'There is a world out there we can step into':

The University of Reading and the World Rankings

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Introduction

This chapter investigates the influence of global rankings on – and their use by – a medium-sized research-intensive English university outside the top-ranked Russell Group of large research universities in the United Kingdom. It explores the ways in which key University personnel negotiate the use of such rankings for internal and external strategic purpose, attempting to avoid their distorting effects while recognizing their increasing influence in orchestrating global and domestic reputation. The study was undertaken at a particular moment in the University's history, when a new leadership and strategy were aiming to extend the institution's global reach and recognition just at the moment when it dropped out of the top 200 in the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings. The chapter suggests this may be an example of a more widespread dilemma for many mid-ranking UK universities that are likely to be increasingly supplanted in the higher echelons of the global rankings by institutions from emerging systems, such as from the Asia-Pacific region. If such universities are to become truly international, including supporting the development of other nations' higher education systems, how do they manage the growing pressure to maintain – or improve – their reputations in the global rankings, with the increasing impact on the University's "bottom-line".

A further aim of this study is to update and extend (albeit to a limited degree) a previous investigation and analysis of the influence of "league tables" on higher education institutions (HEIs) in England (Locke, Verbik, Richardson, & King, 2008). This earlier research was based on policy research initially undertaken for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), comprising of a survey of institutions, case studies and a statistical analysis of three national league tables and two world rankings. Subsequent re-analysis of the evidence gathered from the HEFCE project utilized a conceptual framework developed from the work of a number of American researchers in order to understand the ways in which HEIs and their members (i.e. staff, students, stakeholders) internalize the logic of ranking systems and their influence becomes institutionalized in organizational processes and structures (Locke 2011; 2014). This re-analysis sought to place these developments in the context of growing competition in higher education in England, and to characterize the responses of institutions to rankings as a way of managing status anxiety in an increasingly marketized environment.

The chapter is structured in a similar way to others in this collection, commencing with a brief description of the UK higher education system and how universities within it are responding to the growing influence of world rankings. Subsequent sections describe the methodology of the study and the theoretical and conceptual framework for the analysis of the evidence gathered. The core of the chapter is the case study. After providing key information about the University of Reading, the current narratives of the institution are explored, drawing on the accounts that personnel and documents give of the University in the context of rankings and other related developments. A further section analyses the influence and use of rankings in the University, utilizing and testing the theoretical and

conceptual framework developed in the previous study. Finally, the implications of the findings are discussed and concluding comments made about the likely impacts of world rankings on medium-sized research-intensive universities in the UK and England as they seek to extend their global visibility and reach.

UK Higher Education and Global University Rankings

Universities and colleges have a significant degree of institutional autonomy and remain "at arms length" from the state or government, with "intermediary bodies" such as funding councils operating in the space between. For example, they are able to employ (and sack) their own staff; build, own and dispose of their own buildings; and borrow from commercial financial markets. There is a hierarchy of institutions despite the fact that there has been no official binary divide since 1992, when polytechnics were given the opportunity to become universities. The distinction between "pre-" and "post-1992 universities" is still common parlance over 20 years later. This hierarchy is largely based on reputation and reinforced by national league tables and world rankings. At the "top" are the large research-intensive universities with medical schools and "big science", 24 of which make up the Russell Group (15% of the total of 162 higher education institutions in the UK).

Research Assessment and Selectivity in Funding

Selectivity in funding research in the UK has played a key role in maintaining the status quo, with declining total funding being gradually concentrated in fewer academic departments and universities. Research is funded largely through the dual support system, consisting of (1) a periodic assessment of research quality (the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), now re-titled the Research Excellence

Framework or REF) and allocation from the funding councils (QR), and (2) competitive funding of research proposals submitted to the seven research councils. In the REF, selected research outputs from each academic department are assessed on a four-point scale: world-leading, internationally excellent, recognized internationally, and recognized nationally. In the 2014 REF, 68% of world-leading research was undertaken by the Russell Group universities. In 2012/13, these 24 universities accounted for:

74% (£3.5 billion) of UK universities' research grant and contract income

75% (over £1.1 billion) of total income from the research councils

68% (around £1.3 billion) of the total quality-related research funding (QR) allocated by the funding councils

82% (over £0.8 billion) of funding for research from UK charities

60% (over 13,000) of all doctorates awarded in the UK

Tuition Fees and Marketization

In England, growing marketization is being combined with greater state regulation of this "quasi-market", for example, of full-time undergraduate fees, student numbers (until 2015), quality and standards and student complaints. "Consumerist technologies" are increasingly being used to foster greater competition between institutions, and between departments within institutions. This is achieved through the publication of performance indicators, the results of surveys of students and recent graduates, and the collection and presentation on comparison web sites of information aimed at prospective students, including by commercial providers, often presented in the form of league tables. Key components of the domestic league tables produced by several national newspapers are the results of surveys of

students in their final year (the National Student Survey, or NSS) and of graduates six months after they graduated (the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education – or DLHE – survey).

The 2010-15 Coalition Government largely substituted "block grant" funding for full-time undergraduate teaching by tuition fees backed by loans to students from public funds in England. It also increased competition for universities from further education colleges and private institutions. This shift of the majority of cost of full-time undergraduate higher education to students/graduates, together with research selectivity is in danger of creating a new binary divide between large research-intensive universities and other institutions dependent on tuition fee income for survival.

Internationalization

The dominant form of internationalization in the UK is the recruitment of international students, and the global rankings provide high visibility for a significant proportion of UK universities. In 2013, 21.1% (435,230) of (the total of 2.1m) students were from outside the UK, including 14.7% of the total (302,680) from beyond the European Union (who are usually termed 'international students', because EU students have to be treated the same as UK students). The majority (53%) of these "international students" were studying at postgraduate level, and particularly on taught masters programs (43%). The largest group of non-UK students (43.3%) came from Asia, followed by the rest of the European Union (30.5%), Africa (8.1%) and North America (6.2%). The following chart shows the growth during the ten years to 2012 in the numbers of – and the income to institutions from – international students.

