When the spider met the gram – league tables and the concept of a world class university

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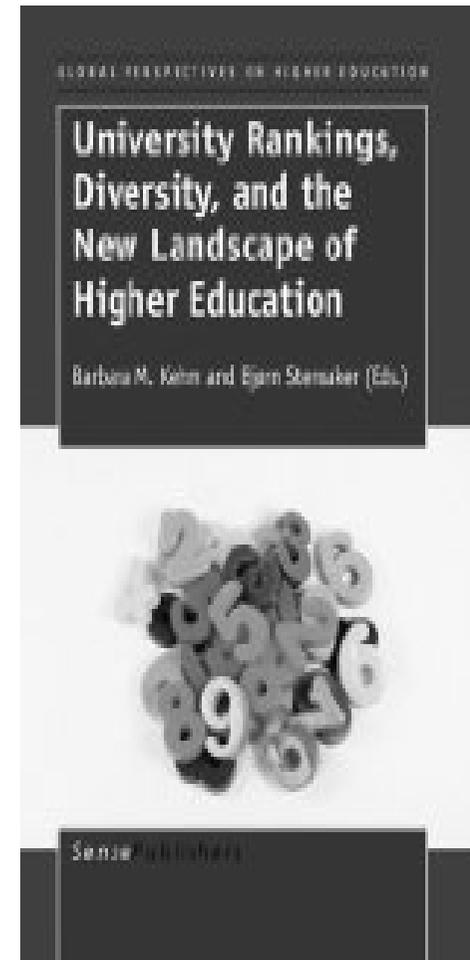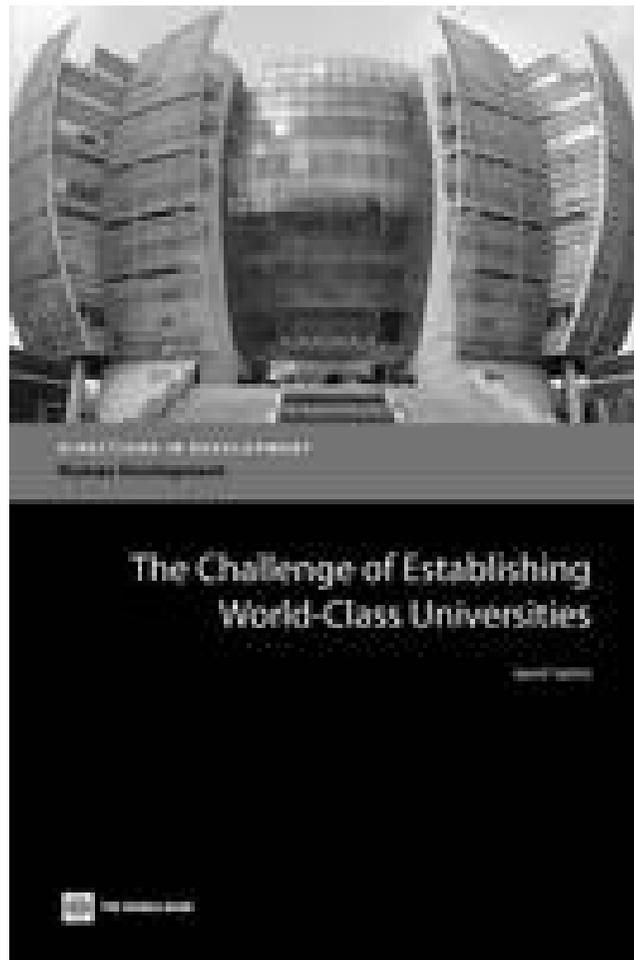Email: R.Deem@rhul.ac.uk

The concept of a world class university

- ✦ 'Everyone wants a world-class university …The problem is that no one knows what a world-class university is, and no one has figured out how to get one' (Altbach 2004)

- ✦ Criteria for declaring a WCU vary: research; internationalisation; teaching …

- ✦ Rarely based on good governance, resources or autonomy

- ✦ Established universities make stronger claims to WCU status

- ✦ For every winner there are many losers (Deem, Lucas & Mok 2008 & 9)

- ✦ Universities in developing countries stand little chance of becoming world class universities

How does the concept of a world class university (WCU) link to league tables?

- ✦ No agreed definition of what it means so can encompass anything BUT

- ✦ WCU widely used by many higher education institutions either as a descriptor or as an objective & league tables an important element in both descriptors and objectives

- ✦ International league table positioning used to make WCU claims which may sometimes be unjustified (given fragility of data and annual changes to it) or out of date

- ✦ World class claims don't always reflect complex interplay of local, national and international activities found in most universities (Marginson and Sawir 2005; Jones 2007)

A new academic research topic

The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities

University Rankings, Diversity, and the New Landscape of Higher Education

Barbara M. Kehm and Bjørn Stensaker (Eds.)

Why league tables?

