

Games played on Australian university alliance websites as they collaborate and compete

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Abstract

In the increasingly complex field of higher education universities are continually required by government and other agencies to participate in complicated activities where they both collaborate and compete for government, private and research funding and for staff and students. Utilising Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital, this paper initially explores the websites of the three Australian university alliances – the Group of Eight (Go8); Australian Technology Network (ATN); and the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) – to ascertain how each utilises particular forms of capital to both collaborate and compete within the field of higher education. A brief explanation of Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital is followed by a discussion about the Australian university alliances. The paper describes how and why these alliances formed then explores their websites to assess the way in which particular forms of capital are utilised on them. These public websites reflect how each university alliance attempts to identify what its constituent universities have in common and how as a group they are unique. The distinguishing characteristics claimed by each university grouping are identified, described and compared to determine how effectively they may be utilised for competitive purposes. Each alliance has determined how to present their own capital in ways that will allow them to compete with the other groups, as they jockey for position and attempt to improve their stakes in the game. As competition for funding, staff and students increases and the game becomes more complex, universities across the sector are required to identify new and more elaborate ways of competing. The development of university ranking systems has encouraged this competitive game. The relevance of university rankings – specifically the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU), published by the Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (IHE-SJTU) and known as the *Jiao Tong* ranking; the World University rankings published by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and known as the *Times Higher* rankings and the *Australian university* rankings, published by the Melbourne Institute – is discussed. The paper concludes with a reflection on why, despite their apparent importance as capital these international and national rankings are predominantly absent from the alliances' websites. These explorations provide an insight into the complex games universities play in order to collaborate and to compete for government, private and research funding and for staff and students.

Introduction

The field of higher education is complex. Universities are required to participate in complicated activities where they both collaborate and compete for government, private and research funding and for staff and students. This paper utilises Bourdieu's (1985, 1986, 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) concepts of field and capital to explore how Australian university alliances have developed and how they collaboratively promote their distinctive forms of capital in order to compete. The website of each alliance is explored, comparing and contrasting the specific forms of capital that it utilises to improve its position in the field. Drawing on the work of Usher & Savino (2006), Williams & Van Dyke (2004), Marginson (2007), and others, the paper focuses on how global and national ranking systems have developed and are employed as capital. The alliances' websites reflect how information about ranking tables, benchmarking information and other forms of capital are utilised as stakes in a game to improve each groups' ability to compete. The paper explores how some Australian universities have been included in rankings but others have not, so that ranking systems have

become a contested form of capital within the competitive game of acquiring staff, student enrolments and funding that is played across the field of higher education.

Bourdieu's concept of field and capital

Bourdieu (1992) describes a field as a social space that is like a game, where players come together, holding relative positions which entitle them to behave in distinctive ways, and requiring them to abide by a set of tacitly understood and agreed rules. Although he uses the terms game and field synonymously, Bourdieu points out that the main difference between them is that a field is not deliberately created and some actions within it are unintended, while a game occurs by choice or intention and follows a defined set of rules. In a game, set rules are understood by all players and tend to be followed, yet in a field the regularities differ from rules because they are not explicit or codified (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p 98). In fields the occupants, or agents, hold positions which are not fixed and there is a constant tension as agents jockey to increase their powers of position (or capital) so that they may better their situation within the social space of “their objective relations to other positions” (ibid, p 97). Where agents occupy social spaces within a given field, their relative positions are determined by their accumulations of value and power of the distinctive species of capital they hold and can actively exchange within that particular field. Capital is valued differently across fields. Each field includes a specific kind of capital “that is current, as a power or stake, in that game” (ibid) and it may change over time. Therefore, while an agent may enjoy a particular position of power in a field where their capital is valued, their agency and opportunity to influence events, practices and relations may not be acknowledged in a different field where their capital is not valued in the same way.