Figure 1: Institutional income from non-EU domiciled students 2002/03 to 2011/12 and non-EU domiciled student numbers

Institutional income from non-EU domiciled students 2002-03 to 2011-12 and non-EU domiciled student numbers

Source: HESA Finance (multiple years)

Finance

15
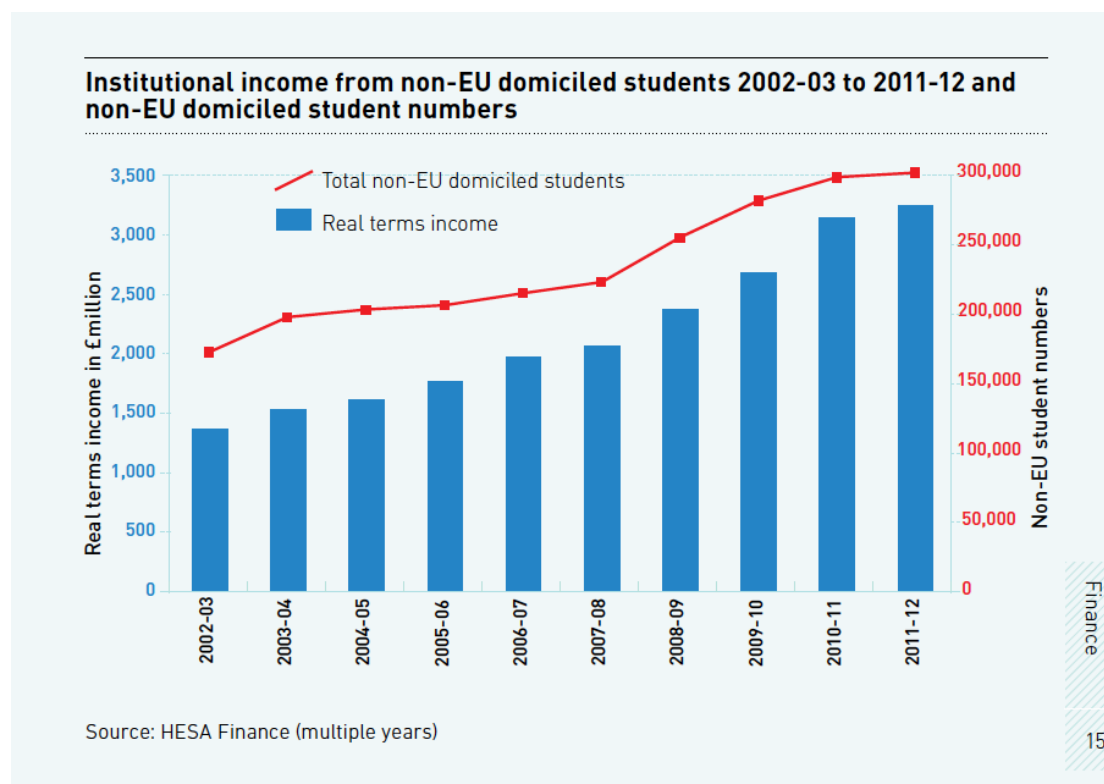
Source: HESA, 2003-13

Universities Responding to the Rise of the World Rankings

Large research-intensive universities in the UK (the Russell Group) benefit from the Anglo-American model of a selective global research university favored by global rankings, such as the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU), *QS* and the *Times Higher Education* (THE) rankings. Smaller and less research-intensive universities (including other institutions that were universities before the end of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics in 1992) struggle to appear in the top quartiles of these rankings because they do not attract the levels of research funding, the quality of faculty and students, and the historically-based reputation and brand recognition enjoyed by the Russell Group universities. The

publication of the first edition of *U-Multirank* tool in 2014 prompted much criticism from the UK because it used indicators that did not favor the Anglo-American model as much as other global rankings (Holmes, 2014).

The government does not actively promote, explicitly refer to, or directly employ university rankings in policy-making, although much of the data gathered and the performance indicators published by the national funding bodies are used in the compilation of national league tables and world rankings. Nevertheless, the reputational hierarchy of HEIs that is reflected in these rankings is "hard-wired" into thinking about higher education in the UK, in particular the distinction between "pre-'92" universities and other HEIs and, within the former, the "elite" (i.e. top half) of the Russell Group. The latter are particularly influential in policy-making.

Our original report for HEFCE (Locke et al., 2008) found that HEIs, despite their criticisms and protests, were the main users of rankings data, for example, in their management information, strategic planning, and marketing activities. Some adopted strategic aims to raise their positions in particular league tables. Governing bodies, and especially lay governors, were particularly affected by league tables because they appear to simplify what can be quite complex operations, and are familiar from other realms, such as business and sport. Particular indicators – especially the NSS results, graduate destinations and salaries, and entry requirements – can acquire greater significance because of their adoption by league table compilers and the increased visibility this gives them.

Methodology

The investigation discussed in this chapter was based on a single university case study that focused on the role that rankings played in the process of its search

for greater recognition worldwide. In the research reported in this book, the criteria for selecting the case study universities were that they were important and recognizable players in their respective countries but were not yet widely visible and significant from an international perspective. The university selected for the UK or, rather, English case study was formerly a 1994 Group member, just outside the "top 200" universities in the world rankings, under new leadership, and showing signs of wanting to become a "global player".

