

Institutional Rankings and Regulation: Universities and the
growth of global private authority

Roger King

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Introduction

As we have noted, HE systems are increasingly characterized by global processes and market-like mechanisms, and by the tendency for the transnational forms of regulation and governance of such systems to be constituted by 'soft law' (guidelines, codes of practice, and so on), private authority and the compelling authority of 'expertise' (as found, for example, in so-called 'epistemic communities'). Particularly, accountability is becoming more market-based, such as through an increased sense of students as consumers with the expansion of tuition and other user charges, and through policy-encouraged institutional competition. The growth of national and other

surveys of student satisfaction and the remorseless spread of newspaper-based and simplified league tables of university performance and reputation are further examples of increased private authority and privately-constructed standards being exercised over universities.

League tables of university standing may be regarded as a further instrument of accountability to add to those associated with scholarly self-regulation and governmental external quality assurance.

Rankings as a Global Phenomenon

Over the last two decades or so university rankings or league tables have become a global phenomenon. This is meant in two senses. First, national rankings can be found in virtually all the major advanced countries, and in others, too. Second, in the last decade we have witnessed the arrival of 'global' or 'world-class' rankings in which the leading universities around the world are ranked against common transnational criteria, and against each other. These global league tables (which, of

course, cover only the leading universities) are becoming increasingly influential for those universities that regard themselves as 'top rank' internationally, or at least have such aspirations.

In the absence of official or governmental data across territorial boundaries, in comparison with the data often available and deployed by national rankings, methodologies at the global level tend to be based predominantly on research citations and awards (Shanghai Jiao Tong), or on data collected through peer-collected surveys of institutional reputation (The THE/QS).

Criticisms

Institutional university rankings particularly (as distinct from those evaluating departments and subjects, such as the Financial Times listings of business schools) have been the subject of fierce and continuing criticism, especially from those working in the HE sector. Private authority of this sort appears to confound the more legitimated and democratic policies and processes associated with the state and public accountabilities.

For many in HE, governmental bodies are regarded as being much more responsive to representations and lobbying by universities than are commercial entities such as large publishers.

More substantively also, the criteria underlying judgements as to the 'best university' are regarded by many in universities outside the top echelons as too conventional, 'elitist, over-reliant on research performance, and generally too backward-looking for the modern age. It is argued also that public policy goals, such as the enhancement of systemic institutional diversity, and for raising the standard of learning and teaching in comparison with that for research, are devalued by the league tables (which tend to reward research performance and the recruitment of formally highly-qualified students).

The producers of the league tables, however, argue that they provide a valuable tool for determining and assessing student success. They help to make institutions more accountable to the wider public. Moreover, universities are not slow to promote

their positions in the league tables if they have done well or to cull selectively from league table components for favourable use in their corporate promotional literature. There is evidence that internal data management by universities (data is now managed rather than being an administrative function) is becoming more aligned with the external information requirements of the league table compilers.

More obviously, of course, institutional rankings provide the simple heuristics or bounded rationality in a complicated yet often opaque informational world that social psychologists claim that we all gratefully seize upon in making decisions of many kinds. After all, league tables that rank organizations are produced for many sectors and not just HE.

Whether university rankings reflect a response to articulated consumer demand for them, or are rather an example of demand created by clever, market-aware, publishers and other entrepreneurs is harder to disentangle. Undoubtedly both demand- and supply-side factors are at work. The growing

range of state-collected and other standardized data on HE institutions has made possible – and credible – the idea of formalizing and publicly disseminating judgements on the hierarchical standing of institutions. Widely available data, alongside data collected by the league table compilers through specially commissioned opinion surveys of universities, have provided the basis for newspapers and other non-governmental entities to produce league tables at a cost affordable to them. Governments have sought increased information about the institutions that they fund as part of policy policymaking and accountability objectives. This public function provides a key underpinning for the private authority exercised by the league table compilers.

Institutional reputation and media amplification

Many rankings go out of the way to point to the on-line interactive facilities provided to enable anyone to construct their own league tables according to the criteria that they feel are important. Yet, this rather misses the point. League tables are

as much about reputation and the role of media amplification in advancing or debilitating institutional esteem as they are about more private or discreet benchmarking processes. A league table produced and consumed through the privacy of one's computer inevitably lacks the attention that publicized institutional rankings achieve.

Wide and simplified dissemination is the key to league tables. Moreover, data is subject to a variety of treatments by league table compilers – it is not simply neutral. Outcomes are heavily influenced by the decisions of newspapers and other teams on the importance they attach to particular factors and to what impact they should have in the overall formulations. The rankings do more than provide listings but are premised on a view of what HE should be like as these are expressed in the criteria that the compilers operate. That is, the tables seek to constitute standards and benchmarks for assessing the modern university which can differ from the models and aspirations driving institutions and even governmental policymakers.

Compilers make judgements that carry a reasonably high expectation that they will be regarded as 'authoritative' (such that leading universities are located in the right league table positions and do not feel obliged to withdraw their data and their support for the ranking exercise). Yet the compilers are not simply private commercial entities but 'public regulators', except, of course, that they do not seek to convince others to conform to their view of the world but only to take this view as highly significant and authoritative. The hierarchies in the rankings are not simply the outcome of technical exercises and calculations but involve judgements based on qualitative and often undisclosed interpretations.

