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The Global Obsession with Rankings: How should Ireland respond?

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'What do we need to achieve by 2013? Two universities ranked in the top 20 worldwide' (Cronin, 2006).

'This is the opportunity for more of our universities to emerge as world-class institutions. More of our universities should aim to be within the top 100 internationally and I would like some of our universities to aspire to the top 10' (Bishop, 2007).

'This strategic plan...reflects our unswerving commitment...to transform [xxx] University, within the next 10 years, into a world-class institution that will be ranked among the top 30 leading universities in the world.'

'To be number two – that would be good – and to be among the first ten universities in Germany is also a goal. We are ten or eleven so it differs between the different rankings so that's a point. So we might reach number five or six, would be possible.'

Themes

1. Globalisation and the Rise of Rankings
2. How Rankings Impact on Higher Education
3. Lessons for Ireland
4. Conclusions

1. Globalisation and the Rise of Rankings

The Policy Context (1)

- Globalisation and Knowledge Society
 - Knowledge recognized as foundation of economic growth, social development, and national competitiveness,
 - Emphasis on human capital formation and knowledge production, dissemination and transmission,
 - HE now an issue of geo-political dimensions.
- 'Battle for Brainpower' (Economist, 2006), 'Scramble for students' (Matsumoto and Ono, 2008, p1) or 'Skilled Migration' (OECD, 2008)
 - Greying society and shortage of PhD/researchers,
 - Competition between HEIs for students, faculty, researchers,
 - Internationalisation of higher education.

The Policy Context (2)

- 'New Public Management'
 - Shift from HE as part of social to productive economy, and market steering mechanisms.
 - Competitive positioning of HE and HEIs.
 - Emphasis on value for money, efficiency and investor confidence
→ metrics,
 - HEIs asked why they exist – no longer an end but a means.
- Student is savvy participant/consumer/customer as link between HE and career/salary grows
 - Education as public or private good.
 - 'Consumer' information for students, parents and other key stakeholders.
 - Increasing desire for comparative or benchmarking data.

Rankings and the K-economy

- If HE is the engine of the economy, then productivity, quality and status of HE/HE research is vital indicator;
- Global competition reflected in the rising significance and popularity of rankings
 - Attempt to measure knowledge-producing and talent-catching capacity of HEIs,
 - Appear to (re)order global knowledge by giving weight and prominence to particular disciplines/fields of investigation,
 - Provide a framework or lens through which the global economy and national (and supra-national) positioning can be understood by giving a 'plausible' explanation of world excellence,
 - Measure national competitiveness as expressed by number of HEIs in top 20, 50 or 100...
- There is a gap between national/supra-national ambitions and global performance.

Be careful what you wish for...

- Rankings part of US academic system for 100 yrs, but today increasing popularity worldwide.
- But, policy role, autonomy and funding comes with a price:
 - Greater accountability, efficiency and value-for-money,
 - Reform of curriculum, organisation and governance model,
 - Emphasis on academic output which is measurable and comparable,
 - Quality assurance, assessment and evaluation mechanisms.

Trends



College guides: fulfil public service role, helping and informing domestic undergraduate students and their parents.

Evaluation and assessment of research, and teaching & learning or whole institutions for QA and accreditation.

Benchmarking: used to manage more strategically, effectively and efficiently as systematic comparison of practice and performance with peer institutions.

National rankings

- Modernisation of HE management, strategic planning and accountability/public disclosure,
- 45+ countries have a national ranking system.

Global rankings next logical step. The rising significance and popularity of worldwide comparisons.

Obsession With Rankings

- 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 students/consumers re: monetary 'private benefits' of university attainment and occupational/salary premium,
 - Cue to employers what they can expect from graduates,
 - Cue to government/policymakers re: quality, international standards & economic credibility,
 - Cue to public because they are perceived as independent of the sector or individual universities,
 - Cue to HEIs because they want to be able to benchmark their performance.

Audience/User Beyond Likely Suspects

- Undergraduate, domestic students
 - Parents
-
- Internationally mobile students and faculty
 - Postgraduate students
 - Academic partners and academic organisations
 - Government/Polycymakers
 - Employers
 - Sponsors and private investors
 - Industrial partners
 - The public and public opinion
 - Ranking agencies/organisations

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?