Initially, the intention was to provide anonymity to the University in the published account, although this would have distinguished it from the other national case studies in this collection. This had been the approach in the original study, in order to maximize authenticity and minimize public relations issues. However, during the investigation, the importance to the branding of the institution of being in the top one per cent of universities in the world became apparent. This was such a significant part of the way the University of Reading saw itself, and was referred to so frequently by all participants in the study, that to ignore or disguise it in some way would have amounted to misrepresentation. Yet, to report this accurately, which was desirable, would have immediately signaled the identity of the case study institution as Reading.

Empirical data for the case study consisted of interviews with key university managers and academics, analysis of additional documentation, and observational evidence. The fieldwork was carried out in early November 2014. Nine interviews were held with 15 people, using a similar approach and interview schedule to the original study (Locke et al., 2008). Interviewees have deliberately not been identified nor have comments or quotes been attributed to any individuals. In that sense, the *individual* anonymity of those who kindly participated in the research has been

maintained. Inevitably, in the interviews with participants, discussions ranged between the world rankings, the national (UK) league tables and other evaluation exercises in the UK, such as the NSS, the DLHE survey, and the RAE/REF. To some degree, it was difficult to separate the influences of these phenomena, especially as the results of the NSS, DLHE and RAE are included in most of the national league tables.

Documentary analysis included the relevant University strategies, internal analyses of a range of rankings and the University's position in these produced by the Planning and Strategy Office, and marketing material. Observation was made of the main campus, including the publicity material adorning the University's buildings and walkways.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for the Analysis

In my earlier chapter and article (Locke, 2011; 2014), I argued that it was important to understand the influence of rankings in the UK in the context of the increasing marketization of higher education in that country. It was the phenomena of growing privatization and intensifying competition, I claimed, that had transformed rankings from "easy guides" to the strengths and weaknesses of individual universities into powerful tools for monitoring and influencing their organizational behavior and that of their staff and students. I maintained that these broader and more significant forces had made it almost impossible for universities to simply ignore rankings and virtually inevitable that they would have to accommodate them in some way.

Through analyses of the case studies and survey responses, I explored the forms in which this accommodation could take and, specifically, the ways in which

the rationales and processes – the logic – of ranking systems were being internalized and, ultimately, institutionalized by individual universities in different ranking positions and at different stages of accommodation. By this means, I aimed to explore how this logic became embedded in organizational structures and procedures and established as the norm. I also hoped to shed light on the variable responses of different types of institution, the different parts within an institution and, in particular, the dynamics between central university management and the various academic and support units. Finally, I aimed to show how these responses unfolded over time, for example, from initial skepticism and resistance to reluctant acceptance and, ultimately, active engagement with rankings systems. These phenomena could only be explored empirically, I argued, and this was (and still is) largely missing from the literature on rankings.

However, I also wanted to provide a theoretical and conceptual framework to underpin the analysis. Drawing on Espeland and Sauder's (2007, see also Sauder & Espeland, 2009) concept of *reactivity*, and the two mechanisms that induce this – "the self-fulfilling prophecy" and "commensuration" – I re-analysed the evidence gathered for the HEFCE project, in particular the case studies. This revealed six main ways in which different types of higher education institution and distinct levels and parts of institutions are affected by, react to, and use rankings in various ways. These were:

1. **Strategic positioning and decision-making:** The use of rankings in the strategic positioning of institutions, in branding and promoting themselves and in making decisions about strategic goals;

2. **Redefining activities and altering perceptions:** How rankings can redefine activities as institutional personnel focus on the indicators and measures used in

rankings rather than the qualities they are designed to evaluate, privileging certain characteristics above others;

3. **Evolving responses:** How responses to rankings evolve, for example, from initial dissonance and the invoking of alternative evaluations, to attempts to understand and explain unexpected results, to efforts to produce desired ranking outcomes, and the exploitation of ranking successes in institutional promotion activities;

4. **Affective responses:** The influence of ranking results in the affective domain, including the impact on staff morale in institutions (and departments) ranked in different parts of the national tables, and anxiety about what other institutions are doing to improve their ranking positions;

5. **Self-management:** The use of rankings logics to lever internal change, for example, tightening reporting procedures, rendering academic units accountable, and promoting competition between departments; and

6. **Degrees of control – resisting, managing, exploiting and 'gaming' rankings:** Attempts to manage the influence of rankings, including negotiations with compilers and efforts to mitigate conflicts between ranking logics and the social missions of institutions.

These six categories were therefore developed largely in the national context in response to the UK league tables, although case study institutions were also asked about the world rankings. Only one of the original case studies was a large research-intensive university with a global reputation and a place near the top of the world rankings. The smaller research-intensive 1994 Group member was beginning to consider world rankings in 2007, but was not yet in a position to actively promote

itself in them. So, one aim of this current study was to investigate whether these six categories still held seven years later and in the context of the world rankings and a university seeking to become a global player, and whether new ways of responding would be observable.

The Case Study: The University of Reading

General Description

The University of Reading, founded in 1926, is a pre-1992 university, with its main campus 36 miles (58km) to the west of London. In 2014 it had over 17,000 students, including 37% from outside the UK, and nearly 4,000 employees (including 1,600 faculty). It received, on average, nearly seven applications for every place it offered. 70% of the University's 2011 graduates were in graduate level work or further study. In 2008, the University merged with the well-respected Henley Management College, which added a third campus. Research specialisms include climate and environmental sciences, health and food security, the latter founded on its history of research into agriculture and food. It began delivering courses in Malaysia in June 2012 and opened a campus there in 2015. It also has a smaller Business School campus in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Research and Publishing

Over 78% of the University's research was rated as being at least "internationally excellent" (i.e. 3* or 4* on a scale of 1* to 4*; 4* being "world-leading") in the 2014 UK REF. The University adopted a relatively inclusive strategy of submitting 83% of its eligible faculty for the REF, thus making it equal 19th in the 'research intensity index', although its average grade placed it equal 38th. In the *QS*

World University Rankings in 2014/15, the University scored 44.2 for citations per faculty, placing it 302nd in this indicator (202nd overall). In 2013/14, it was awarded over £34 million in external research grant income, of which 56% was from the research councils and charities. Its total research income during that period was over £50 million.

