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Rising popularity of rankings

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internationalbriefs

Academic claims poor students are dumber

Bruce Charlton, a reader in evolutionary psychiatry at the UK's Newcastle University, stirred up a hornet's nest last week after comments which implied poor people are dumber than rich people and therefore policies to encourage working class students into elite institutions are a waste of time and effort. Charlton said the fact that a greater proportion of students from wealthier socio-economic groups were at elite universities was not a sign of "admissions prejudice but rather the result of simple meritocracy". In an article published in the *Times Higher Education*, Charlton said: "Evidence to support the allegation [that Oxbridge universities discriminate against poorer social groupings] of has never been presented. Nevertheless, the accusation has been used to fuel a populist 'class war' agenda. Yet in all this debate a simple and vital fact has been missed: higher social classes have a significantly higher average IQ than lower social classes." The article caused an outrage, with the National Union of Students saying the paper was "wrong-headed, irresponsible and insulting". Higher education minister Bill Rammell, the higher education minister, said the article reeked of the attitude that "people should know their place".

NZ-Aussie salary gap widens

Australian academics earn 44 per cent more than their New Zealand counterparts and the gap is growing, the chair of the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee said last week. Roger Field said the Australian budget had made the situation even more critical since there had been an injection of funds into universities. He said the difference in salaries between the two countries was of utmost importance given competition for properly qualified staff. Australian academics also benefited from benefits such as salary loadings, not available in New Zealand universities which only served to accentuate the salary difference.

India exam pressure leads to wave of student suicides

It's exam season in India – and it's also suicide season when students buckle under parental pressure to get high marks and into a top university for the chance of a high-paying job. On a single day in April, the *Times of India* reported two male students in New Delhi hanged themselves because of fears around their marks. A final year bachelor of commerce student hanged herself in Mumbai apparently because she was not prepared for her economics paper and did not want her family to feel ashamed. In 2006, the most recent year for which official figures are available, 5857 students – or 16 a day – killed themselves due to exam stress. Competition for places in the best schools is increasing with the cut-off average mark to pursue an undergraduate economics degree at Delhi University last year at 97.8 per cent. India's half dozen elite colleges, seven institutes of technology and six institutes of management take only 16,000 new enrolments each year. **AFP**

The rising popularity of

University rankings are creating a furore wherever or whenever they are published or mentioned. Politicians regularly refer to them as a measure of their nation's virility or aspirations, universities use them to help set or define targets mapping their performance against the various metrics, while academics use rankings to bolster their own professional reputation and status. Despite their relatively short lifespan and mounting criticism of the methodologies employed, rankings have become a permanent feature of higher education in a growing number of countries around the world. Today, over 33 countries have some form of ranking system, operated by, inter alia, government and accreditation agencies, higher education, research and commercial organisations, or the popular media. National rankings are being eclipsed by global rankings – the most prominent of which are the Times QS World University Ranking and the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). There may be over 17,000 higher education institutions worldwide, but rankings are driving an obsession with the world's top 100. And Australia is not immune.

Playing the rankings game

Mounting evidence, drawn from a 2006 international survey, and interviews during 2008 with (to date) academic leaders, and internal and external stakeholders in Germany and Australia, indicates that rankings are perceived as playing a critical role in enabling and facilitating universities to maintain and build reputation; that high-achieving students, and especially international and postgraduate students, use rankings to shortlist; and that external stakeholders use rankings to influence decisions about funding, sponsorship and recruitment or employment. Rankings consciousness is rising rapidly because benefits and advantages are perceived to flow from high ranking. Conversely, fear of falling and the negative publicity associated with it can be as great for highly ranked or ambitious universities as non-appearance can be for others.