Bourdieu identifies various forms of capital, including: symbolic capital, which is related to the accumulation of honour or prestige; cultural capital, which is related to cultural acquisitions such as educational or technical qualifications, knowledge and skills, and also more subtle embodiments of styles of self-presentation; economic capital, which is related to material wealth (money, property, stocks etc) (Bourdieu, 1991, p 14); and social capital, which is related to acquaintances, recognitions and relationships which include the membership of groups (Bourdieu, 1986, p 248). These different forms of capital, similar to trump cards or “the aces in a game of cards, are powers that define the chances of profit in a given field” (Bourdieu, 1985, p 724).

Fields are complex entities which comprise a “network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p 97). The positions or social spaces occupied by agents within the field will shift according to their accumulation of the various forms of capital and its currency within that particular field. Agents' capital of different forms may be valued differently according to the particular field that the agent is in (i.e. artistic, religious, economic, etc.) and may change within the field as it develops in time. Players may even attempt to change the rules of the game or the value of the particular forms of capital they hold, as strategies to increase their own position within the field.

Australian university alliances

In the field of Australian higher education, individual institutions have formed various alliances according to their histories and visions in order to increase their chances of improving their positions in, and capacities to play, the game. These alliances include the

Group of Eight (Go8), the Innovative Research Universities (IRU)¹ and the Australian Technology Network (ATN)². These groups have developed on the basis of the histories of the constituent universities, what they have in common and what each may offer the others in relation to how they may better market themselves and lobby government to achieve particular advantages for the constituents. While each university's strength provides opportunities for the alliance to advance, these strengths also enable the individual universities to compete with each other, both within their groupings and as distinct entities. This creates a complex web of competition where all the players in the field of higher education, individual universities, alliances of universities and universities within alliances, are competing with each other and jockeying for position.

University alliances' websites

All of the alliances maintain websites indicating which universities are included, how they collaborate with each other and what distinguishes them from the other alliances. The three groups with websites use them to reflect their symbolic and cultural capital and thus to jockey for position within the field. The websites provide an opportunity for each alliance to promote aspects common to the constituent universities and to reflect how active and involved it is as a collaborative group, thereby increasing each university's ability to compete within the field as part of an alliance as well as on their own.

The Go8 website indicates that this group comprises "Australia's leading universities" which "excel in giving their graduates world-class training". The Go8 universities are a collection of Australia's oldest universities, recognised generally as the most prestigious (hence leading). According to the Go8 website, they "are consistently the first choice of the majority of highest qualified Australian school leavers". It also boasts that: "every Nobel Prize winner educated at an Australian university" attended a Go8 university. These universities have been given "an above-average share of national teaching awards", "over 80 per cent of Australia's Rhodes scholars" have graduated from Go8 universities, and their alumni "find full-time employment sooner, begin on higher salaries, and are more likely to move on to postgraduate studies than graduates from other Australian universities" (Group of Eight Secretariat, 2007a). These statements reflect the Go8's utilisation of symbolic and cultural capital and reinforce the claim that the Go8 are leading universities, as no other group of universities can match these claims and therefore are unable to compete on these terms. The Go8 therefore have a vested interest in ensuring that symbolic and cultural capital, articulated in these statements as prestige and the ability to ensure their graduates win prizes and acquire well paid jobs, continue to be valued as capital within the field (across the sector).

The IRU and the ATN also have websites promoting their claimed distinguishing characteristics and promoting the forms of capital they hold and therefore value and seek to have valued. The IRU website claims that it encompasses six "world class universities" which have "[r]esearch performance and innovation" as key characteristics (IRU Australia Secretariat, 2004b, 2009b). In this statement these universities are utilising the notions that they are *innovative* and *research* institutions, and, by claiming to be 'world class', are suggesting that they have the capital to compete with the Go8 and other universities outside of Australia. Another page of the website states that the IRU "draws together six

¹ James Cook University joined the IRU in 2007 and Macquarie University left in 2008 (Australian Tertiary Education, 2009). Charles Darwin University joined the alliance in 2009 (IRU Australia Secretariat, 2009a).

