

League tables: love them or loathe them.

by Peter Reader

Love them or loathe them, league tables are a fact of life in higher education. Of course, some still hope they will go away.

But as some years ago, John O’Leary, then editor of *The Higher* and currently editor of the *Times Good University Guide*, wrote “British tables, started in *The Times*, are now published in a half a dozen newspapers, proof there is a public appetite for information and the public see them in a different way to universities”.

So they are here to stay; it’s as simple as that. Of course, some argue they are irrelevant. Take Eric Thomas, Vice-Chancellor of Bristol. As recently as November / December 2010, in *Case Currents* he wrote “It really is time we all grew up. In observing my daughter and her peer group apply to university, national league tables played no part whatsoever”. (Hardly the biggest sample – statistically reliable, Eric? And coming from the VC of a research university too!)

And at an OECD conference in Paris last September, the vice-chancellor of California State University described global rankings as “a disease”. Intriguingly he also disagreed top-ranked universities like Oxford and Cambridge were better than others. “They are different, they are no better”, he said. “All universities are good because they add value to what we do”.

This reminds me that in the days before UUK when, admittedly, there were fewer universities, the spokesperson for UUK’s predecessor, CVCP, told a meeting of university communicators that whichever university they named, she would be able to rank them in the top five for something. This probably still holds true.

But in the future, in a more marketised and higher price environment, the consensus is the use of league tables and, hence, their influence on decision-making will increase. This was reflected in an HEFCE Issue Paper in April 2008, *Counting what is measured or measuring what counts?* This summarised the impact of league tables as being on full-time, comprehensive undergraduate provision and on institutional reputation, with increasing usage, including internationally, and with major employers using them more than SMEs.

In the UK, the market leader has been *The Times* listing, but with it now behind Rupert Murdoch’s firewall, will this change? Maybe *The Guardian*’s university league tables will take over at number one in the league table of league tables by use?

Others report on league tables’ impact in international markets and the Knowledge Partnership’s David Roberts told the conference launching the HEFCE paper that independent schools and Asians are more likely to be influenced by league tables. More recently, a report in September 2010 in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, whilst acknowledging Canadian universities have an uneasy relationship with rankings, said “they also know that rankings play a role in recruiting foreign students and faculty”.

I'd argue we all need to understand better both how the various league tables work and the impact of each one, and how we can present our own university in the best possible way. Some areas can be influenced fairly directly, such as by the tariff scores of students admitted and the award of good degrees.

In the UK, the National Student Survey has an increasing influence. But league tables are moving away from using the single overall satisfaction score in their calculations. Their use of various one or two year averages of the separate questions add to complexity with, for example, some tables now giving student satisfaction a higher weighting than other elements.

But what of the future? A recent French government survey which ranked public institutions by graduate students' employment rates after graduation drew both praise and criticism. Thoughts must turn surely to some measure of a university's financial position – and how might fee levels be included and, possibly, be combined to show, well, purport to show, value for money?

Yes, and here I agree with Eric Thomas, of course, league tables are methodically rubbish. But, very simply, we have to live with them.