As competition for good students accelerates in line with changing demographics and funding models, higher education leaders are especially concerned about the influence of rankings on student choice and recruitment. Domestic students have traditionally attended a local university, using the *Good University Guide* or local intelligence as appropriate, but times are changing, especially for high achievers, and for international and postgraduate students. Research from the US, UK, Germany and New Zealand indicates that rank is an important consideration for high-ability students, especially those for whom finance is not a problem. International students might know about Australia, but not where to go in Australia; 92 per cent of international students to the UK indicated

they used UK league tables, a trend reciprocated by some government scholarship schemes. Postgraduates might make more complex choices based on their field of specialisation and expertise of faculty, but the battle for talent has elevated national and institutional competition for PhDs to a new level. Australia's high reliance on international students has made some higher education leaders and administrators nervous. Thus, universities are responding – developing where they previously had none or refocusing their admissions and publicity activities into year-round professional offices offering attractive packages and impressive facilities.

Other evidence suggests that ranking consciousness is spreading beyond students, influencing employers, philanthropists, and industrial and academic partners. Over 40 per cent of survey respondents said that they considered an institution's rank prior to entering into discussions about collaboration, research, student exchanges, etc, while 57 per cent said rankings were influencing the willingness of others to partner with them. While we don't know enough about the role of public opinion, students said they learned which were the best universities from the media, which experts were interviewed on the television or radio and through film.

Not surprisingly, higher education leaders say they must take rankings into account because others do. Over 50 per cent of higher education leaders responding to the international survey say they are unhappy with their current rank. Accordingly, 93 per cent and 92 per cent, respectively, say they want to improve their national or international ranking: 70 per cent say they want to be in the top 10 per cent nationally, and 71 per cent want to be in the top 25 per cent internationally. In response, 56 per cent have established a formal internal mechanism for reviewing their position vis-à-vis the various rankings, while 63 per cent had taken strategic, organisational, managerial or academic action. Only 8 per cent said they had taken no action.

For the most part, rankings are helping to inform strategic thinking and planning. Many universities have undertaken a detailed, almost microscopic, mapping exercise using the metrics to inform institutional targets or action plans, resource allocation, reorganisation or merger of departments, professionalisation of decision-making processes and personnel, etc. Universities face big strategic choices: should we put resources into revising our curriculum or building up research, and if we focus on the former will we lose out because our competitors have focused on the latter? There is also mounting evidence – from web pages and strategic plans – of universities defining their ambitions in terms of a designated ranked position, albeit government ministers are equally drawn to this hostage to fortune. As part of the modernisation

rankings

Major international research is revealing some unforeseen consequences of the increasing obsession with rankings, says Ellen Hazelkorn.

agenda, rankings provide the evidence needed for change, effectively a rod for management's back.

University leaders may be reluctant to acknowledge the extent of the influence or their responses, but faculty perceive increased emphasis on academic performance and research outputs. Deregulated salaries, performance pay, attractive packages to woo HiCi researchers – and conversely, identification of underperformers – are fairly widespread. The emphasis is on headhunting mid-career scholars who, like high-achieving students, will be assets in the reputation race. Some have expressed concern that this focus will come at the expense of post docs, younger scholars and women. At one level it doesn't really matter if these actions are a direct response to rankings or to spiralling competition, the effect is the same.

Faculty morale is hugely affected by rankings. There is a great sense of pride when the university is doing well, but equally a feeling of dejection when the reverse is true – albeit one vice-chancellor

In this story

- 50 per cent of university leaders are unhappy with their current ranking
- Rankings may encourage governments to spend more on weaker institutions
- National pre-eminence is no longer enough; universities benchmark against international peers and forge consortia to help research, exchanges and recruitment.

commented that a poorer than expected ranking had stirred the faculty into fight-back mode. Any of these reactions can create serious HR issues forcing institutions to devote time to restoring their damaged feelings. Because faculty reputation is so bound up with their institution's ranking, they are not innocent victims. As one person acknowledged: we are 'unlikely to consider research partnerships with a lower-ranked university unless the person or team is exceptional'. Arguments over which rankings and which indicators are more reliable – eg, citations, peer review, HiCi, publications – are used as the most recent salvo in the battle to protect or enhance professional status.