International Strategy

The University's International Strategy illustrates its desire to become a global university "in which teaching, research and enterprise are conceived, planned and delivered with explicit relevance to global needs and issues" (University of Reading, 2014b: 2). It seeks to

> Increase its contributions to sustainable global development and understanding; further enhance the depth, breadth and worldwide impact of its research; better equip its staff and students with the values, skills and experience for living and working in a globalised world; and increase the number and diversity of its students, coming from countries throughout the world. (*ibid: 2)*

The Strategy also includes a commitment to establishing and maintaining "high quality" partnerships with universities and organizations around the world. Partnerships include student exchanges, research collaborations, and the joint delivery of taught programs.

The University's Position in the Main Global Rankings Systems

The following tables show the positions of the University of Reading in the most influential world rankings and UK national league tables in each of the last five

years.

Table 1: World Rankings, University of Reading (last five years)

Ranking	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World University Rankings	185	215	215	213	=202
Times Higher Education World University Rankings		164	176	194	201-225 From calculations made by the University's Planning and Strategy Office: 219
Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities	201-300	201-300	201-300	301-400	301-400
Financial Times Executive Education (open) Rankings (Henley Business School)	33	42	39	40	31

Source: published world rankings

Table 2: UK League Tables

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Complete University Guide	35	40	34	32	37
Guardian University Guide	41	45	32	25	38 (30 in 2015)
Times Good University Guide		35	33	24	35
Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey	=36	12	33	33	33

Source: published national league tables

The changes in the University's positions in most of the rankings do not highlight any particular trajectory, except in the world ranking that is regarded as most important within the institution, and in the UK more widely, the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings. This has seen a steady decline in ranking position during the last few years, until the University dropped out of the top 200 in 2014. As the following narratives reveal, this may prove to be symbolic and raise issues about the kind of institution it sees itself as, and wishes to be.

University Narratives in the Context of Rankings

The head of the institution, the Vice-Chancellor, took up his position in January 2012, less than three years before this study was undertaken. During that period, several new members had joined the senior management team of the University in key roles, including from Russell Group universities that were placed higher than Reading in the rankings, such as the Universities of Exeter and Nottingham. There had also been personnel change among the institution's professional services. According to several interviewees, new people had brought new ideas and thinking to the University which was becoming more open to change after a period of relative stasis. In advance of the REF in 2014, a major investment was made in 50 academic posts to strengthen the University's key research areas. Increases in student applications to the University had been achieved in response to the new tuition fees system in England. The University had prided itself on being among the top 200 according to the *Times Higher* world ranking and had translated this into being in the top one per cent of universities in the world.

The University's new *Vision, Ambition and Strategy* leading up to its centenary year described a new "mind-set" that is "optimistic, forward-looking and open to new possibilities" (University of Reading, 2014a). It talked of growth, in both size and "global reach and presence". Its ambition was "to be counted among the very best universities in the UK and internationally". The Vice-Chancellor further indicated the potential for UK higher education – not just Reading – to extend existing partnerships with African countries in a two-way exchange of students. In particular, the strong historical ties with Britain could enable South African students to consider going to UK universities to supplement their in-country education, before returning to lead

change (Bell, 2014). This theme was taken up by another senior manager, who felt it was important to have a capacity development element to the University's international strategy.

Underpinning the University's strategy were four principles: "academic excellence", "global engagement", "financial strength" and "thriving community". On the second of these, 'global engagement', the strategy document elaborated: "We will continue to ensure that we are recognised and experienced as an international institution in terms of our student and staff community, and global in the locations and reach of our activities and impact" (University of Reading, 2014a, p. 25).

At the time of this study, the University was still developing the measures it wished to use to determine its success in achieving the strategy. In 'managing ourselves more effectively', the University sought to "redesign and align processes for setting, supporting and reviewing strategic priorities at local and institutional levels, and translating these into our academic and business planning" (University of Reading, 2014a, p. 20). Significantly, though, the strategy already included references to ranking position and seeking to embed the University strongly in the top 25 UK universities, at the same time as remaining in the top one per cent of institutions worldwide.

All interviewees were clear that the University strategy had not been determined by such measures and significant decisions were not driven by the rankings. However, senior managers were mindful of them:

We've always seen ourselves as a global university, and perhaps we've been articulating more of that recently. But I don't think that's driven by league tables *per se*. We've just felt, we are a global university [and] we should be making sure that is known. I don't think we have made (or will make)

decisions about academic structures based on international league tables. On some issues, like marketing, we look at KPIs including international tables (or tables within the tables). That has undoubtedly been influenced by the rankings. But in terms of the decisions of substance that the University has taken (…) I think tangentially we might have thought, 'oh well, that will improve our world rankings', but it has not been the major influence or driver in this area.

Nevertheless, one senior manager acknowledged that "almost everything we do is now influenced by something about league tables in one way or another". In particular, there was a shared concern for the University to return to the top 200 in at least one of the world rankings, and to the top 30 in the national tables. This interviewee continued: "I think the trick is trying to link it [the University's strategy with the rankings] without undermining your own values as an institution, which is quite a challenging thing to do." Another, more junior manager elaborated this moral dimension: "We have a strong sense of what's right. We now realise we need to be more competitive. But how do we make sure we make ethical decisions?".

Several of the interviewees suggested there was a debate among senior staff about the use of rankings and their inclusion in the key performance indicators (KPIs) being developed in the wake of the new strategy. One middle manager explained:

(…) we were trying to come up with headline KPIs that would deliver the University's strategy, and you can have a strategy that says we're going to have league table performance and nothing else and you do everything you need to do in order to achieve that and nothing else. Well, if that's your strategy, that's fine, but the University had just produced a very different sort

of strategy, saying it was going to do this, this and this. So, in our minds, if you then set league tables up as the target, you could very easily not be delivering the things you'd said you were going to deliver, or not paying enough attention to the areas that would actually deliver the strategy, and clearly there's a huge overlap between the two. We thought that was a distinction worth making, but not everybody agreed.

