Rankings as Indicator of Quality?

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2nd Athens International Conference on University Assessment
October 12-14, 2007
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
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 $\Rightarrow$ 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)
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
Implications for HE (1)

- Increasing vertical stratification with 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)
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?
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
The Big Challenge

- Learn to Live with ‘League Tables’
- Provide transparent understandable information
- Agree format and ‘metrics’
  - How to define quality?
  - How to measure?
  - By whom?
  - For what?
- Educate public opinion
- Otherwise – Rankings will be used as Indicator of Quality