

Chapter 6

World Class Universities and the Rest

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ABSTRACT

University rankings and the concept of “World Class Universities” have captured the imagination of academics and policy makers, and they are now both firmly established as part of the higher education scene. The rankings have been criticised on many grounds: the arbitrary nature of the measures used, the arbitrariness of the methodologies used and the need of rankings to respond to other imperatives. This chapter looks at what function rankings have in legitimising funding regimes that focus investment in “centres of excellence”, and what this implies for reduced / worse funding of other institutions. This central philosophy of focusing investment where there is a critical mass of research activity has dramatic implications for the relationships between universities and their communities. These pressures will be experienced differently in different academic fields. This chapter examines the ramifications of adopting a one-size-fits-all policy to diverse disciplines with different requirements.

BACKGROUND

This chapter examines the way in which the choices of indicators and methods of analysis employed in the process of ranking universities have an impact at different levels of policy. At the level of national policy the concept of ranking universities and producing a class or world-leading institutions supports an environment of competition, where resources are legitimately concentrated in centres of excellence. At an institutional level, rankings have an impact on which institutions are picked out as being “world class”. At a subject level, ranking systems may use indicators that assume a specific research or teaching culture, and therefore favour subject areas where that culture is most widespread and institutions that specialise in those subject areas. And even at the personal level, individuals may select activities that they know will contribute to the status of their institution or subject area, as rankings become the arbiter of what is to be valued.

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To examine that complex interplay of influences in higher education, the chapter starts with a brief outline of the parallel development of ranking systems and expanding systems of higher education, and the pressures to move toward concentrating resources in centres of excellence, usually centres of research excellence. This is followed by an examination of the main elements of ranking systems and possible biases introduced by selecting those elements in particular ways. This analysis of the workings of the rankings is extended to look at how the ranking systems relate to different subject areas, and may also have implications for how universities, as institutions that are oriented toward the world system as a whole, relate to their local home communities.

The chapter concludes with a specific case study of how three prominent institutions in the UK fared in two different evaluation systems in the field of education. The case highlights some of the themes that have been developed through the course of the chapter.

Since the 1980s we have all become familiar with university rankings and “league tables”. Perhaps the expression “league tables” is a peculiarly British one, and I should explain it. League tables are used in most competitive sports, but especially football, where teams compete to be the best, and fans get excited each season over whether their team will move up or down in the rankings. The tables are usually divided into segments or levels, so that only the best teams compete with the best, and a move between “divisions” is a matter of ecstasy or agony for the fans, and may mean financial plenty or financial ruin for the team. The use of the expression “league tables” is intended ironically, no doubt, in relation to national and international rankings of universities, but it implies that providing higher education is now a competitive sport.

In the 1980s national league tables became common, with rankings published by newspapers in the United States, Canada, and the UK, among other countries. Later, attempts were made to produce international comparisons, to identify the best of the best internationally, and thereby consolidate the idea of a “world class university”, a university that can compete with the best in the world and hold its head up high

There are now at least four or five influential rankings that compare universities internationally, including the Times Higher and QS rankings, published in the UK, the ARWU, published in China and the US News and World Report rankings published in the USA. Although each of these rankings is distinct in the measures that it uses and the methodology that it employs to produce an aggregate score, there is a remarkable consensus in the rankings. We expect Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, MIT and Stanford to be near the top, and we expect excellent universities that you have probably never or rarely heard of, especially universities that concentrate on teaching in the liberal arts, and have an excellent reputation in that field, such as Guelph (Canada) and Middlesex (UK), to be nowhere. And our expectations are generally not disappointed. Despite the differences in the ways in which the ranking systems arrive at their conclusions, there is a consensus among the rankings that what counts as a world class university is a large institution that has a specific focus on research and recruits its faculty and students in an international labour market. In addition, it does an institution’s standing in the rankings no harm at all if it has a specialisation in the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), while a focus on the liberal arts appears not to be so helpful.

The rankings themselves have been criticised frequently, learnedly, and justifiably on practically every ground that it is possible to imagine. The response of those involved with constructing the rankings has generally been to shrug, and to remark that, whatever the shortcomings of the rankings, they are with us as an unavoidable fact of life, not unlike death and taxes. A similar response can be found among those senior administrators in institutions who spend time examining the entrails of the most recently published

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