For some, there was a belief that doing 'the right things' would have the desired effect on rankings – although with more reference to the UK league tables than the world rankings. For another interviewee, analysis of the rankings:

Highlights that we're not ranked highly for reputation in certain areas. So we probably need to know about that despite our misgivings about some of the data. The data must be telling us something – if the data are telling us that [for example] our citations are not as high as we thought, then we need to think about why that might be. That might be because we're not collaborating enough internationally, or we're not marketing our research in an effective manner that's communicated more globally. That might be of interest regardless of chasing league tables, so it's food for thought. If it's prompting those questions and getting us to think about how we behave as an institution, then it must be a good thing.

Several interviewees referred to the University as having been "a well-kept secret" before the new leadership and strategy, with a history of being insular, if not complacent, about its success and reputation. One new arrival suggested that being in the top 200 continuously had encouraged the University to be complacent, but that dropping out had been helpful in highlighting the need to evolve. In particular, it was felt that Reading was not as well known internationally as it should be, so that it lost

out in the academic surveys of reputation in the *Times Higher Education* and *QS* rankings. Situated in a large town outside London, it was thought to be less visible than city-based universities, for example, in well-known places such as Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. However, there was an acknowledgement that the institution was beginning to articulate itself more clearly and its rhetoric now matched its ambitions. The Marketing and Communications function had been significantly boosted, with a new Director, four senior managers, and a substantial increase in the total numbers employed in this function.

The area where the world rankings were having most impact was on the University's internationalization strategy (University of Reading, 2014b:

It's positive that the University's more concerned with world rankings in looking out. I have doubts about the rankings themselves, but in terms of what it makes you think about, it isn't just a UK market, we actually need to think about a global market for all sorts of aspects of our activity, and particularly if we're going to deliver our new strategy.

This represented a substantial shift in thinking:

It fits with being a little more ambitious as an institution than we've been in the past and that will take some doing. It's a cultural shift…One of the things I've written down is outward mobility [i.e. students going abroad or studying a language] [which] we're not good [at]. Part of the shift needs to be that there is a world out there that we can step into, not just international students that we can bring here. That's a shift that needs to happen.

This shift was initially being brought about by the influence of the world rankings on international students, universities, and their governments "Certainly, internationally, they are viewed with a degree of importance that we haven't in the

UK, but as we become more internationally focused our views are aligning more to those. And very strong universities overseas talk about them."

However, the rankings were not only regarded as key to prospective students and their sponsors and potential partners. One interviewee noted that applicants for professional posts also appeared to be influenced by ranking position, perhaps more so than academic staff recruits, who referred more to individual and departmental academic reputation and how far this would support their research in the context of the discipline.

In contrast, the world rankings were thought to have little or no impact on domestic student recruitment. Furthermore, the University did not benchmark itself with universities outside the UK, even on its attractiveness to international students. Most interviewees identified the *Times Higher Education* as the most influential ranking because it is associated with a UK publication and is familiar throughout the domestic market. Also, the University had tended to be placed more highly in this than the *QS* or *ARWU* rankings. So, for this, and similar mid-ranking universities, what really counted was how they compared with their peer universities in the UK, rather than beyond (except when it came to partnerships), because "that's where the big competition is at the moment". In effect, for these universities, the world rankings provided another source for a domestic "mini-league table" of those UK institutions within the top two or three hundred positions. However, these versions of the UK standings were noted for showing key differences from the "home grown" tables. In particular, due to the greater weighting given to large-scale research and to reputation surveys in the world rankings, the big city, larger research-intensive universities tended to be better ranked than those universities in smaller conurbations, compared with the domestic-only versions.

Key to the University's branding was being in the top one per cent of universities in the world, i.e. in the top 200 universities in the *Times Higher Education* or *QS* rankings out of a total of 20,000-plus higher education institutions worldwide. This message was very prominent on the University's web site, in promotional literature and in signage throughout its campuses. However, recently dropping out of the top 200 in the *Times Higher Education* ranking, having been in this top category consistently since 2010, had prompted some questions around "What this says about the University", not least from lay members of the University Council. These concerns needed to be carefully managed by the University Executive Board, who had pointed out to Council that other UK universities' ranking positions had also suffered, that much of the drop could be accounted for by citations (which could be addressed) and that the University had actually risen year-on-year in the *QS* ranking (although it was still just outside the top 200). According to one senior manager:

> In spite of some misgivings about the rankings there's only so far you can take that argument, to say they can't be completely misrepresenting our position, if we accept [for example] that citations are a reasonable proxy for research excellence and impact, then we have to accept that's reflected in the world rankings, then it should prompt some questioning of our performance. Beyond just doing better research.

These narratives, official as well as personal and informal, suggest a thoughtful and considered approach to the growing influence of domestic and world rankings – and of performance indicators more generally. The study was undertaken at a particular moment in the University's development, for example: when it had set the strategic goal of remaining in the "top one per cent" of universities world wide, but had just dropped out of the *Times Higher Education's* top 200; when it had

recently produced a bold and impressive new *Vision, Ambition and Strategy* but not yet determined the indicators by which it would measure its success in achieving this; and when a number of new senior managers had joined the institution and were beginning to exert an influence over decision-making. More broadly, the results of the REF 2014 were eagerly anticipated and there was uncertainty over the impact of the imminent General Election on higher education policy in England, and on tuition fees and public funding, in particular. With so many developments and unresolved issues, both within and outside the University's control, and on such limited evidence, it would be unfair to speculate about their resolution or draw final conclusions. However, these narratives do raise the question that, if the University had remained in the top 200 of the *Times Higher* rankings, whether it might have been in a position to take less notice of the rankings, and, conversely, whether dropping out had raised the issue on the agenda and prompted the question about whether the University could afford to downplay them.