2. How Rankings Impact on Higher Education

'They did not tell me frankly but I could read their minds that if I am lucky enough to graduate at this university I could not be as highly appreciated as the one who graduated from Columbia University.

We are 'unlikely to consider research partnerships with a lower ranked university unless the person or team was exceptional.'

'I think the university needs to calm down. We've had two career panic days; it's what I call them where they're like Communist training sessions where everyone has to stand up and say what they are doing to improve their career.'

... those who are looking at their institution on an international scale are fully aware of the potential of these ratings, rankings, evaluations to attract students, to attract faculty and so on and it is also commented in...the newspapers, in comments in the media and so on ...

Ranking Status

Despite methodological concerns, HEIs taking rankings very seriously...

- 58% respondents unhappy with current rank;
- 93% and 82% respondents, respectively, want to improve their national or international ranking.
- 70% of all respondents wish to be in top 10% nationally, and 71% want to be in top 25% internationally.

Despite context, mission, age or size – all HE drawn into global marketplace.

Impact on Students (1)

- *Domestic undergraduate*: rely on local intelligence, national rankings and entry scores BUT mobility on the rise;
- *Domestic postgraduate*: becoming internationally mobile and ranking sensitive;
- *International undergraduate*: influenced by institutional partnerships & familial links – some rankings sensitivity;
- *International postgraduate*: Highly receptive to global rankings
 - Rankings = short-listing mechanism
 - Rankings influence employment opportunities.

Impact on Students (2)

- 40% US students use newsmagazine rankings, and 11% said rankings were important factor in choice (Mcdonagh et al 1997, 1998).
- 61% UK students referred to rankings before making choice, and 70% considered they were important/very important (Roberts, 2007, 20) .
- 92% int'l students considered UK rankings important/very important to inform choice (Roberts, 2007, 5, 18-20).
- 60% prospective German students 'know rankings and use rankings as one source of information among others' (Federkeil, 2007).
- Applicant behaviour conditioned by rankings (Ehrenberg, 2004, 26) .

Impact on Social Selectivity

- 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.
- US Universities increasing recruitment of high SAT scorers to influence student/selectivity metric.
- In binary systems, evidence suggests students migrating out of 'lower status' institutions.

Impact on Employers

- Employers have implicit rankings based on own experience which is self-perpetuating
 - 'Systematic' approach by large/int'l businesses rather than SME.
- UK study shows employers favour graduates from more highly ranked HEIs
 - 25% of graduate recruiters interviewed 'cited league tables as their main source of information about quality and standards' (University of Sussex, 2006, 87, 80, also 87-92).
- Boeing to Rank Colleges by Measuring Graduates' Job Success
 - To show which colleges have produced workers it considers most valuable because it wants 'more than just subjective information' and 'facts and data' (Chronicle of HE, 19 September 2008).

Impact on Academic/Industry Partners

- Academic Partnerships:
 - 40% respondents said rankings integral to decision-making about international collaboration, academic programmes, research or student exchanges
 - 57% thought rankings influencing willingness of other HEIs to partner with them.
 - 34% respondents said rankings influencing willingness of other HEIs to support their institution's membership of academic or professional organisations.
- Almost all universities chosen for Deutsche Telekom professorial chairs used rankings as evidence of research performance (Spiewak, 2005) .
- Boeing will use performance data to influence 'choice of partners for academic research and...decisions about which colleges it will ask to share in the \$100-million' Boeing spends course work and supplemental training for employees. (Chronicle of HE, 19 September 2008).

Impact on Government

- French, German and Russian governments introduced initiatives to boost performance in rankings:
 - French Senate Debate, Conference and Declaration
 - German Excellence Initiative
- Malaysian government established Royal Commission of Inquiry to investigate why rankings of two top universities fell by almost 100 places within a year (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007, 40) .
- Governments use rankings as an indicator of 'value-for-money' w/ ref to scholarship for int'l study (Clarke, 2007, 43; Salmi & Saroyan 2007, 52).
- Macedonia Law on HE (2008) automatically recognises top 500 Times QS, SJT or USN&WR.
- Dutch immigration law (2008) targets 'foreigners that are relatively young and received their Bachelor, Master or PhD degree...from a university...in the top 150' of SJT/Times QS.

