

The age of comparison?

Rising to the challenge of global league tables

When *The Times* reported extracts from the latest higher education league table produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in September 2004, there was a sense of the inevitable. League tables and comparative measures are now symptomatic of an age which is increasingly inventive in measuring everything from income to research output. League tables dominate 21st century life, with hospitals, schools and transport authorities among the organisations subject to assessment.

SUPERSTARS?

For the majority of **"comparison tables"**, a clear purpose exists with the information included guaranteed to be of interest (and especially so to the media). Factors such as **"star ratings"** which were once the preserve of hotels and restaurants are now a fact of life within higher education.

PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS...

Within the UK, the league tables that dominate the higher education sector and that require compliance are subject to much controversy. A brief survey of UK organisations (and ongoing press reports) suggests that many are unhappy with the **"moving goal posts"** and frequent changes in terms of evaluation for key criteria, all of which can make it difficult to measure like for like, year on year. For those involved in corporate marketing within higher education, league tables can be manna for heaven or extremely problematic, but rarely can they be ignored.

International league tables may be a predictable development, but they bring their own challenges. Some of the new tables have been driven by a need for universities to measure gaps between their research performance and those of acknowledged **"world class"** universities.

For higher education managers there are many implications, some of which are highly unpredictable but all of which need to be considered and managed effectively:

[1] The view from outside

Regardless of how accurate (or otherwise) the methodology for league tables, the fact is that they become hot news for individuals plus the media.

While UK sector league tables are well documented, they can be viewed by stakeholders in the perspective of a wide range of additional, easily available information. This information can also have a moderating effect on key aspects of profile and perceived or communicated status. However, for international prospects or academic staff considering UK university destinations, UK league tables produced by internationally respected organisations such as *The Times*, *The Economist* and *The FT* are common currency, but may not always be tempered by additional contextual information.

The newer tables, for example, Shanghai Jiao Tong's rankings, may also effect perceptions. The critical issues in the media coverage of the Shanghai Jiao Tong table were less about relative rankings, and more about how **"surprised"** or otherwise commentators were about the ranking of UK universities. This betrayed the received media wisdom about the relative status of institutions, and has triggered perceptions management projects for a number of concerned UK organisations.

[2] Disenfranchisement

Internationally reported league tables can have significant effects on offshore alumni, either positively or negatively. It is known that a poor showing in league tables can reduce the willingness for alumni to act as advocates, by recommending their university or spreading positive word of mouth. This **"softer"**, but extremely important aspect of outreach activity can have a dramatic, but hard to monitor, longer-term affect on international recruitment.

[3] The "staff market"

US and Australasian universities increasingly advertise in the UK press for academic staff. When loyalty to discipline and the excellence of individual departments really matters, the accurate reporting of league table positions can impact on perceptions, resulting in **"brain drains"** from some organisations to others and the much reported wholesale transfer markets.

[4] A picture paints a thousand words...

When a new table emerges, what really gets noticed and reported are the graphics. Bar and pie charts, tables and top 10 and bottom 10 rankings are dominant in all league table reviews and it falls to universities to manage appropriate responses, to defend or justify.

[5] Bridging gaps

Critical issues arise if organisations are perceived, publicity, to be top league, but the **"service"** they deliver does not **"match"** the professed status. This will become a critical **"choice factor"** in a UK tuition-fees driven market, where students will wish to experience a tangible, differentiated return on their investment. In international markets, too, it will be increasingly possible for globally mobile students to endeavour to measure **"like for like"** added value at universities across several continents.

WHAT'S NEXT?

More league tables are on the way. These will need to consider the experiential and service level factors missing from most of the current reports. In the UK, at least, the National Student Survey will demand that many organisations reconsider just how they manage and communicate experiential factors as part of their competitive proposition.

A major opportunity for the future is for universities to take control, where possible: to develop more organisation-driven evaluators that communicate the points of difference and relative value that are critical to stakeholders' decision making.

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