The Influence and Use of Rankings in the University

This section explores the evidence of the specific influence and use of rankings in the University and the individual indicators associated with these. It draws on the six main ways in which institutions were affected by, reacted to and utilised rankings identified in previous studies (Locke, 2011; 2014), but begins to elaborate how the influence of world rankings for this type of university may differ from that of the domestic league tables.

Strategic Positioning and Decision-Making

Although the University had set a strategic goal of positioning the institution within the world rankings, it had afforded itself some flexibility in opting for the top

one per cent rather than the top 200 universities worldwide. The assumption was that no one knows the total number of universities in the world so, even if the University is just outside the top 200, it can still legitimately use the top one per cent tag. Senior managers were aware of the dangers of being driven off course by focusing too much on the rankings, and of the challenges of remaining true to the values of the University while recognizing the reality of their influence on others' perceptions of the institution. Although it was not part of this study, the Business School was seen to operate with a different set of rankings and, perhaps, with greater influence on decision-making. Nevertheless, some interviewees suggested a direct link with key decisions in the past, such as the decision to establish a graduate school, which was prompted by the relatively low proportion of postgraduate research students in the institution at the time. The arrival of new members of the senior management team from other universities was also seen to be shifting the balance, towards a greater understanding and awareness of rankings.

As with most other higher education institutions, the University conducted analyses of the domestic league tables and world rankings as they were published. For the latter, those indicators were identified in which the University's ranking and/or scores had significantly risen or fallen compared with previous years, often disaggregated by subject. The newly expanded Planning and Strategy Office prepared these and the University Executive Board, Senate and Council periodically reflected on them. Press releases were produced on many of these rankings, focusing on the good news stories, and full analyses were circulated internally. If common weaknesses were identified across a number of rankings, this might lead to a strand of work to address the perceived causes. The range of rankings considered had broadened beyond the *Times Higher Education* and *QS* rankings, to include

those from Leiden University, National Taiwan University, and the SCImago Research Group, for example. More interest in these analyses was being shown by different parts of the University.

Interviewees acknowledged being highly selective in using the rankings for presentational purposes, when negotiating partnerships, for example. This included disaggregating subject rankings and isolating particular indicators to present the best picture of the University. For example, the Leiden ranking had shown a strong performance in Biological Sciences, although the University as a whole was not so well placed. The University had sought partnerships with highly ranked universities or schools (e.g. Law Schools) for prestige purposes. However, it had also developed collaborations with lower ranked institutions, if this fitted with its strategy, for working with emerging countries, for example. Among European partners, rankings were thought to be less important. However, for research collaborations in the UK, one interviewee felt that major partners would need to be in the top 20 or 30 positions in the domestic league tables in order to maximize the chances of success.

Redefining Activities and Altering Perceptions

For several interviewees, rankings were important in "focusing the mind" and identifying where the University's or department's weaknesses were. They offered an independent, external source of information for benchmarking purposes.

We've tried to ensure that communications are balanced and measured and say 'they don't give you the whole picture', you have to be very careful that you don't overstate the days you get it right because the days that go against you – you can't have it both ways. You have to say 'they're a fact of life, we'd rather be in a higher position than we are, but we're not going to distort

reality'. I think we've avoided distorting reality just to meet the league tables. I think we're all pretty cautious.

Even without these external reference points, the University would be benchmarking itself with other universities it perceived as comparable. However, external, independent indicators had persuaded the University and individual departments to change their comparator groups to encompass those that were regularly five or 10 places above the University, especially in the domestic league tables or the rankings of UK universities within the world rankings. Some of the new comparator institutions had dislodged more traditional "peers" based on mission group, outdated notions of institutional type, and historical assumptions that were no longer applicable.

However, the increasingly mechanistic use of the world rankings by governments, sponsorship bodies, recruitment agents, and even prospective (mainly postgraduate) students and their families, as a convenient source of comparison was challenging the University's more subtle response. For example, the Kazakhstan Bolashak scholarship program and the Mexican Government had both queried the University's ranking and the sponsorship of students to study there. In addition, it was recognized that the national league tables might be used by those focusing on studying in the UK as a simple and easily accessible guide. The world rankings were also increasingly important for partnerships with universities and governments overseas. The Chinese Ministry of Education had decided to restrict international partnerships with its own universities to those in the top 100. So, the impact of world rankings was not just a question of reputation, there were material business consequences flowing from them.

There were similar concerns expressed by interviewees about the increasing use of research metrics, especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Although the REF had to some degree acted as a counterbalance to the world rankings, focusing more on peer reviewed quality than quantity, there were proposals to increase the weighting given to metrics and reduce that for peer review in the next version of this cyclical assessment exercise (HEFCE, 2014a). Several interviewees noted that citations and highly cited indices had become increasingly influential, and were concerned with the University's relatively poor representation in these. So, while senior managers were keen not to be seen to distort reality, they were also aware that their reality might be being distorted for them by external parties.

Evolving Responses

Interviewees referred to there having previously been "a learned helplessness" about league tables because it seemed impossible to influence the way they are constructed or do anything that would change the results, especially at departmental level.

> There has been [a learned helplessness], but we're moving away from that and thinking about how to influence them positively (…) we need to keep bringing in the very best people – that is absolutely critical to achieve good results in future league tables. In addition, it's not just citations but using the media more, going on radio and TV, [and being reported in] newspapers. There has been a step change in the last couple of years. In our school, there have been particular members of staff that have been really active. Getting that media exposure is important to the academic reputation survey [in the *THE* ranking].