It is easy to be drawn into too rationalistic an interpretation of university rankings, as though some perfect ideal is achievable. League tables are valued, particularly those outside the HE system, more for their perceived authority, expertise and knowledge of HE sectors, and for their very significance in the eyes of many HE market participants, rather than for the actual precision and numerical correctness of each rating.

Furthermore, league table rationality is undermined by the activities of universities in contexts of high competition. It would be natural for universities to seek to gain maximum advantage for their position in the league tables by 'optimizing' their returns in ways not easily checked by compilers. This increases if they fear, but do not know for certain, that others are 'gaming' the system and obtaining unfair comparative advantage.

Although there are strong constraints on the ability and willingness of university administrators to game the system (it results in too many conflicting and confusing data records internally, and administrators have their professional integrity to consider), the very possibility of such activities casts doubt on the claims for precise levels of league table objectivity and accuracy. Survey-collected data (that is, not relying on university-supplied data) has particular problems too, such as being reliant on subjective views and reflecting closed and established versions of reputation that may outrun actual performance (see especially The THE/QS rankings).

Impact

Councils and other lay governors of universities clearly do regard the rankings as significant and as potentially a source of valuable comparative information. The HEFCE study of England suggested that such boards sometimes regard league table performance as a more independently validated and easier-to-understand performance measure than evaluations produced from within the university itself. The inner and especially academic life of such institutions, circumscribed by traditional canons emphasising intellectual and academic autonomy, may appear impenetrable to outsiders. Independent governors worry whether such notions as academic freedom and autonomy, and critiques of league tables by managers, might be hiding complacency and poor performance throughout the organization.

It is arguable, of course, that league tables may only validate the more tacit reputational knowledge used in the comparison of universities by students and other stakeholders that has

been going on for decades. But university rankings appear to be increasingly valued by the public as these longer-standing informal and closed systems of reputational knowledge become less useful or available. The growth of transnational opportunities for study and research, and the necessity for students and employers to understand more about new and little-known institutions around the world, fuels the demand for the apparently objective and independent analysis provided by league tables. Research suggests that the league tables have the greatest influence on students from higher social-class backgrounds with high achievement goals. The private or independent school sector appears especially adept at scouring the league tables as part of concerted efforts to point their students at the 'best' universities (for which, too, these schools are rewarded by higher positions in some league tables devised specifically for their sector).

It is also becoming clearer from empirical studies that the rankings are used internally by senior managers in universities as useful managerial devices to institute change and lever

enhanced accountabilities. Data collection and internal administrative systems are immeasurably improved by the influence and requirements of the tables, and there is stronger institutional focus on enhancing the student experience and promoting student learning facilities. Positions in institutional rankings are becoming established as key performance indicators for university leaders and governors and as a part of a more professionalized approach to strategic planning.

Rankings are rapidly becoming integrated by administrators into the routine practices of university operations as part of 'normal environments'. They contribute also to wider practices of benchmarking and learning for organizations that have become established features of wider institutional life in modern societies.

The danger to universities is that the rankings, especially global league tables, may spur universities into 'zero-sum' competitive financial spending sprees that are financially dangerous and ultimately self-defeating. Yet politicians in many countries also appear magnetized by the league tables and the perceived

need to increase the number of ‘world-class universities’ (as indicated by global league tables) in their jurisdictions in order both to enhance national prestige and to enable their countries to compete more effectively for top-flight researchers from around the world.

Conclusion

1. The major league tables, especially the two global rankings (The THE, and Shanghai Jiao Tong), display forms of ‘network power’ which increase the more their findings are taken seriously. That is, whatever the intrinsic merits of such tables, the standards they promulgate have the power to coordinate various worldwide university strategies through the sheer weight and accumulation of stakeholders using them. That is, they achieve a form of global ordering by elevating one approach or set of standards over others and threaten the elimination of alternative solutions. They act also as a brake on innovation through the encouragement of conformity to such standards.

University and other decisionmakers are not forced to follow university rankings – their choices are free – but increasingly such choices are also involuntary as league tables generate global templates and structures that inevitably act back on institutional strategies. These are processes of structuration.

2. These dynamics of league table power emerge through private forms of market and sociability. Aggregate outcomes develop not from an act of collective decisionmaking and deliberative democracy and a prior-established collective agreement (sovereignty), but through the accumulation of decentralized, individual decisions that, taken together, nonetheless conduce to a set of structural constraints that affect the entire sector. This is typical of globalization and the accumulation of network power by some standards. As we have noted, university members often complain as much about the absence of deliberative public policymaking with league tables ('we have not been involved in their construction') as anything else.

The decision by the EU to devise its own ranking systems may be regarded as an attempt to return processes of university ranking to processes of sovereignty, collective decisionmaking and deliberative democracy. While the relations of sociability found in market-like and emergent networks (such as global science) consist in the accumulation of individual choices that then generate broader social structures, those of sovereignty depend upon an initial 'social contract' or collective agreement. Here, individuals (institutions) fashion themselves into a unity that then provides for collective, rather than merely aggregated decisions. We wait to see whether the globalizing relations of market-like sociability found in league tables can be trumped by more collective forms of sovereignty and public decisionmaking.