² A fourth alliance, The New Universities Group (NGU), disbanded in 2008 (Australian Tertiary Education, 2009).

internationally recognised, student-focussed, and research-intensive universities” (IRU Australia Secretariat, 2004a, 2009a). This phrase reinforces both the idea that IRU universities are concerned with research and, as the constituent universities are internationally recognised, that they share some of the qualities exhibited by the Go8 universities. However, the IRU website also states that its members intend to set themselves apart from the Go8. The IRU website states that:

The six universities have deliberately developed ways of making themselves distinctive by embracing innovative approaches to teaching, research and community engagement, adopting alternative organisational structures, and actively recruiting students from more diverse backgrounds than are typically found in the longer-established universities (IRU Australia Secretariat, 2004a, 2009a).

The IRU’s focus on embracing innovative practices and providing access to students from a wider range of backgrounds indicates that they are seeking to invoke other forms of capital that will enable them to compete with the older universities (that make up the Go8) on their own terms. The IRU has clearly distinguished itself and indicated that it will utilise innovation in all areas of its work (teaching, research and community engagement) as its competitive capital.

The description that appears on the ATN website says: “The Australian Technology Network is an influential alliance of five distinctive and prominent Australian universities located in each mainland state” (Australian Technology Network, 2004). This statement reflects how the ATN universities are also attempting to set themselves apart from their competitors. The use of terms such as influential, distinctive and prominent imply that this group of universities has worth and authority unique in comparison to other Australian universities.

Just as the IRU utilises their claim to be Innovative Research institutions to set themselves apart from their competitors, the alliance of Australian Technology Network universities promotes, as a distinctive trump card relative to other universities, the technological prowess of the constituents. The *Teaching and Learning Committee* page states that “[t]he ATN Teaching and Learning Committee (TALC) is focussed on the effective use of educational technology” (Australian Technology Network, 2004). However, this technology card will succeed and allow ATN universities to gain increased status within the field only if technological prowess is recognised as an important attribute by players and consumers across the field as a whole. The IRU have also taken up the technology card, as its website claims that all of its universities “place emphasis on multiple modes of delivery, integrating the new educational technologies into high quality face-to-face teaching” (IRU Australia Secretariat, 2004a).

To address the possibility that its technological prowess is insufficient by itself to increase status, the ATN invokes other attributes, which combine with technology, to increase its claim for stronger capital accumulation. The ATN thus promotes its ability to build partnerships and find solutions. It claims it will do this by aiming to support Australia as it develops its reputation as “the clever country” (Australian Technology Network, 2004, 2009). However, attributes claimed by the ATN are not unique to that alliance. The IRU also asserts that its member universities continually extend and increase their activities including their “engagement with business, professions and communities” (IRU Australia Secretariat, 2004a, 2009a).

As well as indicating that it supports the needs of the Australian community and its industries, the ATN website (Australian Technology Network, 2004) states that in recent years the universities have “consolidated their strong reputation for excellence in practice-based learning, flexible and online delivery”. These forms of capital cannot be distinctively claimed by the ATN either as they too are taken up by the IRU. The IRU website incorporates them within a statement which also identifies how the IRU intend addressing equity. The statement says,

[its] universities stress the importance of a strongly student-focussed learning environment, with schemes to promote access, equity, and diversity and place emphasis on multiple modes of delivery, integrating the new educational technologies into high quality face-to-face teaching. (IRU Australia Secretariat, 2004a).

The ‘equity’ card is another that is played by more than one alliance. Equity is included on the websites of all three. The ATN claim that they “will continue to champion the principles of access and equity that have ensured its members are the universities of first choice for more students” (Australian Technology Network, 2004). In this statement the ATN are not only articulating their commitment to equity but are suggesting that their constituents are successfully attracting a larger number of students than other Australian universities. The Go8’s approach to equity incorporates it with the group’s identity as prestigious universities. Its home page states that (one of) the reasons the Go8 exists is to “expand opportunities for Australian students, regardless of background, to participate in higher education of world class” (Group of Eight Limited, 2009b). The utilisation of the phrase “regardless of background” allows the Go8 to articulate an intention to address access and diversity as well as equity. The descriptions on the various alliance websites reflect how each alliance has attempted to reveal its recognition of the importance of signifying a commitment to equity. The various examples of how each alliance promotes their specific forms of capital in ways that uniquely invoke the specific attributes of each groups’ constituent universities illustrates the complex games they are required to play, given the structuring forces that historically configure the field. Each must determine how to present the capital they have in ways that will allow them to continue to compete with the other groups, as they jockey for position and attempt to improve their stakes in the game.