Those who had recently arrived from other universities that were more rankings-focused described the University as being "behind the learning curve" but catching up, not just in responding to league tables, but in the recording and use of management information more generally.

The degree and pace of change since the new leadership had arrived and the University *Strategy* had been published has been described in the previous sections of this chapter, and was clearly continuing. It will not be possible to judge the significance and lasting impact of this for some time. In particular, it was not feasible to assess in a snap-shot study how widespread the changes were and whether they were being broadly adopted. As in any research-intensive university, there were limitations to "top-down" approaches to institutional management. As one interviewee described it, "You appoint free-thinking individuals and then you try to manage them. It's bizarre." A key issue will be how the University manages perceptions around dropping out of the top 200 in the *Times Higher Education* ranking, and the symbolic impact of this.

Affective Responses

Being in the top one per cent of universities in the world was described by some interviewees as immediately understandable and easy to grasp – even more so than the top 200 tag. It had had a strong positive effect on morale and generated satisfaction throughout the University, becoming "an index of pride", according to one academic interviewed. For others, it had raised confidence and the level of ambition within the institution.

It gave us something to latch on to, to identify something important about the University. Once we identified that we were part of the top one per cent, then it was a very strong message to promote inside the University, as well as

outside. It's very important for staff morale. Higher education is becoming harder and, for many people, they entered with different expectations of what they were going to be doing.

The impact on morale and confidence was felt by Heads of School, who began to feel they could strategically affect the rankings:

But it needs us to do things systematically across the whole institution. You need a really good understanding of numbers to go into strategic level plans. Alongside general marketing and a buzz that's been created, it seems possible to raise the University back into the top 150 and why not higher?

Self-Management

Several interviewees mentioned the increasing volume, availability and use of management information in the University, some of which was explicitly about rankings and some of it related to them. There was a data and management information project, a stronger appetite for dashboards, and a desire to put greater capacity in place. "Just in the last year, there is more understanding of the value of having more data, easier access to data, reporting on more things." One senior manager talked of "a more intelligence-led approach" to decision-making, implying more than simply an "information-led" or "data-led" activity. Another emphasized the key role of individuals (in particular, academics) in prompting these developments, whereas in the past, academics had not been as sophisticated about the use of data as they might have been.

Much of these data were being used for benchmarking purposes, disaggregated by subject, by indicator, or both. Each school now received a pack of information about its student market, including its domestic and world rankings disaggregated by discipline and comparisons with benchmark institutions so that it

could understand better what its competitors were doing. Notably, the peer group membership had shifted from being members of the Russell Group to those that were "Russell Group-like", including former members of the 1994 Group, and even beyond this to include some successful former polytechnics.

Again, the Head of School was seen by several interviewees as a key level or position in the development of these new operating models, with their greater accountability and increased use of KPIs. Rankings were seen as an important focus for Heads, as a real motivator, a target, and a tool for benchmarking purposes. Although this was more often mentioned in relation to the domestic league tables and the UK RAE/REF and student/graduate surveys, reference was also made to how the *QS* ranking helped to identify comparable HEIs, in terms of their size, research intensity and subject mix.

Degrees of Control – Resisting, Managing, Exploiting and "Gaming" Rankings

Most participants in this study adopted a very pragmatic approach to rankings: "They're a fact of life that you've got to work with. This University cannot influence the methodology very much." However, most interviewees acknowledged it was a judgment call about how far to allow them to influence decision-making: "they clearly do have a behavioural effect", one interviewee observed, particularly in relation to the NSS. "Recognising they're a fact of life and they are important. As a crude measure by themselves, [they] shouldn't dictate our strategy but, recognising where it's helpful to do so, aligning activity or playing the game in other areas."

As in most higher education institutions, the University had looked at the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data it submitted to national bodies. It included data governance and data quality as part of its strategic themes and, as

already mentioned, a new Planning and Strategy Office had been established to support this activity.

It's made the University think about whether it's doing all it can to make sure that its performance is reflected accurately in league tables, in what it perceives its position globally. If we see other institutions (who we would consider ourselves our equal) much higher [in the rankings], it's made us question some of the aspects of the [National Student] survey.

As in most UK HEIs, efforts had been made to improve the NSS response rate (although not the nature of the responses), albeit to limited effect. Related to this, was a recognition of the growing importance of "the student experience", in the context of increasing competition in the domestic student market. Recent refurbishments of the Library and of student accommodation were mentioned by several interviewees as direct responses to this. One senior manager mentioned other capital investments, such as a new sports pavilion, the Student Union, and a project to "digitise the student journey" from outreach activities through application, induction and study support, and on to careers education, graduation, and beyond. Another common theme was improvements in the timeliness of feedback on students' assessed work, which had been a particular weakness in the NSS results.

Several years before the study, the University had responded to its graduate employment record, as highlighted by the DLHE survey. Analysis had been undertaken of employment rates by subject in relation to the entry qualifications of the students. As a result, it had restructured the careers service, introduced placements and career planning, and embedded these in the curriculum.

In the area of research, as already mentioned, the University had invested in particular disciplines, by recruiting 50 new academics, hoping (among other things)

this would have a beneficial impact on its REF results. Along with many UK universities, it had been more selective in its REF submission compared with the previous exercise in 2008, submitting 590 (83% of) academics out of a possible 709 eligible for submission (HEFCE, 2014b, THE, 2014). In 2012/13 it had 600 academics (i.e. 49%, out of 1,235 who taught) on teaching-only contracts (HESA, 2014) and thus not eligible for submission – a far higher proportion than most UK universities. The University's relatively poor showing in the rankings on citations was being addressed by a task group, chaired by the PVC Research and Innovation. It was also tackling its academic reputation as represented in the various surveys included in the world rankings. Academics from the School interviewed had developed a program of international Academic Visitors and conferences, in order to raise its profile globally.

