

# Rank and File: The individualisation of research performance management (0181)

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## Introduction

League tables, defined as ranked lists compiled in accordance with specified evaluative criteria, are making increasingly frequent appearances in higher education globally. For instance, the *Times Higher Education* list ranks universities across the world by a basket of criteria. HE league tables vary in focus from entire universities through to faculties and, increasingly, to individual academics. This paper looks at one particular league table – the UK Association of Business School's journal rankings list.

The ABS list purports to offer the prospect of evaluating individual journal paper quality by simply and only looking at the position in the ranked list of the journal in which papers are published. The editors of the list maintain that it can safely be used to supplant traditional peer review processes, offering a cost-effective solution to the onerous task of judging of quality to policy-makers, funders, research users and managers. The uptake of this list has been reasonably widespread throughout UK business and management schools and there is some anecdotal evidence that it has influenced the compilation of similar lists in other countries which are used in those countries' research quality audits.

The extensive use of league tables betokens, we argue, the prevalence of a competitive marketised environment within HE. There is a highly competitive global market in which institutions fight for resources and students-as-customers. League tables are part of this competitive process, seeking as they do to act as measures of 'quality'. Importantly, the evaluative criteria by which 'quality' in this market is measured are heterogeneous and subjectively defined.

Much existing literature seeks to critique the various HE league tables and does valuable work in pointing up the problems, subjectivities and difficulties in such exercises. But, problematically, much of this literature focuses only on how to devise better league tables rather than problematising their usage in any fundamental manner. In this paper we take a different focus. Our concern is to explore first why and then how such league tables become part of the HE landscape in the first place and to consider the consequences of their usage. We do so using a Marxian analytical lens and via an empirical case study of the Association of Business School's journal rankings list.

Accordingly, this paper is organised into three principal sections. First, we conceptualise the usage of league tables in HE using a Marxian theoretical framework.

We approach this by explaining how universities are now expected to operate within a idealised capitalist enterprise architecture. This model is not that of modern creative industries, such as software development or advertising agencies, but rather that of the factory in the very traditional sense. We explicate this idealised architecture is in terms of markets, products, managers, labour and capital.

We then contrast this idealised type with the actual organisational nature of universities and point to the areas where they currently diverge from this model (for instance, knowledge products are not amenable to standardisation, markets are weak, managers as agents enjoy significant power asymmetries between them and their principals, and labour and capital are, to a significant extent, a unity). These points of divergence engender, we argue, a need for technologies to both signal knowledge product quality and also, to the extent possible, redefine knowledge products, processes and labour in such a way that they are amenable to managerial control. League tables such as the ABS list, we posit, are perceived as meeting this need.

This yields a theoretically grounded explanation as to *why* such league tables might be developed and used. However, the empirical focus of the paper, presented in the second section, is to consider *how* they come to be adopted and embodied into the practices of HE. Using a combination of publicly available data and the results of a web survey inviting open text answers, we explore the social and managerial processes by which the ABS list was developed, taken up and now, how it is being used. Our results point to a desire on the part of management elites to bridge the gap between the actual architecture of universities and the expectations that they will conform to an idealised capitalist enterprise type, and how they seek to achieve this.

In the third section of the paper we turn to consider the likely implications of the use of such league tables for higher education and its knowledge-creating responsibilities. The implications of lists such as the ABS one are, we argue, potentially profound for organizations, academic careers and the nature of knowledge itself. They include

- a) The creation of a bias towards highly codifiable knowledges – these are easier to evaluate as they have highly scripted routines for their conduct etc.
- b) A bias towards cognitive complementarity, in that everyone sticks together and excludes those out the clique.
- c) A bias against inter / transdisciplinarity
- d) Minority areas get sidelined, leading to intellectual atrophy as people make research choices on narrow career grounds.
- e) For academics, a potential dissonance between their standing in research fields and spaces. Academics are likely to suffer a tension between expressing loyalty to their discipline / field and their institution.
- f) A reduction in epistemic variety because of the narrowing of the acceptable range of what constitutes knowledge and inhibition of the development of new disciplines.

- g) A circumscribing of what constitutes knowledge and the determination of what counts as knowledge through these managerialist technologies.
- h) A potential consequential adverse effect on peer epistemic communities, their associations and their journals.

In sum, in this paper we argue that the exogenous marketising pressures on universities are effecting institutional change, and in particular the development of managerial technologies such as league tables designed to measure (a subjectively and market-oriented and defined) notion of quality. In turn, these managerialist technologies impact upon the work of individual scholars, which in turn effects change within epistemic fields. This has profound implications for knowledge.