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League Tables: What Chance of Promotion or Relegation?

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LEAGUE TABLES: WHAT CHANCE OF PROMOTION OR RELEGATION?

Andrys Onsman, Monash University, Australia

Australian universities pay great heed to some rankings tables and not so much to others. Of the international ones The Times Higher Education Supplement is preferred to the Jiao Tong, probably because Australian universities fare better in the former. Nationally the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research has wide-spread national status. However, the rankings of greatest interest to Australian universities is that put forward by the federal Government’s Learning and Teaching Performance Fund because financially that has the most immediate and public impact. Like American universities’ single-minded concern with the rankings published in the United States News and World Report, Australian universities are much more concerned with comparisons amongst themselves than internationally. Universities ranked at the lower end are claiming that ranking of any kind is fundamentally flawed and institutionally biased; and that any evaluation of quality based on generic performance criteria will be qualitatively unbalanced. To what extent is the claim that rankings table suggests better and worse universities when in fact there are only different universities, a justifiable claim? Or is it simply an excuse put forward by poorly-performing universities?

Much has been written about the appropriateness of the purpose, construction and use of tabulated rankings of universities (Steele, 2004; Williams & Van Dyke, 2007; Marginson, 2007; Marginson, 2006; Usher & Savino, 2006; HEFCE, 2008; Carey, 2007). Regardless of the weight of contestation about their validity and accuracy, the fact that highly ranked universities use their table positions in marketing gives them more credibility and influence. In the broadest of brush-strokes, it seems that as academics contest their validity and purposes, administrators are nonetheless using them as indicators of quality in their marketing (Hazelkorn, 2006). Van Raan (2006) argues that it is inevitable that if universities are measured somehow, and those measurements are tabulated, then the resulting tables will be used competitively.

According to Carey (2007), there is little doubt that table position has a discernible impact on university marketing strategy, research collaborations, alumni contribution and grants. However, tables also have some unintended effects such as being cited as indicators of quality in external arenas such as Mass Media editorial polemics and court cases (Onsman 2006); the targeting of lower ranking universities as easier avenues for residency qualification (Times of India, 2006) and their use to justify the increasingly mercantile nature of Higher Education at the expense of its function as a public intellectual sphere (Lynch, 2006). In the main, however, it is likely that the university ranked at the top of the table is likely to be happier than the one at the bottom.

Amongst numerous others, Marginson and van der Wende (2006) eloquently and convincingly assert that the tables of university ranking are becoming less avoidable as they are increasingly used in strategic positioning. Given the global nature of Higher Education, international standing becomes the paramount aspect of marketing (Dill & Soo, 2005 Marginson, 2007b, regardless of the fact that the processes that gather the data from which the tables are created may be questionable. As Marginson (2007b) points out, globalization of institutions is not necessarily the same as globalization of disciplinary knowledge. Hence national standing may have a different purpose to international standing – although the distinction is increasingly blurred in the case of the larger and more well-known HEIs.
Although Vidaver-Cohen (2007) is talking specifically about Business Schools, she sums up the current situation for all HEIs:

... despite the global explosion of the rankings industry, and the fact that rankings have become an inescapable proxy for ... reputation in many circles, the validity of the current ranking systems and league tables as creditable measures of reputation has been soundly criticized by educators, scholars, accreditation agencies and ... consumers alike. (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007; p278)

In general terms, until they were ranked in tables, all universities were equal, with the implicit understanding that some were more equal than others. Harvard, Princeton, UCLA, CalTech, Tokyo, Oxbridge and the like were a cut above the rest, but until the Times, Shanghai University and others decided to tell us, who knew whether the University of Sydney was better than the University of Leyden? Of course, universities have always been competitive to a certain degree, claiming to be better than their perceived rivals and trumpeting successes in the local press. As an example, Oxford and Cambridge have been at it for centuries:- Cambridge made the headlines when it beat Oxford in rowing in 1914, despite the latter’s rather dubious their use of American Rhodes scholars. In 1919, it was international headlines when Cambridge took the honours in Rugby, with the crowd “acting like Americans.” In 2007 Cambridge beating Oxford at something again stole the headlines; but this time it wasn’t in sport or debating, it was in the best university list.