Several interviewees referred to the need to manage perceptions of changes in the University's rankings positions among members of University Committees. It was felt that a degree of "intervention and intelligence packaging" was required in order to put the rankings into perspective. One senior manager described well how the league tables and rankings could pull university management in different directions if it allowed them to:

The dilemma is that universities have got to deliver on so many different fronts these days. Different league tables will prioritise different areas. I looked at that in a presentation recently (…) looking at the global and the domestic league tables and what emphasis they place on your research standing, and it was quite variable. Then, of course, you've got the REF, which is just about research, and the NSS which is just about the students (…) And, inevitably, there are tensions within a university [about] where do you invest in? If you've

got £5m to spend, do you build a swimming pool? Which would be nice, [and would] enhance the Sports Centre. Do you improve some of your teaching facilities, by putting more lecture capture all over the place? Or do you invest in some research area? Because they'd all score differently in different league tables.

Discussion

Although this investigation focused on a single institutional case study at a particular moment in time, it provided rich evidence of the reverberations of rankings and related phenomena around strategic thinking and decision-making in a smaller research-intensive university with global aspirations in the increasingly marketized higher education operating environment in England. It underlined the dilemmas and difficulties of setting strategic goals that aim to position a university in a particular segment of the rankings. Using rankings as a strategic goal creates "a hostage to fortune", especially when this proves difficult to achieve or sustain. One dilemma is that, in addition to the reputational pressures that were already evident at the time of the original study in 2007, there are now material factors associated with rankings performance which impact on a university's bottom-line – its income – and its aspirations. As potential international students (and their sponsors), collaborators and partners increasingly use ranking position as a selection criterion, those institutions just outside the upper echelons are beginning to lose out in the global competition stakes. One danger is that, if the goal cannot be achieved or sustained, this may provoke – and even distort – discussions about strategy. There may also be a message about managing expectations and perceptions. To summarize one of

the interviewees, if the rankings really are suspect, then this is equally true when they show the university in a good, as in a bad, light.

The theoretical and conceptual approach set out in the early part of this chapter continued to provide an effective framework for the analysis of the narratives and accounts of the participants, documentary evidence and observations included in this investigation. There were examples of the University responding to, engaging with, and using rankings in each of the six ways originally identified. As the rankings had evolved and proliferated, it was clear that the University was taking an increasingly informed and proactive approach to them. Whether this was identifying citations or academic reputation as priority areas for action or becoming more sophisticated in benchmarking performance with other universities ranked similarly, there was a more "knowing" approach than most of the case study institutions in the original study. However, further investigation would be necessary to determine the extent to which this was reproduced throughout the institution or was largely concentrated among senior management.

Alongside these insights, it was surprising that some fundamental contradictions between rankings and University mission that had been highlighted in the previous research study (Locke et al., 2008) did not emerge strongly in this investigation. For example, in the earlier study, the domestic league tables' inclusion of students' entry qualifications had mitigated against the recruitment of those from disadvantaged groups who lacked the highest school qualifications, as mid-ranking universities had sought to improve the quality of their intake. However, in this case study, the top one per cent tag was reported to have helped to attract applications from students from such backgrounds away from Russell Group universities and to the University, because it was clearly "one of the best" even if it was not in this select

group. However, a new contradiction seemed to be emerging in the area of research activity, where funding policies were steering researchers towards solving real-world problems through multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches, while the rankings were still preoccupied with traditional disciplinary boundaries. As suggested by one interviewee, this might be because the rankings were primarily aimed at prospective students for whom the curriculum was still primarily structured by historical categories of knowledge.

Conclusions

The University of Reading has been an international university for much of its history – in that it has recruited international students to its UK campus – and now has aspirations to be a *global* university with its new off shore campus and ambitious international strategy. As one of the interviewees said, "There is a world out there that we can step into". However, some mid-ranking UK universities are beginning to slip in the world rankings as institutions from emerging systems supplant them – especially where governments are investing large amounts of public money in a small number of universities. In the UK, increasing research selectivity (through the REF/QR and research council funding) is also creating a '"super-elite" group of large research-intensive universities at the expense of the "squeezed middle". As one interviewee put it:

> I suppose, in the context of the international tables, what I wonder is whether what's going on is these other universities coming through, whether there's just sort of an inexorable tide that's going to wash away – out of the top 200 – a bunch of UK and, indeed, US institutions that thought that "We've got our place in the top 200". It's a moot point whether we'll get back in.

No doubt, national governments and higher education ministers are keen to have their best universities in the top echelons of the world rankings. It is interesting to speculate, if some of the highest ranked UK universities started to drop out of the top ten – or even the top 50 – whether and how the governments of the UK might react. Indeed, this possibility may already be influencing research funding policy. However, the preoccupation with the global rankings may be greater just below the super-elite. As the same interviewee said:

> Maybe it's at the level of institutions outside the super-super-elite [where] we're much more obsessed about it. At the national level, I'm not sure. And actually, if you're thinking about the standing of UK HE and making the case, you're unlikely to cite the global rankings, you're much more likely to cite 'What's our percentage share of the global research budget?', 'Where do we stand on the citations index?', 'How many Nobel Prize winners we have relative to our size?' – those seem to be much more interesting (…) much more important than a bunch of league tables that come and go.

Furthermore, a truly global university strategy would seek to support the development of other nations' higher education systems and the individual institutions they comprise. Another interviewee summarized the paradox – and the dilemma – neatly:

> I think the Brits have got to understand that their dominance in the top 100, 200, or 500 will slip, as the UK system develops internationally. Because part of the UK's success internationally is helping the development and success of systems overseas as well.

Whether you are a world class university (WCU) or not, perhaps a truly global university is more concerned with developing world class higher education systems (WCS) (Hazelkorn, 2011).

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