Universities across the sector are required to identify new and more elaborate ways of competing. The inclusion and increasing prevalence of university ranking systems has added further complexity. Marginson (2007) and Moodie (2005, p 1) each suggest that rankings will influence universities in ways that were previously unprecedented. They may affect the alliances universities build with each other, the perceptions of prospective staff and students, as well as influencing government and industry funding because research may only be commissioned from those universities or research units who are ranked near the top of the scales. Students, especially those studying in vocational areas, may prefer to attend universities that are more highly regarded by employers in their field so they may secure more lucrative employment after graduating. Within a globalised and highly competitive university sector, rankings not only influence how the players and teams are positioned but may also impact on the rules of the game itself.

Brief history of rankings

University ranking systems were initiated in the United States “in order to meet a perceived

market need for more transparent, comparative data about educational institutions” and provide an aid to parents and students when choosing which higher education institution to attend (Usher & Savino, 2006, p. 3). In agreement with Usher & Savino, Clarke (2006) argues that rankings have been produced by governments, research centres, newspapers and magazines for over two decades and are becoming more important as a way of aiding prospective students to decide which institution to attend. Rankings therefore provide valuable marketing opportunities for institutions, but also represent high-stakes contests in the game of institutional positioning and, indeed, survival. Clarke says,

the growing demand for rankings is fuelled by several trends in higher education: e.g., increasing participation rates, higher costs, and the view of students as consumers who expect value for money (p. 1).

Ranking systems encourage universities to compete, and provide methodologies for measuring and indeed constituting university worth. According to Usher & Savino (2006) each ranking system measures a different set of data about the universities under examination. Different systems may therefore rank the universities in a different order. Despite the variety of approaches, rankings have become a method for measuring and constituting university ‘quality’. Usher & Savino argue that the authors of the various rankings impose their own “definition of quality on the institutions being ranked” because they select the particular indicators that will be used, ignoring other indicators that may be equally legitimate, and assign each with a given weighting so that the rank can be determined (p. 3).

Global ranking systems

The differences between ranking systems become increasingly important when universities are ranked globally. Williams & Van Dyke (2007) contend that globalisation has led to employers, academics and students increasingly seeking indicators that compare the standing of universities on an international level. Williams & Van Dyke argue that comparing universities against each other on a global scale enables better informed judgments to be made “about where to study, whom to employ, or where to seek professional expertise” (p. 819). They observe that, although both quantitative and qualitative information should be used to make these decisions, comparative data has not been readily accessible until recently when information about different institutions has become accessible online (pp. 819 – 820).

Two global rankings which include Australian universities are predominantly discussed in journal articles (Marginson, 2007; Usher & Savino, 2006; Williams & Van Dyke, 2007). These are the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU), published by the Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (IHE-SJTU) and known as the *Jiao Tong* ranking, which began in 2003; and the World University rankings published by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and known as the *Times Higher* rankings, which commenced in 2004. The *Jiao Tong*, which focuses primarily on scientific research and related outputs, does not take the quality of a university’s teaching and learning into account (Marginson, 2007). It uses several indicators to measure performance, including national ranking, the number of alumni and/or staff winning Nobel prizes and fields medals, highly cited researchers, articles published in *Nature* and *Science*, articles indexed in major citation indices, and the per capita academic performance of each institution. These criteria are used to compare universities across both regional (Europe, Americas, Asia/Pacific and Africa) and world domains (Institute of Higher Education Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 2007a).