Impact on Faculty and Academic Work

- Increased emphasis on academic performance/outputs
 - Contracts tied to metrics/performance,
 - New salary and tenure arrangements,
 - Active head-hunting of high-achievers.
- Rankings used to identify under-performers.
- Impact on Staff Morale.
- Faculty not innocent victims:
 - Rankings confer social and professional capital on faculty in high-ranked HEIs,
 - 'Research power' in deregulated global division of academic labour.

How are Institutions Responding?

63% HE leaders have taken strategic, organisational, managerial or academic actions in response to the results.

Of those,

- Overwhelming majority took either strategic or academic decisions and actions.
- Only 8% respondents indicated they had taken no action.

Mapping Institutional Actions

	Specific Actions	Weightings
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively develop/promote bio-sciences rather than arts, humanities & social sciences • Allocate additional faculty to internationally ranked departments • Reward publications in highly-cited journals • Publish in English-language journals • Set individual targets for faculty and departments 	SJT = 40% Times = 20%
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merge with another institution, or bring together discipline-complementary departments • Incorporate autonomous institutes into host HEI • Establish Centres-of-Excellence & Graduate Schools • Develop/expand English-language facilities, international student facilities, laboratories 	SJT = 40% Times = 20%
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmonise with EU/US models • Discontinue programmes/activities which negatively affect performance • Grow postgraduate activity in preference to undergraduate • Favour science disciplines • Positively affect student/staff ratio (SSR) 	SJT = 10% Times = 20%
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target high-achieving students, esp. PhD • Offer attractive merit scholarships and other benefits 	Times = 15%
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head-hunt international high-achieving/HiCi scholars • Create new contract/tenure arrangements • Set market-based or performance/merit based salaries • Reward high-achievers • Identify weak performers 	SJT = 40% Times = 25%
Academic Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionalise Admissions, Marketing and Public Relations • Ensure common brand used on all publications • Advertise in high-focus journals, e.g. <i>Science</i> and <i>Nature</i> 	Times = 40%

To summarise...

1. Audience/User goes beyond the usual suspects,
2. High achievers – students and faculty – are particularly sensitive to rankings,
3. Rankings influence decision-making, and incentivize behaviour with positive and perverse effects,
4. HE are focusing resources on fields and activities that will positively affect position, status and reputation.

3. Lessons for Ireland

Legacy of Rankings

Rankings = metaphor for competition and driver of HE reform

- Using rankings to inform policy and restructure HE system
 - As a 'market mechanism' to drive difference,
 - To concentrate resources in 'Centres of Excellence'.
- Linking indicators to resource allocation and accreditation
 - Shift from input → outcome/output → impact,
 - Will intensify as economies/financial situation tightens.
- Cross-national comparisons as indicator of HE performance.

Indicator of Global Competitiveness?

Top 100	Times QS		SJT Ranking	
	2007	2008	2007	2008
US	37	37	53	54
Europe	35	36	35	34
Australia/New Zealand	9	8	2	3
Asia Pacific (incl. Israel)	13	14	6	5
Canada	6	5	4	4
Latin America/Africa	0	0	0	0
Switzerland	1	3	3	3
UK	19	17	11	11
France	2	2	4	3
Germany	3	3	5	6
Japan	4	4	5	4
China (incl. HK)	5	5	0	0
Ireland	1	1	0	0
Sweden	1	2	4	4
Russia	0	0	1	1

Another Way to View Competitiveness?

