

Living with the world rankings: How 'aspirational' universities negotiate status anxiety within increasingly competitive environments (0049)

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## **Part 1 Abstract**

This paper draws on the findings of an international research study that endeavors to answer the question: *How do university rankings challenge and affect institutions of higher education in different countries?* This is one of the first international comparative studies of the influence of rankings *within* universities, as distinct from on HE systems and global policy discourses. It explores the ways in which key university personnel negotiate the use of such rankings for internal and external strategic purpose, attempting to avoid their distorting effects while recognising their increasing influence in orchestrating global and domestic reputation. The core of the paper is the UK case study of the University of Reading, but it draws on the other ten national case studies to test a conceptual framework devised to examine the processes of internalisation and institutionalisation of rankings logic within universities and the intensification of these as the rankings industry expands.

## **Part 2 Outline**

### **Introduction**

This paper draws on the findings of an international research study that endeavors to answer the question: *How do university rankings challenge and affect institutions of higher education in different countries?* (Anonymous reference). Much of the research and literature on rankings focuses on their construction and their influence on systems, discourses and policy at national and global levels. This paper, and the research on which it is based, investigates the impact and use of rankings by individual institutions, their managements, academic communities, professional staff and students. It will be of value to all those trying to understand the growing influence of this phenomenon in different national and institutional contexts, and the long-term implications for the development of higher education.

The core of the paper investigates the influence of global rankings on—and their use by—a medium-sized, research-intensive English university outside the top-ranked Russell Group of large research universities in the United Kingdom: the University of Reading. It explores the ways in which key university personnel negotiate the use of such rankings for internal and external strategic purpose, attempting to avoid their distorting effects while recognising their increasing influence in orchestrating global and domestic reputation. The study was undertaken at a particular moment in the case university's history, when a new leadership and strategy were aiming to extend the institution's global reach and recognition, just at the moment when it dropped out of the top 200 in the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings.

The paper also draws on the ten other national case studies within the study to test a conceptual framework devised to examine the ways in which HEIs and their

members (i.e. staff, students, stakeholders) internalise the logic of ranking systems and how their influence becomes institutionalised in organisational processes and structures (Anonymous reference). It is argued that these processes of internalisation and institutionalisation of this logic within universities are being intensified as the rankings industry expands and increases its influence (Anonymous reference).

## **Methodology**

The study covers research universities in 11 countries in different regions of the world, and has been undertaken by a team of experts from each country. The author of this paper is the UK member of the international research team. Empirical data consisted of interviews with key university managers and academics, analysis of additional documentation and observational evidence. The approach was to focus on illustrative case studies to analyse how rankings influence thinking, action and policy at the university level—in other words, it seeks to illustrate how rankings actually affect the academic enterprise and the lives of the academic community. It is particularly concerned with the impact on the work of universities, the effects on the academic community and related issues. In the UK context, the research is seeking to further investigate the processes of *internalisation* and *institutionalisation* of the logic of rankings systems within individual behaviour and organisational practice.

The research is based on a number of individual case studies in different countries, thus limiting the representativeness of each case in its host country and the comparability between countries. However, it is one of the first international comparative studies of the influence of rankings *within* universities, as distinct from on HE systems and global policy discourses. It could form the basis on which larger samples might be investigated in similar groups of countries.

## **Findings**

The case studies provide rich evidence of the reverberations of rankings and related phenomena around strategic thinking and decision-making in mid-ranking universities with global aspirations. It underlines the dilemmas and difficulties of setting strategic goals that aim to position a university in a particular segment of the rankings. Using rankings as a strategic goal creates 'a hostage to fortune', especially when this proves difficult to achieve or sustain. One dilemma for universities in the UK such as Reading is that, in addition to the reputational pressures that have been evident for some time, there are now material factors associated with rankings performance which impact on a university's 'bottom-line' – its income – and its aspirations. As potential international students (and their sponsors), collaborators and partners increasingly use ranking position as a selection criterion, those institutions just outside the upper echelons are beginning to lose out in the global competition stakes. One danger is that, if a desired rank position cannot be achieved or sustained, this may provoke – and even distort – discussions about institutional strategy.

## **Implications**

The research raises questions about universities managing the influence of world rankings in an increasingly competitive global market for HE. The issues raised are relevant to universities in a wide range of national HE systems. The findings of this research could have impacts on the understanding of rankings and their influence,

the quality and validity of rankings and the degree to which public policy is (and is not) influenced by them.

The paper suggests the University of Reading case study may be an example of a more widespread dilemma for many mid-ranking UK universities that are likely to be increasingly supplanted in the higher echelons of the global rankings by institutions from emerging systems, such as from the Asia-Pacific region. If such universities are to become truly international, including supporting the development of other nations' higher education systems, there are questions about how they manage the growing pressure to maintain—or improve—their reputations in the global rankings, with the increasing impact on the university's 'bottom-line'.

(893 words)

## References

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