The *Times Higher* rankings utilise both qualitative and quantitative measures. These include peer review, which involve surveying academics around the world to determine who they consider are the top 30 universities in their field; recruiter review, where staff in recruitment agencies are asked to name universities they recruit from; number of international staff; number of international students; faculty to student ratio; and number of journal citations received by faculty (Times Higher Education Supplement, 2006, pp 6-7). Marginson (2007) argues that although the *Times Higher* rankings are more holistic, as they are not only focussed on research, they are also less reliable because they are based on “an international opinion survey of academics” (p 134).

The impact of global rankings

Marginson (2007) observed that global rankings will have a similar change-inducing impact across universities as the deregulation of currencies had in the 1980s when it “exposed trading economies to global market forces” (p. 132). Universities from all countries will be required to compete in ways which advantage some universities and countries, while imposing hardships on others, utilising a process of relentless comparison which may be unreasonable, inequitable and unsuitable.

Moodie concurs with Marginson, claiming that despite the acknowledged disparities and the unfairness associated with their application, rankings will have an unprecedented impact on universities. He suggests rankings will influence the perceptions of prospective staff and students, governments, and industry funding as research will be commissioned from the top ranked universities or research units. Moodie also indicates that rankings “will affect the capacity to form partnerships with other universities” (2005, p 1). Rankings are therefore becoming a form of symbolic capital impacting on institutional and alliance abilities to compete for position.

Use of global rankings on alliance websites

The Go8 website provides an example of how rankings are being utilised as symbolic capital to improve position and reflect status. Until 2008 the Go8 website included a statement indicating that the constituent universities were “ranked in the top 100 universities in the world by the *Times Higher Education Supplement 2005*” (Group of Eight Secretariat, 2007b). The information regarding rankings appeared with other statements promoting the advantages of attending Go8 institutions, which include assertions that the average staff-student ratios are better than at other Australian universities; that they are able to provide a variety of scholarships to both Australian and international students; that all Nobel prize winners who received an education at an Australian university and over eighty percent of Australia's Rhodes scholars attended one of the Go8 institutions. All of these assertions enable the Go8 universities to position themselves as having more prestige and higher symbolic capital. This increased capital also suggests that attending a Go8 university provides students with opportunities to gain greater social capital than by attending other Australian universities. These statements reflect some of the measures utilised by the *Jiao Tong* rankings although rankings themselves are not identified.

The Go8 website selectively includes particular ranking results that promote the alliance's prestige, while others which may not provide as positive a picture are absent or have been removed. For example there was recent removal of the *Times Higher* rankings (when the Go8's performance in it significantly dropped); and there has been a lack of any reference to

other international rankings such as the *Jiao Tong* lists. The *Jiao Tong* rankings have never been mentioned on the Go8 website despite the *Jiao Tong* rankings having greater recognition outside the “Westminster countries”³ than the *Times Higher* rankings (Marginson, 2007, p. 134). Marginson expresses concern that the *Times Higher* rankings have “artificially inflated the performance of Australian universities” and that

the *Times Higher* result will induce complacency in university and policy circles in Australia, enabling the *Jiao Tong* performance, which is more material and influential, to be set aside (p 135).

A comparison of how the *Times Higher* and the *Jiao Tong* rankings place Australian universities indicates that Marginson’s concerns are warranted, as the *Times Higher* ranks Australian universities much higher than the *Jiao Tong*.

Rankings information is absent from the alliance websites. There may be at least two reasons for these exclusions. Firstly, some of the constituent universities rank much higher on these indices than others, so it would be more beneficial for those individual universities which rank more highly to use the rankings on their individual websites for their own gain. Although all of the Go8 universities appear in the *Jiao Tong Asia Pacific top 100 World rankings*, only the ANU, the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney are in the top one hundred world rankings (Institute of Higher Education Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 2008). Secondly, according to Marginson (2007), the *Times Higher* ranking emphasises internationalisation and reputation and is designed “to intervene in the market in cross-border degrees, in which both UK and Australian universities are particularly active” (p 134). Therefore the Go8 utilised this ranking for promotional purposes, while it provided opportunities to enhance the position of its constituent universities and where inclusion of the information improved its competitive position. In more recent times, as the performance of Go8 universities has become more erratic in relation to global rankings, their use as a trump card has provided less advantage and so discussion of the *Times Higher* rankings has been removed from the Go8 website.

