

Rankings as Indicator of Quality?

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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 → 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 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 (2)

- 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

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