

The hidden cost of league tables...

Relative performance and staff morale.

League tables, we know, just won't go away and all the signs indicate an increasing interest in them and also in ways of measuring and comparing organisational performance for many years to come.

CHANGING FOCUS

THE FOCUS WILL CHANGE, INEVITABLY.

It is probable that the future will bring an increased blurring of the boundaries between varied evaluation outputs and there are signs that this has already started. For example, even though methodologies may be completely different, there is already an "unofficial" tendency, through ratings web sites and some reaches of the media, to make inter-county comparisons on factors affecting the broad "student experience" element of organisational performance. As the media reports that "students are told it's cheaper to study abroad", comparisons between higher education in the US, Canada, Australia and Europe are on the increase.

Since the emergence of the Shanghai Jiao Tong index, "global" tables have begun to head the agenda for many institutions, and this has been mirrored, inevitably, by a not-so-subtle shift among some UK organisations towards the articulation of their strategic goals in terms that reflect specific evaluation indicators for the Shanghai Jiao Tong index and other global measures.

A STRATEGIC APPROACH?

The process of responding to league table demands and managing returns is time consuming and costly, but one that cannot be ignored. Increasingly, UK institutions are taking a strategic view about which league tables are the most critical for them, in terms of positioning and reputation, and upon which parameters it will be most effective to concentrate.

When planning on a national or global level, though, it is dangerous to overlook those personally responsible for delivering the key results and outputs through academic achievement or in the face-to-face delivery of the student experience.

FUTURE LEAGUE TABLES

SO WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Emerging trends in global or inter-country league tables are likely to include, for example:

- Performance re: ethical policy issues, carbon footprint etc
- Reviews of financial sustainability
- Credibility (and "behaviour" or performance) of organisational partners i.e. links with other universities and commercial organisations
- Costs benefits analysis on organisational running costs
- Relative spend per capita on issues beyond undergraduate and postgraduate students, i.e. staff development, family support services for staff and students, alumni relations and advancement etc
- Career trajectories of staff: for example, retention rates, tenure issues, length of time in post etc
- Inter-country cost of living
- Inter-country safety issues
- Graduate employment rates and salary indicators (i.e. to reflect the increased mobility of students/graduates and the growing tendency to study at more than one organisation or away from their country of domicile)

NEGATIVE FALL-OUT

The fall-out of not performing well in league tables, or rather, not performing as hoped and expected, is well rehearsed.

Unexpected (and unwelcome) shifts in position affect positioning, funding and investment potential plus institutional reputation and will exert a direct impact upon recruitment agendas for specific markets such as postgraduate and international students, for example.

However, what is not often addressed is the critical impact unexpected or negative performance can have on staff morale. Academic staff are often left feeling de-motivated when academic output-related league tables do not go to plan.

IMPACT ON STAFF MORALE

Reported common responses include:

- A feeling of powerlessness in the face of the "system"
- A sense of injustice, especially when results do not appear to reflect hard work and effort
- Concern about organisational reputation and how negative results will affect an individual's career opportunities at other organisations
- Disenfranchisement with their faculty or the university as a whole
- Lack of confidence in the organisational strategic plan
- Lack of confidence in the organisation's senior management team (SMT)

The critical factor is the negative impact that such issues have upon staff morale. This is not always recognised or addressed and yet has the potential to cascade a negative effect on other aspects of the organisation:

- It is known to affect staff recruitment and perceptions of organisational employer brand
- It can affect staff retention and staff turnover rates
- It makes it more difficult for SMTs to instil the corporate vision and strategic objectives across the staff cohort (which then makes change management or institutional development problematic on many levels)
- It can directly affect the relative perceived quality of the student experience (i.e. as delivered by disenfranchised staff)

Planning league table management and reporting is a major operation for many organisations, but it is critical not to lose sight of the individuals that make performance possible and to recognise the exponential effect that negative results can have across the organisation.

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