- The simplistic answer is globalisation BUT many international league tables are about research, for which truly international funding (except for the EU) is unusual

- The massive growth in the number of universities and students

- Increased emphasis on student choice and consumerism

- Closely linked to neo-liberalism and the encouragement of markets in publicly funded services such as higher education

- Also linked to commercial publishers' desire to promote their journals and newspaper editors' wish to sell papers

- League tables are now a national and international obsession of publishers, governments and universities

Why do we pay attention to league tables?

✦ Playing the 'research game' (Lucas 2006)

✦ Academic quest for status & power (Bourdieu 1988)

✦ Concern about institutional and unit reputation

✦ Stakeholders think they are important e.g governors, students, alumni, employers

✦ They sometimes provide us with useful information eg who are our competitors, who is doing what etc (Hazelkorn 2009)

✦ Because governments are obsessed with them

League tables and student choice

✦ Assumed that some league tables are driven by student demand for information (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2009).

✦ If so:

✦ Why & how do students use league tables? Do different categories of students use them in different ways? Are league tables accessible to all students?

✦ How easily can they interpret the data?

✦ Do they see the other side of the fence when they complete surveys or is this a case of cognitive dissonance?

An example of reform using league tables: Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) Framework for English higher education 2009

- ✦ More competition between universities, priority to programmes that teach high level skills (eg team working, IT, communications etc?)

- ✦ Business more engaged in funding & design of programmes

- ✦ Creating more part-time, work-based & foundation degrees to make it easier for adults to go to university (Heath, Fuller, Paton, 2008)

- ✦ Encouraging universities to consider contextual data in admissions

- ✦ Sustaining world class research base by focusing on excellence (only in STEM though?), concentrating research funding where needed to secure critical mass & if can show economic impact (REF)

- ✦ Encouraging collaboration between universities on world class research, especially in high cost science (cost cutting?).

The BIS HE framework's new league table

✦ Programmes to be rated by

✦ Contact hours; whether academics or teaching assistants teach; Employment destinations of students: Earnings of former students

✦ BUT

✦ What do contact hours mean in different disciplines? Do potential students understand these variations?

✦ Will everyone want to do finance & economics or medicine, not social work or teaching?

✦ Aren't earnings & employment destinations also affected by the economy, social class, gender, ethnicity, disability etc?

Are there benefits to league tables?

✦ Institute of Higher Education Policy USA (2009) : 4 country study (Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan) suggests use of league tables can lead to:

✦ Improved data-based decision making

✦ Increased participation in broader discussions about

✦ measuring institutional success.

✦ Improved teaching and learning practices.

✦ Identification and replication of model programs.

✦ Increased institutional collaboration.

✦ **BUT aren't there other means of achieving these things?**

League tables as the source of all evil?

✦ Hazelkorn 2009 – analysis slips into equating institutional focus on research & its effects on academics with league tables but as Lucas (2006) shows, this has a much longer history

✦ Research audit processes certainly feed into league tables but these are not the sole driver for research audit and performance management – concerns about effective & selective use of public money; accountability & research-wealth creation relationship are other reasons

✦ Nor can concentration on research at expense of teaching be seen as a league table induced approach - some league tables use data on teaching (mostly proxies) and many academics have long preferred research to teaching (see Becher & Trowler 2001, Henkel 2000)

Can we afford to ignore league tables?

✦ Many university rectors/presidents and governments would say no BUT

✦ Some universities have withdrawn from them e.g Wolverhampton University UK, has instructed the Higher Education Statistics Agency not to release its data to any private organisation

✦ Could we take more responsibility for their production & content?

✦ Could we train our stakeholders to interpret them sensibly?

Spidergrams and higher education: an alternative to league tables?

✦ Provide institutional level information on a range of indicators (e.g research, teaching, widening participation, employer engagement)

✦ Seem easy to understand and have their supporters e.g HEFCE, Chris Brink VC of Newcastle BUT

✦ They provide a static not dynamic picture and are one-dimensional

✦ Not all the data are collected at the same time period (eg citation data by calendar year, research income data by financial year)