Table 3 Small nations: Highly Cited researchers (August 2007) and Nobel Laureates (1901-2006)

Includes Peace Prize, excludes organisations (e.g. Médecins Sans Frontières, Belgium)

Nation	Highly Cited researchers	Nobel Prize winners
Austria	13	21
Australia	108	10
Belgium	37	9
Denmark	30	14
Finland	16	3
Hungary	5	12
Ireland	7	9
Israel	47	8
The Netherlands	95	18
New Zealand	17	3
Norway	13	10
Singapore	4	0
Sweden	61	28
Switzerland	111	25

Source: Thomson ISI (Highly Cited researchers), Wikipedia (Nobel Laureates)

Wealth of U.S. Universities, 2007

	Endowment \$b	Gifts Raised \$m	SJT Rank	Times QS Rank
Harvard	34.9	614	1	1
Yale	22.5	304	11	2=
Stanford	17.2	911*	3	19
Princeton	15.8	254	8	6
MIT	10.0	333	5	10
Columbia	7.2	913	7	11
U-Penn	6.6	450	15	14
Cornell	5.4	406	12	20=
Dartmouth	3.8	159	101-152	71=
Brown	2.8	126	86	32

Can we afford that 'reputation race'?

Rankings inflate academic 'arms race' locking institutions and governments into continual 'quest for ever increasing resources' (Ehrenberg 2004).

- 'World-class University' estimated to cost min. \$1b-\$1.5b-a-year operation + \$500m for medical school (Usher 2006; Sadlak & Liu 2007).
- This would require min. 600% increase for the largest Irish HEI and diverting the entire HE budget to a single institution.

Policy Trends

2 main policy regimes

1. Create greater vertical (reputational) differentiation [neo-liberal model] (e.g. German, Japan, France):
 - 'Excellence initiatives' to concentrate research in 10/30 world-class universities;
 - 'To compete globally, the government will close down some regional and private universities and direct money to the major universities'
2. Create greater horizontal (mission) differentiation [social-democratic] (e.g. Australia, Norway):
 - 'Create diverse set of high performing, globally-focused HEIs'
 - 'Move towards self-declaration of mission, setting own metrics and a corresponding funding model'
 - Link 'compacts' to mission and performance

Responding to Global Rankings

International/Europe

- OECD AHELO Project,
- EU Expert Group: Assessment of University-Based Research,
- Declaration on Ranking of European Higher Education Institutions,
- EU Tender for a European Ranking of HE.

Ireland

- National Research Platform & National Research Data Project,
- IOTI: developing standardised for data reporting,
- HERG – SSTI Indicators Project,
- Foresight AHSS – Metrics,
- Increasing attention to evaluation of research outcomes.

Global Networks

- HE judged increasingly in both national and global context.
- National boundaries declining in significance –
 - 'National pre-eminence is no longer enough',
 - Worldwide comparisons more significant in the future,
 - Implications even for 'elite' HEIs which may have been dominant within national boundaries,
 - Development of 'single world market' (Marginson, 2006) .
- Growing importance of global HE networks – lessons/benefits of research teams translated to regions,
 - Lisbon Agreement/EHEA and ERA,
 - ASEAN common higher education space
<http://blog.beerkens.info/index.php/2008/11/creating-a-higher-education-common-space-in-southeast-asia/>.

Diversity of Missions

- Trend of simple to complex knowledge and shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 corresponds with blurring boundaries between vocational and classical HE.
- Top-down regulation defining mission difference no longer capable of meeting geo-political competitive demands for RDI.
- Renewed attention on valuing diversity and cohesiveness of HE 'system'.
- Greater horizontal differentiation according to mission, e.g. civic, technological, classical, specialist:
 - Research intensity replaced by research/field specialisation,
 - Basic vs. applied replaced with applied and almost applied (LERU, 2008, p9).

Global Cities and Higher Education

- As the distribution of economic activity has gone global, cities now compete on global terrain (Florida, 2008)
- Successful cities/mega-regions:
 - Depend on specialised clusters of HE and research institutes that interact with creative enterprise, exchanging ideas and personnel (OECD, 2006),
 - Have HEIs that either already have, or are growing, an international reputation and have close relationships with businesses based on the particular specialism of the institution (Hutton, 2006),
 - Because most OECD countries face talent shortages, successful cities attract international students and researchers (OECD, 2006, p122).

Building a World Class System

- Diverse and coherent portfolio of horizontally differentiated high performing, globally-focused institutions and student experiences:
 - Research base for creation of knowledge to fuel innovation and forge/attract international links.
 - 'balanced' disciplinary or comprehensive approach
or
 - 'focused' disciplinary approach of developing world-class expertise in targeted areas.
 - Scale and quality of graduates to provide for desired societal and economic outcomes.
 - Maximising capability beyond individual capacity.