The ATN and IRU websites have never included information about either of the global rankings; and a reasonable analysis is that this is because doing so would not advantage their constituent universities. While all of the ATN universities appeared in the top 200 of the *Times Higher* rankings in 2005, over the four year period to 2008 they have progressively lost position and by 2008 only two ATN universities remain in the top 200. While three of the IRU universities appeared in these listings in 2005, the only university to remain in the list in subsequent years was Macquarie University, which left the IRU alliance in 2008. *Jiao Tong* lists do not include any ATN universities, and while four of the IRU universities are present in the top 500 lists, Macquarie is the only university which consistently appears in the top 300 (Institute of Higher Education Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008; Times Higher Education Supplement, 2006, 2007, 2008).

National rankings

Individual countries also have national systems to rank their universities. According to Usher & Savino (2006) these have existed for longer than the global rankings, with the first

³ The Westminster countries are those which use a government system that is based on the one in England. Australia is an example of a Westminster country.

appearing in the United States in 1981 (p 2), and they differ greatly in what they measure, as across all ranking systems over one hundred different indicators are used (p 14). National ranking systems are usually presented in a similar way to league tables, and, although different in some ways, they resemble performance indicators. In both cases information on particular topics, such as the number of citations attributed to academic staff or staff student ratios, is compiled and compared. The main difference between ranking systems or league tables and performance indicators is that performance indicators provide benchmarks to show how well an institution or group of institutions is doing, while league tables “are designed specifically as a comparative measure, pitting institutions against each other” (p, 5). These national systems are open to the same criticisms and provide a similar function to the global rankings systems, as they may also be used as marketing tools, as an aid in making decisions about which university to attend, and as a reflection of university quality.

Australian university rankings are based on independent evaluations that use a diverse range of criteria to compare universities (Australian Education Network, 1998). From 2005 to 2007 Go8 universities occupied the top eight positions⁴ in *Australian University* rankings⁵. During this period the ATN universities ranked in the top twenty six of the *Australian university* rankings (Australian Education Network, 1998). Although information from the Melbourne Institute’s rankings are included on the Australian Education Network website, alongside details from both the *Jiao Tong* and the *Times Higher* rankings, the website includes a disclaimer which states that “[t]here is no official ranking of Australian universities as exists in some other countries”. It also says:

Australian university rankings that do exist are therefore based on independent evaluations that use different criteria and approach the task from different perspectives (Australian Education Network, 1998).

These statements may explain why details from *Australian university* rankings are not included on any of the alliances’ websites – i.e. they are not offering capital which will aid in the advancement of any of the groups.

Benchmarking

Until recently other national rankings, which may more accurately be regarded as benchmarking activities such as Learning Teaching and Performance Fund (LTPF) and Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) outcomes have also remained absent from these websites. The lack of inclusion of information regarding the LTPF may have been attributed to its relative newness⁶, the fact that it reflects the learning and teaching rather than research outcomes of the university, the various concerns that were raised regarding the way that the LTPF was developed⁷ and/or the negative way that it reflects each group’s constituent universities.

The Go8 has recently added benchmarking and statistical data to its website. The new data provides statistics on “key indicators of performance”. These are listed as: staff numbers;

⁴ This was out of thirty seven positions.

⁵ These were prepared by the University of Melbourne’s Melbourne Institute. The Australian Education Network site’s most recent listing is for 2007 ranking.

⁶ The fund was instigated in 2006 (Director Teaching and Learning Unit, 2007).

⁷ Numerous concerns regarding the methodology used to determine funding were raised in relation to the fund (Marks & Coates, 2007).

student load; how student load is funded; other financial information; CEQ data on the overall satisfaction item, the good teaching scale and generic skills scale; LTPF income; and information on research income, publications, higher degree by research (HDR) student load and HDR completions. The website states that these detailed statistics are provided so that its constituent universities may be benchmarked and compared “against each other, compared with the Australian university sector as a whole and with comparable universities and groups of institutions overseas” (Group of Eight Limited, 2009a). The inclusion of benchmarking and statistical data reflects a changing emphasis regarding what capital may be wielded by the alliances as they compete for strategic advantage. These changes are particularly timely given proposals outlined in the Bradley Review and taken up by the Rudd Government who suggest that one of their key tasks in relation to higher education will “be to establish objective and comparative benchmarks of quality and performance” (Gillard, 2009).