Was Oxford concerned with such mundane things as university league tables? A quick look at their website shows that amongst the advertising rhetoric the University trumpets on its home page are the following statistics:

- Oxford was ranked joint second in the world in the Times Higher Education Supplement’s World University Rankings 2007.
- Oxford is repeatedly ranked in the top ten of universities worldwide in the annual tables compiled by Shanghai Jiaotong University.
- In May 2007, Oxford University topped The Guardian’s UK rankings for the third consecutive year.
- Oxford was named Britain’s top university for the sixth year running in the Times Good University Guide (August 2007). (Oxford, 2008)

League tables are different to local rivalries, even if the rivals have no hesitation in using them when they are to their individual advantage. The main difference is that in the case of the former there are external agencies that do the ranking, which takes away what is known in legal terms as “mere puffery” which essentially means the hyperbolic chest-thumping that is meant to be taken with a pinch of salt. Nowadays the league tables are published by the international media as the result of independent and verifiable data collection and therefore an accurate summative report. The tables are released accompanied by a deal of fanfare and razzamatazz, which takes us to the obvious analogy with football.

At the end of each season, most interest in football is focused on the teams at the top or at the bottom. At the top of the ladder is where the promise of Champions’ League places ensures nail-biting finishes. At the bottom, the threat of relegation ensures desperate battles of momentous importance. A cynic may suggest that it’s the promise of massive gate receipts and international exposure for club sponsors and the threat of losing international television revenue that are the real motivators, but undoubtedly each player wants to operate at the
highest level. Else why would relegation see a clear-out of name players? Surely it isn’t just the money?

Middle of the table teams generally either breathe out a sigh of relief that they stayed up or breathe in a deep sigh of disappointment that they didn’t get to the top. For them the buying and selling of players is usually less frenzied, and as a bonus the players get a longer holiday. How many constitute the top teams varies from country to country: for some it may be one or two, for others it can mean four or five. In The Netherlands, the sporting press even refers to the sub-toppers; those below the top three but above the middle pack. In short, the fluctuation in league table positioning results in great deal of activity. Players are bought and sold, sponsors are won and lost, the hearts of fans broken or filled with happiness.

How far will the football analogy take us? It seems unlikely that any HEI would be happy to ranked bottom on any of the league tables. HEIs play in local leagues with the aim of reaching the big international leagues. My own university, Monash, makes no bones about the fact it wants to be a university of significant international standing. So, what strategies do football clubs use to raise their standings, and are there corresponding strategies in HE?

First and foremost both teams and universities need to perform well. They need to score goals: literally for the former, metaphorically for the latter by having

… alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, Highly Cited Researchers, articles indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded (SCIE) and Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). Two new indicators were introduced [for 2008], one is the percentage of articles published in the top 20% journals of each field, and the other is the engineering research expenditure. (Jiao Tong, 2008)

The Times Higher Education Supplement ranking adds a Teaching component (20%), an international Focus component (10%) and a Graduate Employability component (10%) but still has the greatest emphasis on Research (60%). In Australia, the Melbourne Institute (Williams, 2007) argues for a greater percentage share for teaching, based on each HEI’s scope.

The easiest and most effective strategy to move up the tables is to find a sponsor with deep pockets. Nowadays it seems to be the fashion amongst American, Russian and South-East Asian billionaires to buy an English Premier League football club. The equivalent strategy amongst universities is to find a rich benefactor. Bill Gates hasn’t bought a football team: instead he has donated $ US 193 million to Cambridge for a scholarship program to rival Oxford’s Rhodes Scholarships. Even that is small change compared to Harvard University which has an endowment fund of US$35 billion. Indeed many of the larger US universities have endowment funds of more than $10 billion. Most of the Ivy League’s teams, I mean universities, fund a large part of their operational costs from the interest from their endowment funds – Yale sourced almost a third of its costs from that source.

The football analogy dissipates quite quickly because ownership, sponsorship and donation are different processes with different aims. Owners of football teams generally want a return on their investment and to assume control over the entire enterprise. Sponsors generally want a mutually beneficial return and to maintain control over specific joint projects. Donors are more often content with having a wing or a scholarship named after them and generally don’t interfere with the programs. Just as there are very few universities that are
officially owned by an individual and there are very few football teams that receive large donations without strings attached.