Cf. Strategies in Norway, Australia, Catalonia

Ranking World Class Systems (1)

Rank	Country	Score
1.	United States	100
2.	United Kingdom	98
3.	Australia	94
4.	Germany	92
5.	Canada	92
6.	Japan	90
7.	France	89
8.	Netherlands	86
9.	South Korea	79
10.	Sweden	79
11.	Switzerland	79
12.	Italy	77
13.	Belgium	77
14.	New Zealand	76
15.	China	75
16.	Hong Kong	72
17.	Ireland	71
18.	Finland	70
30.	South Africa	54
40.	Turkey	35

- *System*: No. HEIs ranked 500 or higher ÷ average position.
- *Access*: Total FTE at top 500 HEIs ÷ population size.
- *Flagship*: normalized score based on performance of leading university.
- *Economic*: performance relative to investment.

QS SAFE - National System Strength Rankings

Ranking World Class Systems (2)

Overall Rank	Country	Overall Score
1	Australia	30.6
2	UK	31.1
3	Denmark	39.1
4	Finland	40.8
5	USA	49.0
6	Sweden	49.2
7	Ireland	49.2
8	Portugal	54.3
9	Italy	60.9
10	France	62.2
11	Poland	64.4
12	Hungary	64.5
13	Netherlands	69.6
14	Switzerland	70.3
15	Germany	72.5
16	Austria	76.4
17	Spain	79.4

- *Inclusiveness* – participation rates
- *Access* – Threshold of skill aptitude required for HE graduation.
- *Effectiveness* – Value of HE to labour market as per wage premia.
- *Attractiveness* – Ability to attract international students.
- *Age range* – Lifelong learning capacity as % 30-39 year olds enrolled.
- *Responsiveness* – ability of system to reform and change – measured by speed/effectiveness Bologna Declaration.

University Systems Ranking. Citizens and Society in the Age of Knowledge. Lisbon Council, 2008.

Strategic Considerations for Small Nations

- Small nations face particular difficulties seeking to build world class universities without sacrificing other policy objectives – the gap is very wide;
- Performances of HE in small nations is uniformly strong throughout top 500 suggesting research investment evenly rewarded across the sector (Sheil, 2007);
- A *World Class HE System* can be developed adapting/learning from:
 - Strategies of successful mega-regions (e.g. Florida, Sassen),
 - Innovation clusters (e.g. Porter, Nelson, Lundvall, Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff),
 - Mode 2 research networks (e.g. Gibbons, Nowotny et al),
 - Biodiversity (e.g. Rosen, Wilson).

4. Conclusion

Positive and Perverse Effects

- Creating sense of urgency and accelerating modernisation agenda;
- Driving up institutional performance and providing some public accountability and transparency;
- Distorting the focus of HE away from research-informed teaching towards research, in the narrowest sense;
- Reshaping HE by aligning national and institutional priorities – education and research – to indicators;
- Challenging government, HEIs and the public to (re)think HE, and how and what should be measured.

Urban Myths

- Rankings provide useful comparative information about the performance of different HEIs facilitating student choice and benchmarking;
- Indicators are 'plausible'/meaningful measurements of research and knowledge creation;
- High ranked HEIs are better than lower ranked/not ranked institutions;
- Concentrating research in a few elite institutions or scientific disciplines will 'lift all boats'.

Conclusion (1)

- Rankings have gained popularity because they (appear to) gauge world class status, provide accountability and measure national competitiveness;
- But even in relation to scientific research, rankings do great damage to the research enterprise - inducing HE and governments to adopt simplistic solutions and skew research agendas and policies to become what is measured.

Conclusion (2)

- Because cross-national comparisons are 'here to stay', the choice of metrics (and weightings) are critical.
- The challenge is to:
 1. Ensure Ireland's research landscape can participate appropriately across the spectrum of world science;
 2. Develop depth and excellence wherever it occurs;
 3. Mobilise and amplify the potential of the whole HE system and its benefits to society at large.