An alternative system

According to Bourdieu (1985), field agents (in this case university chancellors, vice chancellors, deputy vice chancellors and others at relatively high levels within these organisations) “yield a power proportionate to their symbolic capital i.e., to the recognition they receive from a group” (p. 731). If we consider Moodie’s (2005, p 1) aforementioned suggestion that rankings influence the perceptions of prospective staff and students, governments, and industry funding and that they may impact on the relationships universities may form with one another, it is possible to argue that rankings and benchmarking information are forms of symbolic capital that allow universities and their agents to gain recognition and relate to one another in partnerships and in other relevant fora. Bourdieu argues that symbolic capital is important because it distinguishes agents within groups as having a place, as either belonging or not and that this capital may influence the place held by these agents and the strategies at their disposal to increase their own position as well as the position of their group. Agents of high position within given institutions act to maximise the capital of their institutions as a way of increasing their own position both within institutions and across them. As the symbolic capital of the institution and/or alliance increases so does that of the institution’s agents. Bourdieu says,

Those most visible in terms of the prevailing categories of perception are those best placed to change the vision by changing the categories of perception. But also, on the whole, those least inclined to do so (ibid, emphasis from original).

In the case of university rankings the universities that are most highly ranked and least highly ranked are the most visible. In Australia the Go8 are the most highly ranked within both the Australian league tables and according to the *Times Higher* rankings. These universities are also the most likely to promote these rankings as valid and important, while the universities who are least visible because they are in the middle or lower-middle, as are the ATN universities, wish to establish a different system and a different way of thinking about ranking.

The ATN constituent universities are aware that they would have a better chance at increasing their position within the field of higher education if it were possible to establish an Australian university education system that is ranked highly by global competitors. The ATN would then be ranked alongside other universities rather than having to compete with other Australian universities for a place in the rank. In an interview with the newspaper *The*

Australian, the director of the ATN suggested a change in the rules of the game that would enable the ATN constituents to participate in the game and gain credibility through their participation. In the interview she said, “[F]or us, it's more about becoming a top 10 university system rather than getting a university into the top 10.” She then explained why this difference was so important, stating that by having a world class system Australia would be better positioned to attract international students and researchers (Rout, 2007).

Professor Peter Høj, the vice-chancellor and president of one of the ATN universities, the University of South Australia, compares university rankings with top-level sporting success. He argues that winning medals at the Olympic Games or acquiring a Davis Cup at tennis does not reflect the sporting ability or fitness and well being of the rest of the Australian nation. He suggested that it only serves to reflect how well the best trained athletes may perform on any given day. He states that similar things occur when reading league tables because “rankings success does not necessarily correlate with university output or impact in all the areas that matter”. His suggested alternative corresponds with those discussed by the director of the ATN (quoted above), that Australia requires a top university system rather than individual universities that compete globally (Høj, 2008, p 6).

Ranking systems are very problematic as measures of university performance. Each measures something different and what is measured effects how universities are ranked. These rankings create particular problems for those universities who do not rank highly. Within Australia, ATN universities fall into this category and cannot favourably compete with universities, such as those of the Go8, that are positioned relatively highly within a world ranking. The gambit of an ATN Vice Chancellor to focus on creation of a world class university system, rather than on elite individual institutions, would aim to secure for the ATN, and its constituent institutions, potentially better opportunity to be regarded as equals alongside Go8 institutions. However, it is hard to imagine why the Go8 universities would agree to participate in a system that redirected the capital they gain from being ranked among the world’s top universities.