Ian Chubb, the Vice Chancellor of the Australian National University, argues that the highest ranked Australian universities, including his, should be given more funding than Australian universities that are more lowly ranked, because all Australian universities are slipping in the international rankings. Australia should, he argues have at least one or two HEIs in the Champions’ League. His argument is that the HEIs with the highest standards should get most of the funding. In effect that means that the universities that make up the self-selected Group of Eight, the universities that, more or less, perform best in the national and international rankings, should get the bulk of Federal funding. Marginson (2006a) sees the trend by national governments to strengthen their top universities to build a stronger global position as part of the convergence of global policies. Harking back to the football analogy, like the Australian competition, the A-League, which coincidentally also has eight teams, the Go8 allows neither relegation nor promotion. The A-league does in fact get the bulk of Federal funding for football, allowing the teams to buy the best players so that one or two of them can successfully compete in the Asian Champions League every year.

If there is no way that your university can lift itself up the table, then perhaps it can use its lower position as a marketing strategy. The Times of India (ToII, 2006) reports Professor Bob Birrell from Monash University as saying that “immigration-oriented higher education had become an important new feature in the less prestigious of the country’s 38 universities”. As an example, the ToII claims the University of Ballarat was targeted by Indian students as an easier place to get a degree that will give the same number of immigration points as the higher ranked HEIs. Ballarat has some 600 foreign students, whereas Monash has roughly 20,000. If Monash’s Michiel Baas is correct then three-quarters of them will apply for and get permanent residency. Perhaps the equivalent practice in football is to support a third division team because you know you will get a seat in the stadium at a reasonable price, whereas to get a seat for a Manchester United home game is impossible.

There is, however, a fundamental difference that limits the football analogy. Teams are owned by individuals and/or shareholders, HEIs are sponsored by benefactors. Nonetheless, as with football clubs, money in the coffers allows a university to sponsor the best students; to have independent research centres; to have secure international business partnerships and as importantly, it allows top universities to buy the best performers from lower ranked ones – all without having to return a (literal) dividend on investment.

In Australia the Group of Eight universities jostle amongst themselves (with occasional intrusion from a “lesser” institution) for research status and grants; for teaching status and reward; and for international reputation and standing; for their place in the international and national rankings. Ross Williams of the Melbourne Institute points out that although Australia’s two major funding mechanisms, the Research Quantum Fund (RQF) and the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) take the ambitions, objectives and performances of individual institutions into account when doling out the money, league tables tend to use aggregated scores that favour the Sciences and Industry related disciplines to rank HEIs.

To some degree, using tabulated data about teaching effectiveness is fraught with potential dangers or rather it is demonstrably easier to use institutional outputs as ranking criteria. As Raan (2005) puts it:
In general, studies based on bibliometric analyses will always have difficulties to cover the social science and humanities properly, given the inherent limitation of the bibliometric methodology with respect to these disciplines. (v. Raan, 2005: p5)

The same argument applies to using teaching or learning as a quantifiable index.

Whilst the LTPF is not meant to be a league table as such, Kerrie Lee Harris from Melbourne University’s Centre for Higher Education Studies (Harris, 2007) shows that it is certainly used as one. The annual release is presented in the general mass media with much greater fanfare than the international rankings, whilst the tabulated RQF allocations on the other hand barely rate a mention.

The public media hype surrounding the publication of the LTPF tables has built up very quickly. In 2003, the Australian Government announced amongst three major initiatives that would promote excellence in learning and teaching, the establishment of the LTPF to “reward those higher education providers that best demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching”. In 2006 the first $54M was up for grabs, increasing to $83M in 2007 and $113M in 2008. The first set of results was presented as a table:

In the first iteration there were obviously some flaws in the process, probably because the HEIs were ranked on a single index. For example, the Australian Maritime College’s ranking at second was bewildering to say the least, because for the best part of the previous year the College had been involved in pay claim-based industrial action involving a staff lock-out that had gone on for months; had conducted little in the way of peer reviews; had done no research...
to speak of; had a poor international standing and had not figured on the previous year’s “practice run” table.

The biggest shock however, as reported in the headlines on the front page of Australia’s only national broadsheet was that a regional university (Wollongong) had beaten “the nation’s most-prestigious higher learning institutions” in “an official league table” which would be used by the Federal Government to “reward the best-performing teaching universities with an extra $250 million in funding.” (Illing, 2005; p1)

However, there was an even greater discrepancy. The post-hoc weighting meant that in reality there were two tables: one for the HEIs overall standing and the other for how much money the HEI received. The two did not always correspond. For example, in terms of money Monash, ranked 14th (which was not a good result for a university in the Group of Eight) received 4.59 million dollars, which was substantially more than the second ranked institute, the Australian Maritime College which received $1.14M.

