

Measure it!

The rise of global league tables

In September 2004, The Times reported extracts from the latest higher education league table produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University. The table aimed to establish the relative rankings of international research universities, and was headed up by the US with the UK following in second place.

League tables and comparative measures are symptomatic of an age which is increasingly inventive in devising ways to measure everything from relative value to kudos, income to research output. League tables dominate 21st century life, with hospitals, schools and transport bodies embedded in the ranks of organisations subject to scrutiny and assessment.

5-STAR SERVICE?

Obviously, for many of these measures, there is a clear purpose and much of the information is of value or at least, of interest. There have been changes, though, in attitudes to public evaluation over the last 25 years. Where star ratings were once the preserve of hotels or restaurants, they are now common parlance in UK higher education. The cult of measurement rules and has, of course, spawned its own mini-industry of administrative departments established to manage league table submissions and to ensure that organisations are able present themselves to best effect.

CONTROVERSY

However, in the UK, the league tables that dominate the higher education sector and that require compliance are subject to much controversy. A survey of UK organisations suggests just how 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 against year. For the marketer, league tables can be manna for heaven or extremely problematic, but rarely can they be ignored.

The relative proliferation of international league tables has been a predictable development, but it can provide university managers and marketers with yet more challenges to face. Some of the new tables have been driven by a need for the originating universities to measure any gaps between their research performance and those of acknowledged "world

class" universities, so enabling them to plan effectively for the future. The ripples in the pond, though, do not stop there. For marketers and managers there are many implications, some of which are highly unpredictable and all of which need to be considered and managed, if possible.

A number of factors emerge to set an additional agenda for Marketing Departments and Corporate Strategy Groups in the UK:

PERCEPTIONS

Regardless of how accurate or inaccurate the methodology for league tables, the fact is that they are taken account of both by individuals (although some groups more so than others) and by the press and media.

They are known to affect perceptions of organisations, but especially so among nondomestic markets. For example, while the UK sector league tables are well documented, they can be viewed by stakeholders in the context of a wide range of additional, freely available information. This information can also have a moderating effect on some 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, that produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, may also have a dramatic effect on perceptions. The real point to note in the media coverage of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University table was less about relative rankings, and more about how "surprised" or otherwise commentators were about the placing of UK organisations. This betrayed the received media "market wisdom" about the relative status of competing universities, and has triggered the initiation of perceptions management projects for a number of UK organisations.

DISENFRACTISEMENT

Internationally reported league tables can have dramatic 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 marketing activity can have a dramatic, but hard to monitor, longer term affect on international recruitment.

STAFF RECRUITMENT

International staff recruitment is on the increase, with US and Australasian universities increasingly advertising 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. This problem is also exacerbated in some UK organisations due to a critical lack of synergy between corporate and employer brand management.

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY...

However detailed the research and evaluation processes for any league table exercise, inevitably, what really gets noticed and reported are the graphics. Pie charts, tables and top 10 and bottom 10 rankings are dominant in all league table reviews and it falls to marketers to manage the response to these published outputs. Most league table reporting is critically "top line", so it is up to individual organisations to make the most of the details behind the facts ad figures.

DIY AND MADE TO MEASURE...

Organisations use league tables variably. Top leaguers tend to focus on quality factors and use league tables as a background to marketing activity. Mid table organisations have the opportunity to use highlights and those aspects that support niche areas of reputation. Movement up or down is also scrutinised by the media and the trigger for profile raising or damage limitation exercises. If domestic and international league tables cause real problems, some organisations may need to decide to take matters into their own hands and develop their own measures.

This could include their own evaluation of KPIs and benchmarking processes, which measure factors that are core to their mission. For example, those universities that do not feature among the dominant top 10s, but which would much prefer to be known for excellent employability, pastoral care or other factors that are central to their brand and important to their stakeholders and prospects.

EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT

Critical issues arise, of course, if organisations register in the public consciousness as top league, but their delivered service levels do not reflect such status. This is a now a major issue in the UK where a tuition-fees driven market demands that students experience a tangible, differentiated return on their investment and in the global market where it is increasingly possible for globally mobile students to attempt to measure "like for like" added value at universities across several continents.

NEW GENERATION TABLES?

The future will hold more league tables for all universities.

These will, though, increasingly need to consider the experiential and service level factors missing from most of the current reports. Already, some UK organisations are planning how to measure and evaluate those factors that will drive their competitive differential in key markets.

The opportunities for the future are centred on monitoring and managing responses to existing league tables and, when possible, taking control to develop university-driven evaluators that articulate the elements of difference and relative value that are critical to the university's audiences and that drive informed decision making. Rosemary Stamp is Director of Stamp Consulting, providing strategic advice and consultancy support to education and public sector organisations across the UK and Europe.

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First published in Education Marketing, November 2004

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