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How Should We React to World University League Tables?

If you click on Sussex University's home page, you will see the future. It is unsettling. Between an item on advice for freshers and one on obesity research, there is a link to a world league table of universities.

This ranking is new. It will be important. The authors' methodology is persuasive and it appears that the table will be re-done every year. In my judgement it should frighten -- and may even come to haunt -- universities across the world. As though to make their global point, the league table's creators are in Shanghai.

How should we react?

First, brands are power. Students can now train in almost any country; faculty members can work anywhere. So global reputations matter intensely.

Football league tables illustrate the key point. They fix in our minds a perception of quality. Humans are too busy to invest time in figuring out the detailed truth, so, perfectly sensibly, people use league table positions as rules of thumb. That is about to happen in the world (literally) of higher education.

Second, because university quality is exposed so sharply in a league table of this kind, we will soon witness efforts by institutions to manipulate where their university lies. In other words there will be strategic behaviour -- some of it undesirable. That is what we have seen in response to UK school and university league tables.

Third, this global league table will eventually put the RAE (research assessment exercise) out of business. Why bother with something parochial when there is an independent league table from abroad? It is interesting to look at an RAE-based ranking of our country's

universities alongside their world league table ranking. Clear discrepancies emerge.

What we once called redbrick universities do better in world league tables than I had expected. On closer inspection, they deserve to do so. Most British newspapers have used silly ways of ranking universities, and I believe that has misled many parents, and distorted how people think about our nation's institutions of higher education. In my opinion these world rankings will do us painful good because they focus back on a university's core business: ideas. The amount you spend on your sports facilities does not matter a jot in the world university league table. Research quality is everything.

Fourth, there are problems with the Shanghai global table. But they are all fixable. No weight is currently assigned, for instance, to humanities. That will have to be changed, perhaps by using the Humanities citation index. Moreover, the creators of the table seem to have forgotten that scientists publish many more multi-author papers than social scientists, and some adjustment ought to be made there. The size of a university is also treated oddly. If I were the boss of the California Institute of Technology I would be cross, because his institution would be top if the Shanghai league table had standardized properly for size. Nevertheless, those who constructed the league table did make an attempt here; no doubt they will refine it next year. In passing, I was interested to discover that Caltec seems to be the only institution run by a Nobel prize winner.

Fifth, UK universities do well. To my surprise, Cambridge and Oxford are in the top 10 in the world. Partly that high ranking stems too much for comfort from data far in the past, so we should not be sanguine. Nevertheless, our nation has 11 universities in the top 100, which puts us second behind the United States.

Sixth, the world league table implicitly emphasises individual talent. A large weight is given, for example, for producing people who win Nobel prizes and Fields medals. I expect this fact to lead to tactical hiring and greater wage dispersion inside universities – for the simple reason that picking up one of these scientists just before they win the Prize can put dozens of places on a university's world ranking.

Seventh, and unsurprisingly, private universities dominate the international league table. They have the resources.

And in the future? A further look on the web suggests that universities like Imperial and UCL are about to publicise their own positions in the world university ranking.

This thing is going to have profound effects.