Where to from here?

There is little disagreement that rankings are here to stay; even the more rankings the better. But what is the best way forward?

The current situation has taught us that rankings are neither ideologically nor value free. The choice of metrics, and the weightings attributed to those metrics, reflects the views, values and objectives of their producers and advocates. And because evidence suggests rankings do influence behaviour, the choice of metrics is critical. As higher education is required to take on more roles and

responsibilities, how should teaching and learning, added value, community engagement, breadth and depth of research and innovation, be measured? Would ratings be preferable to rankings or banding according to typology or mission? Should the emphasis be on disciplines and fields rather than whole institutions?

Respondents to the international survey identified the following indicators: teaching quality, student-faculty ratio, graduate employment, research (including publications, citations and income), PhD students, finance, student life, selectivity, mission and the library. Rankings should not be conducted by media organisations but by independent research organisations or accreditation agencies, or non-governmental or international organisations. Ideally, institutional or publicly available data or that which has been gathered by questionnaires should be used. Despite criticism about the difficulties comparing whole institutions with different missions, 30 per cent of respondents favour institutional reviews as against 21 per cent who favour program or departmental level reviews. Ultimately, the objective should be to enable student choice, provide accountability and enhance quality while giving a fair and unbiased picture of the strengths and weaknesses of a university.

At the international level, the International Rankings Expert Group (IREG), which comprises rankers, academics and policy analysts, has developed the Berlin Principles as best practice guidelines. The OECD has launched the pilot phase of the International Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes to try to create new internationally comparable data on teaching and learning. And the European Commission has recently established an expert group to identify appropriate metrics for the assessment of university-based research going beyond traditional citations and peer review.

A new higher education world order?

Rankings are the latest weapon in the battle for world-class excellence. They are a manifestation of escalating global competition and the geopolitical search for talent, and are now a driver of that competition and a metaphor for the reputation race. What started out as an innocuous consumer product – aimed at undergraduate domestic students – has become a policy instrument, a management tool, and a transmitter of social, cultural and professional capital for the faculty and students who attend high-ranked institutions.

The German Excellence Initiative may be a very explicit response to rankings, but many governments are using rankings as the hidden hand reshaping national systems, perhaps replacing difficult policy decisions. It is likely the pace of change will quicken as governments believe reform will lead to more competitive and better

(more highly ranked) institutions. On the other hand, rankings may encourage governments and higher education leaders to spend more resources on weaker institutions or departments. Whether national or global, or teaching and learning or the NUS survey on student councils, rankings influence institutional behaviour. By effectively naming and shaming, rankings serve a public accountancy role and force universities (not without controversy) to review their strategies and adopt appropriate change management processes.

The changes transcend and potentially usurp national boundaries. Formation of global university networks are quickly transforming the way universities interact not just with each other but also with their nation-state. As one university says: national pre-eminence is no longer enough. Acting increasingly as transnational corporations, universities are choosing to benchmark themselves against peers in other countries, and to forge consortia through which research, program development, faculty and student exchange, and recruitment occurs. Worldwide comparisons are becoming more important, and this has implications for the other 17,000 higher education institutions and their societies. If rankings are as influential as they currently appear, will developing societies be able to attract enough good students and faculty. As one former university rector asked: are we transforming higher education in the interests of a small elite?

In the post-massification higher education world, rankings are widening the gap between elite and mass education, exacerbating the international division of knowledge. They inflate the academic arms race, locking institutions and governments into a continual quest for ever increasing resources which most countries cannot afford without sacrificing other social and economic policies. Should institutions and governments allow their higher education policy to be driven by metrics developed by others for another purpose?

On the plus side, rankings are challenging all of us to (re)think carefully and critically about higher education, its role in society, and how it should be measured. Is it better to have a few world class universities or a world class system? There is need for wider public engagement with the options and their implications. ■

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