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Rankings & the Battle for World Class Excellence: Institutional Strategies and Policy Choices

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'What do we need to achieve by 2013? Two universities ranked in the top 20 worldwide' (Cronin, 2006).

'This is the opportunity for more of our universities to emerge as world-class institutions. More of our universities should aim to be within the top 100 internationally and I would like some of our universities to aspire to the top 10' (Bishop, 2007).

'This strategic plan...reflects our unswerving commitment...to transform [xxx] University, within the next 10 years, into a world-class institution that will be ranked among the top 30 leading universities in the world.'

'To be number two – that would be good – and to be among the first ten universities in Germany is also a goal. We are ten or eleven so it differs between the different rankings so that's a point. So we might reach number five or six, would be possible.'

Themes

1. Rising Influence of Global Rankings
2. Institutional Strategies and Policy Choices
3. Observations and Implications

1. Rising Influence of Global Rankings

Rise of Global Rankings

- If higher education is the engine of the economy, then the global status of HEIs becomes a vital indicator;
- Yet, there is a gap between national/supra-national ambitions and global performance;
- Rankings used to measure national competitiveness as expressed by number of HEIs in top 20, 50 or 100;
- All HEIs drawn into the global knowledge market.

Playing Rankings Game

Despite methodological concerns...

- Rankings play critical role in building reputation, visibility and brand;
- High-achieving students use rankings to 'shortlist' choices;
- Stakeholders use rankings to influence funding, sponsorship and employment;
- Benefits and advantages flow from high-rankings.

Ranking Status

HEIs taking rankings very seriously...

- 58% respondents unhappy with current rank;
- 93% and 82% respondents, respectively, want to improve their national or international ranking.
- 70% of all respondents wish to be in top 10% nationally, and 71% want to be in top 25% internationally.

Impact on Students

- *Domestic undergraduate*: rely on local intelligence, national rankings and entry scores BUT mobility on the rise;
- *Domestic postgraduate*: becoming internationally mobile and ranking sensitive;
- *International undergraduate*: influenced by institutional partnerships & familial links – some rankings sensitivity;
- *International postgraduate*: Highly receptive to global rankings
 - Rankings = short-listing mechanism
 - ‘Might know about Australia, but not where in Australia to go’
 - Rankings influence on employment opportunities.

Changes in Academic Work

- Increased emphasis on academic performance/research outputs
 - Contracts tied to metrics/performance
 - New salary and tenure arrangements
 - Active head-hunting of high-achievers
- Rankings used to identify under-performers
- Impact on Staff Morale
- Faculty not innocent victims: rankings confer social and professional capital on faculty in high-ranked HEIs

Influence on External Stakeholders

- Influence goes beyond 'traditional' student audience: employers, philanthropists and industry
- Governments especially influenced by SJT, even beyond HE, e.g. emigration policy
- Employers have implicit rankings based on own experience which is self-perpetuating
 - 'Systematic' approach by large/int'l businesses rather than SME
- National excellence initiatives used/perceived as a ranking
 - 'Are you not excellent anymore?'

2. Institutional Strategies and Policy Choices

How are Institutions Responding?

63% HE leaders have taken strategic, organisational, managerial or academic actions in response to the results

Of those,

- Overwhelming majority took either strategic or academic decisions and actions
- Only 8% respondents indicated they had taken no action

Institutional Responses

High-ranked, international-facing:

- 65% have formal mechanism to review rank
- 60% use rankings to set goals for strategic planning
- 93% believe rankings influencing stakeholders
- 59% use rankings to monitor peers worldwide

Strategy: Use rank to extend research presence and 'talent-catching' capability

Low/non-ranked, regionally-focused:

- 21% have formal mechanism to review rank
- 86% use rankings to set goals for strategic planning
- 56% believe rankings influencing stakeholders
- 30% use rankings to monitor peers worldwide