Harris (2007) showed that the “clear winner”, the University of Wollongong, responded by publicly emphasizing that the win was due to their excellent teaching, while one of the HEIs at the bottom of the list (University of Adelaide, ranked 36 out of 38) blamed the flawed system, and called for a change. Wellen (2005) predicted that such responses would happen, based on the North American experience:

… rankings are treated with great seriousness by nearly all universities, and those institutions that score well never tire of citing their results in university promotional material. An institution that is ranked lower than its peers will complain bitterly about the flawed methodology and blindspots of these consumer reports. Consequently, behind the scenes, many universities are eager to alter and adapt their image and academic practices to improve their scores. (Wellen, 2005; p28)

In fact those at the bottom of the list had some cause to be disgruntled because the criteria and processes used to rank the tables have changed for each of the three years the LTPF has been in operation, suggesting that those in charge of the Fund are aware that the process needs to be refined to make it reflect the actual performances of the HEI. The fact that the process continues to be altered from year to year indicates that ranking is far from an exact science, but as there are millions of dollars at stake, it nonetheless needs to be transparent and accountable.

In 2007, financial rewards were allocated according to the rankings of discipline groupings. Undoubtedly this was a fairer way to divvy up the cash but it had the unforeseen effect of the total amount of money a HEI received becoming the criterion according to which the HEIs were ranked. Whereas 14 of Australia’s HEIs received a share of the S54M in 2006, in 2007, 30 HEIs received a share of the more than $83M (Australian Education Network, 2008). Despite the fact that rewards were based on Discipline Groups (Science, computing, engineering, architecture and agriculture; Business, Law and Economics; Humanities, Arts and Education; Health, with rankings into Band A1, Band A2, Band B and Band C), the ranking of HEIs was done according to how much money each received. The winner in 2007 was the University of Melbourne, which received almost $9M. Monash University achieved a ranking in each of the bands and still managed to receive more than $4.5M. We were ranked about 8th, with a prize of about $4.5M. The previous year’s winner, the University of Wollongong came in at number 6, winning $5.4M.
This year’s results threw the winner’s laurel leaf to the Australian National University. Monash University lifted its overall ranking to 1st on the “Money Earning Table”, receiving $10.55m of the $83m on offer. It’s not that we are competitive, but we beat the University of Melbourne. More importantly the University made the LTPF a priority for its Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT). Whilst there may justifiably be some argument about whether a higher ranking on the LTPF actually is a measure of advancement in learning and teaching, the University clearly considers where it is ranked on the teaching league table, as well as on the research league table as being of enough importance to make it a strategic priority. In reality CALT had less to do with the win than the Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ), the group that administers the Quality Assurance instruments, such as the Student Evaluations of Learning and Teaching and the Course Experience Questionnaire. The University’s primary aim was to raise its rankings, not the quality of its teaching. The two are not necessarily related (see among many others, Merritt, 2007) but a $10M windfall is worthy of institutional effort regardless of what it is actually given for.

Even without direct financial benefit, one of the reasons why ranking tables are considered to be problematic, particularly in the area of teaching is that they may cause HEI administrators to focus on how they can improve their institution’s ranking rather than on the quality and efficacy of its programs (Policano, 2007; Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). Such a response, although inevitable, may also turn the position on league tables into an end in itself, with a resultant loss of universities existing for the public good (Calhoun, 2006). Calhoun argues that the desire to rise in the rankings will lead those universities that can to compete for the best students, the main strategy therefore being to be high in the rankings and the second to offer cheaper or free entry. According to Calhoun, such self perpetuation comes at the cost of either charging the less able student more or excluding them from prestigious courses. Ranking then, is the result of the corporatisation and commercialisation of Higher Education Institutes around the world. Commerce depends upon competition: for universities, where every other HEI is the competition.

As an aside, whilst it is a common commercial assumption that those who buy a product want and have a right to know how the alternatives stack up, ranking is not the inevitable result of accountability. Referring back to the earlier argument that HEIs are unlike football clubs in that they do not have owners who are motivated by profit, neither are they accountable in a corporate sense. HEIs are accountable in terms of the Quality Assurance processes they themselves have put in place – which in very broad-brush terms is what the Australian University Quality Agency, the national HEI auditors, evaluates in their triennial reviews. Accountability is not a criterion for measurement used by the League table compilers.