✦ They provide an over-view not a drilling-down

✦ Only expert readers can fully interpret the data

Evidence Ltd (UK) *Education Research Yearbook*: examples of customised data using charts and spidergrams
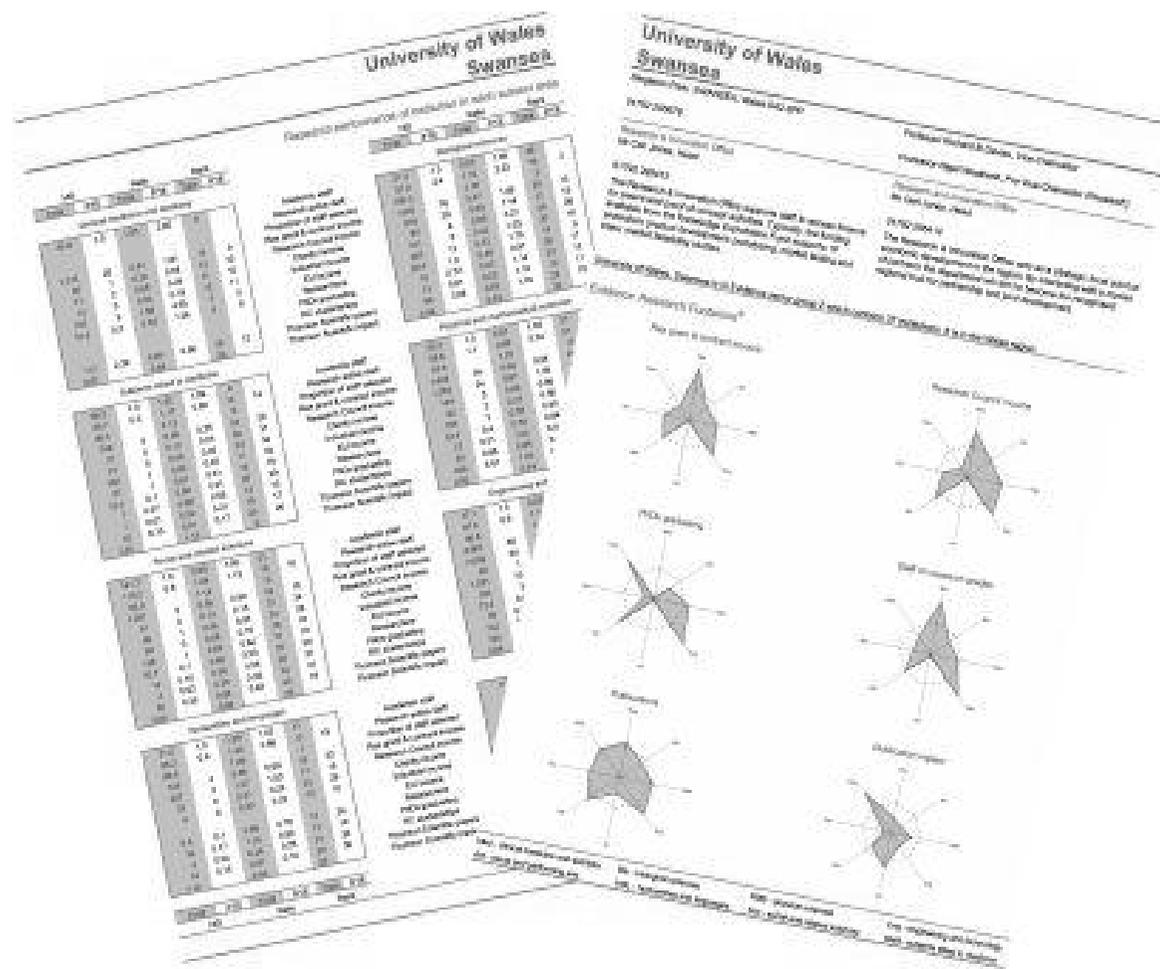
Does world class equal being highly ranked in league tables?

- Since there is a profusion of league tables, clearly not

- Every institution looks for a league table in which it can come top

- What goes up must come down – positionings are fragile

- The concept implies selectivity but the number of claimants to WCU status makes it seem universal

- Truly being world class only matters to a tiny number of universities but pretending to be matters to many more

World class universities and sustainability

✦ Many of the characteristics measured in league tables & which contribute to notions of WCUs depend on using non-renewable resources:

✦ International recruitment of students and staff

✦ Academic and student mobility

✦ International gatherings of researchers

✦ Expensive commercial academic journals few can now afford (Ciancanelli 2007)

✦ Easy availability of public and private research funds

✦ Can this carbon heavy and resource rich pattern of activity be sustained during the next decade of the 21st century ?

Who/what is excluded from world class status

✧ Most universities in the developing world

✧ Open access/open source publications

✧ Publications not written in English

✧ Universities without international academics & students

✧ Capacity building in the developing world

✧ Institutions with a local or regional mission

League tables & the purposes of universities

✦ Is league table culture distorting the purposes of universities?

✦ Already big shifts – Kwiek (2005) HE in battle over use of public funding; shift from HE as public to private good (Nyborg 2003); move away from Delanty's (2001) notion of universities as creating & transmitting national cultures

✦ Purposes of universities in transition (Deem 2008) - from shared open access knowledge to private knowledge for wealth creation (Ciancanelli 2007), greater emphasis on third mission (Nedeva 2007), students as customers, research as impact, a degree as work preparation etc

✦ If the values and purposes of higher education are distorted by a focus on what can be measured and put into tables, where does this leave education for citizenship & personal development & the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake?

✦ Lessons to be learned from the failure of the targets culture in other public services (Seddon 2008)

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