Strategy: Focus on selective indicators to build niche research expertise

Mapping Institutional Actions

	Specific Actions	Weightings
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively develop/promote bio-sciences rather than arts, humanities & social sciences • Allocate additional faculty to internationally ranked departments • Reward publications in highly-cited journals • Publish in English-language journals • Set individual targets for faculty and departments 	SJT = 40% Times = 20%
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merge with another institution, or bring together discipline-complementary departments • Incorporate autonomous institutes into host HEI • Establish Centres-of-Excellence & Graduate Schools • Develop/expand English-language facilities, international student facilities, laboratories 	SJT = 40% Times = 20%
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmonise with EU/US models • Discontinue programmes/activities which negatively affect performance • Grow postgraduate activity in preference to undergraduate • Favour science disciplines • Positively affect student/staff ratio (SSR) 	SJT = 10% Times = 20%
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target high-achieving students, esp. PhD • Offer attractive merit scholarships and other benefits 	Times = 15%
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head-hunt international high-achieving/HiCi scholars • Create new contract/tenure arrangements • Set market-based or performance/merit based salaries • Reward high-achievers • Identify weak performers 	SJT = 40% Times = 25%
Academic Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionalise Admissions, Marketing and Public Relations • Ensure common brand used on all publications • Advertise in high-focus journals, e.g. 	Times = 40%

Institutional Choices

- Use Rankings to Determine Targets Vs. Benchmark Performance?
- Concentrate on Research Vs. Revise Curriculum?
- Focus on Strong Fields Vs. Maintain Spread of Disciplines.
- Merge Discipline Compatible Departments, Close Down Weak Ones or Cross-Subsidize?
- Strengthen Postgraduate Activity Vs. Undergraduate Programmes?
- Recruit High-Achieving Students Vs. Widen Access?
- Headhunt High-Achieving Faculty Vs. Develop Existing Faculty?
- Merge With Another Institution Vs. Reorganize the Institution?
- How Much Do We Have To Spend? How Much Can We Afford To Spend?

How are governments responding?

2 main policy regimes

1. Create greater vertical (reputational) and horizontal (functional) differentiation [neo-liberal model] – German/Japan

- 'excellence initiatives' to concentrate research in 10/30 world-class universities;
- *'to compete globally, the government will close down some regional and private universities and direct money to the major universities'*

2. 'Create diverse set of high performing, globally-focused HEIs' [social-democratic] – Australia:

- linking 'compacts' to mission and performance
- *'move towards self-declaration of mission, setting own metrics and a corresponding funding model'*

Policy Choices

- Devise Appropriate Indicators to Influence/Incentivize Behaviour Vs. Use Global Rankings.
- Concentrate Resources In Few 'Centres of Excellence' Vs. Support Excellence Wherever it Exists?
- Use Rankings to Foster Differentiation Vs. Mission Profiling?
- Allocate Resources According to Mission, Performance or Rankings?
- Launch Public Information Campaign about 'Use And Abuse' of Rankings Vs. Allow Media to Provide Information?
- How Much Do We Have to Spend? How Much Can We Afford to Spend?

3. Observations and Implications

Positive and Perverse Effects

- Creating sense of urgency and accelerating modernisation agenda;
- Driving up institutional performance and providing some public accountability and transparency;
- Creating elite group of global universities via accentuating vertical/hierarchical differentiation;
- Reshaping HE by aligning national and institutional priorities – education and research – to indicators;
- Challenging government, HEIs and the public to (re)think HE, and how and what should be measured.

Urban Myths (1)

1. Rankings provide useful comparative information about the performance of HEIs facilitating student choice & benchmarking.

While some rankings do include metrics on teaching and learning, most are focused on (life-science) research.

2. Indicators are 'plausible'/meaningful measurements of research and knowledge creation.

They are the only publicly available comparable data.

Indicators do incredible damage to the RDI enterprise.

Urban Myths (2)

3. High ranked HEIs are better than lower ranked/not ranked institutions.

According to the IAU, there are 17,000 HEIs worldwide. Since when does being in the top 3% mean failure?

4. Concentrating research in a few elite institutions or scientific disciplines will 'lift all boats'.

Not obvious this kind of investment will create patentable knowledge that can be exploited, while concentration could reduce over-all national research capacity.

Are HEIs Acting Irrationally?

- Governments content to quietly condone the role rankings play in accelerating competition while demurring from the actual concept or process;
- High-ranked HEIs seen as trophy universities;
- Rankings used as policy/quasi-funding instrument and political tool.

Because rankings incentivise behaviour...

Using global rankings as the benchmark only makes sense if the indicators are appropriate – otherwise, governments and institutions risk transforming their HE system and institutions, and subverting other policy objectives, to conform to metrics designed by others for other purposes.

Policy choices are critical.

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<http://www.oecd.org/edu/imhe/rankings>