
 - Variation in indicator choice and weighting reflects national views or the views of the rankings' authors
- Is there a correlation between teaching quality and research assessment?
- 'Which university is best' can be asked differently depending upon who is asking
 - Rankings taking on QA function but with different definitions of quality (Usher and Savino, 2007)

Consumer Information?

- Do rankings provide the right kind of information for incoming students?
 - Rankings may not measure what the student thinks they are measuring
 - Provide short-hand 'Q' mark
 - Provides fast, 'pre-sort' (Contreras, *Inside HE*, 31/07/07)
- What is influencing student choice: location, financial, programme, reputation, employment?
 - Undergraduate vs. Postgraduate
- Should rankings influence student choice?

Comparing Institutions/Systems

- Is it possible to measure 'whole' institution?
 - Complex institutional activities ('wealth of quantitative information') aggregated into single rank = proxy for overall quality
 - Exaggerates differences between institutions
- Do Rankings impose a 'one-size-fits-all' measurement?
 - Institutions have different goals and missions, nationally and internationally
 - Complexity of different HEIs and HE systems reduced to single number
 - Absence of internationally comparable data

Influence on HE, policy and public opinion?

- Institutions behaving rationally – becoming what is measured.
 - Making structural and organisational changes:
 - Shift resources
 - Publicity and marketing
 - Potential distortion of institutional purpose?
- Influence goes beyond 'traditional' student audience
 - Growing influence on public opinion, government, employers, philanthropy and industry
 - Influence policymaking, e.g. classification of institutions, allocation of research funding, accreditation

What People Say...

- Problem with ranking concerns the practice, not the principle.’ (Altbach, 2006)
- Institutions compared with inappropriate peers, and inputs/outputs treated in equivalent manner (Turner, 2005)
- Hierarchical system has developed effectively rendering ‘different activities differently valued, such as research over teaching and sciences over humanities.’ (Gumport, 2000)
- Results may ‘encourage a sense of failure in many institutions rather than success’. (Shattock, 1996)

What People Say...

- 'Serve useful role' by highlighting 'key aspects of academic achievement' (Altbach, 2006)
- 'For parents and prospective students, lots of information is better than less information...' (R Osgood, President, Grinnell College, USA; *Inside HE*, 10/09/2007)
- 'Hospitals, banks, airlines and other public and private institutions serving the public are compared and ranked, why not universities? (Egron-Polak, IAU Horizons, May 2007)
- Despite criticisms, HE sector is 'going to have to learn to live with them, or at the very least how to play the league table game.' (Bowden, 2000)

3. How are Rankings Impacting on Higher Education?

Playing the Rankings Game

- Despite methodological concerns strong perception that...
 - Rankings help maintain/build institutional position and reputation
 - Good students using rankings to 'shortlist', especially at postgraduate level
 - Stakeholders using rankings to influence funding, sponsorship, and recruitment
 - Benefits and advantages flow from high ranking
- HEIs taking results very seriously...

Impact at Institutional Level

- Significant gap between current and preferred rank :
 - 70% of all respondents wish to be in top 10% nationally, and 71% want to be in top 25% internationally.
- Almost 50% use their institutional position for publicity purposes: press releases, official presentations, website.
- 63% respondents taking strategic, organisational, managerial or academic actions
- Over 40% of respondents engage in peer-benchmarking

Impact on Student Choice

Evidence is very limited/mixed, but trends are appearing

- 40% US students use newsmagazine rankings, but only 11% said rankings were important factor in choice (McDonagh et al 1997, 1998)
- Rank important for US high-ability students (Griffith/Rask, 2007)
 - Above-average students make choices based non-financial factors, e.g. reputation (Spies, 1973, 1978)
 - Full-pay students likely to attend higher ranked college (even by a few places) but grant-aided students less responsive
- High rankings → rise in applications (*NY Times*, 2007)

Impact on Stakeholders

- Employers favour graduates from more highly ranked HEIs (UK) (University of Sussex, 2006)
- State appropriations per student in public colleges are responsive to rankings (US) (Zhe Jin, 2007)
- Almost all universities chosen for Deutsche Telekom professorial chairs used rankings as evidence of research performance (Spiewak, 2005)
- Arizona Board of Regents approved a contract this year to give president of Arizona State University a \$10,000 bonus if institution's *U.S. News* rank rises (*Chronicle HE*, 25/05/07; *East Valley Tribune*, 18/03/07)

Impact on Higher Education

	True %	False %
Favour Established Universities	83	17
Establish Hierarchy of HEIs	81	19
Open to Distortion and Inaccuracies	82	18
Provide Comparative Information	74	26
Emphasize Research Strengths	65	35
Help HEIs Set Goals for Strategic Planning	65	35
Provide Assessment of HEI Performance	52	48
Promote Accountability	48	52
Can Make or Break an HEI's Reputation	42	58
Provide Assessment of HE Quality	41	59
Promote Institutional Diversity	38	62
Enable HEIs to Identify True Peers	33	67
Encourage FAIR Competition	25	75
Provide Full Overview of an HEI	11	89

Implications for HE (1)

- Re-structuring of HE systems, nationally and internationally



Enhanced Global Competition and Market Mechanisms

Accountability and Transparency

Quality Assurance and Accreditation

Institutional Benchmarking

Worldwide Ranking and League Tables

Growing Institutional and System Differentiation

Implications for HE (2)

- Increasing vertical stratification w/ growing gap between elite and mass education
 - Public HEIs have hard time competing: ‘...measures favor private institutions over public ones’ (*Chronicle HE*, 25/05/07)
 - Student selectivity indicators and shift in resources being made to improve ranking are disadvantageous for ‘low income and minority students’ (Clarke, 2007)
 - ‘...certain institutions or types of institutions...rise to the top regardless of the specific indicators and weightings’ (Usher and Savino, 2007)
 - As demand for status increases, rankings are leading to creation of more elite institutions. (Samuelson, *Newsweek*, 2004)
 - ‘Devaluing of hundreds of institutions...that do not meet criteria to be included in rankings’ (Lovett, President AAHE, 2005)

Implications for HE (3)

- Despite support for inter-institutional collaboration, in a competitive environment, 'elite' institutions may see little benefit working with/helping 'lesser' institutions.
- Worldwide comparisons more significant in the future:
 - 'Reinforce effects of market-based & competitive forces' (Clarke, 2007)
 - Development of 'single world market'
 - Formation of international/global networks

4. Who Decides?

Defining World Standards

- How to define quality?
 - How to measure?
 - By whom?
 - For what?
-
- Multiple definitions of quality depending upon who is asking and for what purpose
 - Classification systems, e.g. Carnegie, became hierarchical ranking system by default
 - Recognition of diversity of institutional missions
 - Public policy dimension

Ideal 'League Table'

- Objective:
 - Give fair and unbiased picture of the strengths/weaknesses
 - Provide student choice for a programme and institution
 - Enhance accountability and quality
- Metrics:
 - Teaching Quality, Staff/Student Ratio, Employment, Research, Publications, Research Income, PhDs, Finances, Student Life, Citations, Selectivity, Mission, and Library
 - Using institutional or publicly available data or questionnaires
 - Institutional level
- Undertaken by independent research organisation or accreditation agency

Big Challenge

- Learn to Live with 'League Tables'
- Provide transparent understandable information
- Agree format and 'metrics'
- Educate public opinion

Otherwise – Rankings will be used as Indicator of Quality

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