A final note of caution about the future of the LTPF comes from the announcement by the newly elected Labour Government of Australia to slash more than $10.5 M from the national Higher Education body, the Carrick Institute. When the Institute’s backers persuaded the Government to not cut its funding, the LTFP was targeted instead. Even if the Federal Government reduces the current total funding by less than 10%, the Federal Government’s willingness to eat into the Fund at all suggests a less than wholehearted endorsement of it.

It is interesting to conjecture where Australia will head in its use of league tables. At the moment both the LTPF and the RQF are used as quasi summative tables of reward for performance. Their use as guides for potential students is assumed to be driven by their desire to enter the best university they can get into. However, studies by Pimpa (2001) and (Deumert et al, 2005) suggest that students are far more strategic when making that choice.
Monash University is pinning its hopes on international tables taking greater cognizance of internationality, which would be in its favour:

2.3.3 *Research performance and reputation of the university will not only be the two major factors driving the current global ranking emphasis, sooner if not later, the ‘internationality’ or internationalisation of a university will increasingly become the third prominent factor in ranking methodology.* (Fahey, 2007)

Fahey (2007) suggests the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) as a model for measuring internationality, based on the number of international academic staff and the amount of time a staff spends internationally; the number of international doctoral and post-doctoral candidates, opportunities for student mobility, foreign language skills, international research collaborations and networks amongst other criteria. What is not alluded to in Fahey’s comment is the emphasis that CHE places on their rankings (published annually in Die Zeit) being an information service for international students wanting to enroll in a German university. There is no sum total, no league table positions. Instead the multiple rankings are multi-dimensional that are weighted to avoid random fluctuations in statistical analysis of allocated scores being seen as consistent and verifiable difference between HEIs.

Internationally, the CHE system is assuming the mantle of best practice in ranking tabulation, with other countries such the Netherlands adapting their system (Studiekeuze123) to mirror CHE (van der Wende & Westerheyden, 2007; p1). Whilst there is a similarity in the process of the CHE system and that used in the LTPF, their purposes are manifestly different. The former sees itself primarily as an information system with no reward to the HEIs, the latter is entirely a reward for performance model that does little to inform potential students beyond the general. Regardless of the former gaining more credibility in the sector, Monash University accepts the latter as inevitable:

2.3.5 *Whether we like it or not, rankings are here to stay. Rankings will have a significant influence on how universities view themselves. Rankings will force institution to focus on league table criteria, which will inform their strategic goals, annual plans and resource allocation.* (Fahey, 2007; p2)

In the headline article of the IMHE’s December 2007 issue of *Info*, Ellen Hazelkorn reports that

*University leaders believe rankings help maintain and build institutional position and reputation; good students use rankings to ‘shortlist’ university choice, especially postgraduates; and key stakeholders use rankings to influence their decisions about accreditation, funding, sponsorship and employee recruitment. Respondents say ‘reputation derived from league tables is a critical determinant for applicants’. Almost 50% respondents use their institutional rank for publicity purposes, in press releases, official presentations and their website.* (Hazelkorn, 2007; p1)

In Australia, the situation is much the same. Further, in Australia the shift in focus to worldwide rankings is less pronounced, except amongst the “Group of Eight” universities. There is evidence that Australian universities too are establishing units charged with monitoring and improving their university’s ranking. There is less support for the notion that there is an increasing gap between the elite HEIs and those servicing the masses although the development of the Melbourne model and the call by the vice-chancellor of the ANU for
greater funding for the better performing HEIs lends the idea some credibility. In conclusion it seems likely that a CHE type model is unlikely to find favour in Australia as long as the two main tables are lists of rewards rather than useful and accurate sources of information for current and potential stakeholders.
REFERENCES


The Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University was accessed on the 28/04/2008 at http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/
## APPENDIX: LTPF ALLOCATIONS FOR 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University (in alphabetical order)</th>
<th>University Grant</th>
<th>Science, computing, engineering, architecture and agriculture</th>
<th>Business, law and economics</th>
<th>Humanities, arts and education</th>
<th>Health</th>
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** Indicates universities excluded by the Fund’s Expert Panel from this discipline group due to a low number of responses.