The idea that Australia produces a university system that is highly ranked across the globe rather than having a number of highly ranked individual universities has been taken up by the current Australian government, which sees it as an opportunity to advance the sector. Gillard’s (2009) statement that the government intends to “create the conditions for an excellent university system” reflects support for the ATN’s suggestion for a world class university system rather than one where individual universities compete for global ranking. However, according to an article published in *The Australian’s* Higher Education Supplement, Australian universities, particularly the Go8 and “wanna be Go8’s” (i.e. those regarded as having less prestige), continue to be “strongly focussed on the Shanghai [Jiao Tong] rankings” (Healy, 2009).

Conclusion

Although none of the alliance websites currently include information regarding international rankings, the article from *The Australian’s* Higher Education Supplement reflects the importance that continues to be placed on these rankings and the symbolic capital they embody. In this case symbolic capital is particularly important because it is closely related to opportunities for the highly ranked universities to increase economic capital. A representative from Griffiths University (which belongs to the IRU alliance) said,

the billions in accumulated investment and prestige associated with the world's top universities made it futile for all but the top four Australian universities to try to crack the top 20 “super-league”, or even the top 100 (Healy, 2009).

The four universities referred to in this quote are all from the Go8⁸ which suggests that only half of its constituents have a chance of “making it” in world rankings, and especially in the *Jiao Tong*. The four universities may therefore be better served by ensuring their own ratings in the international rankings tables are listed on the individual websites rather than sharing the capital with their Go8 colleagues. The home pages of these universities’ act as advertising spaces, providing details of current, nationally important research that is being undertaken and achievements of students or staff. They also link to include information about new programs and courses and other information. The rankings information appears on the news and events sections; on the “about” pages and on the information for new students pages. Rankings are therefore used as promotional tools to attract new students and potential staff. Not including the ranking information on the home pages indicates that these top universities recognise the importance of also utilising their other capital and the need to compete in a range of different areas. The Go8’s website redevelopment reflects that as a group the universities also recognise the need to utilise a number of ‘cards’ to improve their stakes in the game.

The updated Go8 website reflects an engagement with technology that, while also claimed by the IRU and the ATN, is not reflected by the look or feel of their websites. The Go8’s website includes an aggregator for RSS⁹ feed and it is mildly interactive as it allows visitors to the site to choose how information is displayed to them. Despite the claims to technological prowess stated on the IRU and ATN websites, both are static and appear stale and outdated by comparison. These websites require updating if the alliances wish to give any weight to their efforts in claiming technology as a strong capital of their institutions.

In exploring Australian university alliance websites in relation to Bourdieu’s concepts of field and capital, this paper has revealed the complicated activities that take place in the field of higher education. It has explored how university alliances seek to gain competitive advantage and when it is not possible to do so they attempt to conserve or change the rules of the game, depending on field position. The paper has revealed how universities are required to collaborate to promote their distinctive forms of capital and compete in order to acquire funding and attract staff and students. The discussion on ranking systems presented in the paper indicates how these systems incite contests over capital and themselves become a contested form of capital, where universities pit themselves against one another in relation to their ability to conduct research, produce prize winning students and attract the brightest and best students and staff from across the globe. At the same time universities “club together” and those who rank most highly strive to maintain a system which benefits them while those who are unable to compete and who do not have a stake in this game seek to change the rules so that they may gain opportunity to improve their position. Macquarie University provides an example of one institution which determined its needs would be better served by moving away from the alliance (the IRU) it had been a member of since 2003. Macquarie consistently scores higher in all rankings than the other IRU’s and is often the only IRU to appear in the *Times Higher* rankings. The Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, Stephen Schwartz

⁸ The top four Australian universities are the Australian National University, University of Melbourne, University of Sydney and University of Queensland.

⁹ RSS is a technological term which stands for Really Simple Syndication and means that information can be automatically updated onto the website from other sources.

claimed that “Self-imposed silos limit rather than foster collaboration. We want to work across all groups rather than be aligned with only one” (2008). Following Macquarie University’s movement within the field over the next few years will reflect whether withdrawing from the IRU was a skilful move to improve position or whether it will thwart the Macquarie University’s progress.

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