

The Intensification of Rankings Logic in an Increasingly Marketised Higher Education Environment

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Introduction

A study for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) by the author and colleagues concluded that institutional rankings were being used for a broader range of purposes than originally intended, and bestowed with more meaning than the data alone may bear (Locke *et al.*, 2008). The study found, in particular, that higher education institutions in England were strongly influenced by rankings in both their strategic decision-making and more routine management processes. Case study institutions reported increasing reference to the rankings by prospective students and their families and by academics seeking job opportunities. Other studies have highlighted their use by employers in the marketing of graduate jobs and the selection of candidates (Morley & Aynsley, 2007). Yet, analysis of three UK national tables and two world rankings confirmed that they largely reflected institutional reputation and resources rather than the quality or performance of institutions.

A higher education institution's reputation is based on how attractive it is, and therefore how selective it can be, with regard to students, academic and other professional staff, research funders and partnerships. As higher education becomes increasingly subject to marketisation, reputation becomes critical because it is regarded by universities, employers, government and the best qualified and most mobile students as ultimately more important than quality. However, the diversion of resources towards activities that enhance institutional reputation may actually detract from the quality and performance of educational activities that are likely to be of most interest to potential students and their families. Expenditure on extensive marketing campaigns, impressive new buildings and facilities and attracting international research 'stars' are thought to be a signal of 'high quality' and therefore likely to increase shares in the markets for students, consultancy services, and research funds. But this may mean that money is not spent on supporting students' learning, improving educational resources, and the professional development of younger academic staff.

The interaction between rankings and marketisation helps to explain why compilers and publishers have been surprised by the influence of their rankings: market mechanisms and responses to these have transformed their (not entirely innocent) attempts to provide simple and 'user friendly' guides to the higher education landscape for prospective students and their families into vehicles for auditing and producing changes in performance. It also explains why attempts by

[Corrections added on 7 March 2014, after first publication: The editorial office's corrections for this article were inadvertently omitted and have been incorporated in this version of the article.]

higher education institutions themselves to boycott rankings have largely failed: rankings are linked with larger and more far-reaching changes in economies and society that cannot simply be rejected, and they appear to have to be, at least in part, accommodated, even where they are resisted in principle.

However, this accommodation — a form of internalisation and, ultimately, institutionalisation of ranking systems' rationales and processes — may produce unintended and undesirable consequences for higher education institutions. The concepts of internalisation and institutionalisation help to explain the processes by which ranking systems logic becomes embedded in organisational structures and procedures and established as the norm, despite initial skepticism and resistance. They also help to illuminate the differential responses to rankings of distinct types of institution and the different parts within an institution, the relations between internal units and university-wide management, and the activities within institutions — together with the unfolding of these responses over time — that have yet to be explored empirically to any great extent and in any detail.

This article asks how we can conceptualise the ways in which organisational members make sense of, and then respond to, rankings. Here, the approaches adopted by some US researchers seem most likely to be fruitful. The empirical basis of the argument is a re-analysis of the aforementioned study of institutions responding to rankings drawing on the conceptual framework already outlined. This is supplemented by reflections on the emergence of more sophisticated websites presenting detailed statistics that enable prospective students — and others — to compare courses and institutions on indicators such as modes of student assessment and employment outcomes. With the transfer (in England) of the majority of the cost of study to students, these developments appear to be intensifying the impact of rankings and other data-driven market mechanisms. The key findings of these analyses are discussed, building on those of an earlier version (Locke, 2011a). The article concludes by calling for further differentiated and conceptually-informed empirical investigation of the influence of rankings and other data-driven logics on, and within, higher education institutions.

Institutions Responding to Rankings

How can we conceptualise the ways in which higher education institutions and their members internalise the logic of ranking systems and their influence becomes institutionalised in organisational processes and structures? A number of US researchers have begun to tackle this, although largely focusing on how rankings influence specialist academic organisations, such as law schools and business schools.

Espeland and Sauder (2007) have employed the concept of 'reactivity' — or how people change their behaviour in reaction to being evaluated, observed, or measured. A reactive measure is one that changes the phenomenon it is designed to evaluate, because those who are being evaluated begin to concentrate on the measure rather than the activity. Espeland and Sauder conceptualise the nature of reactivity as patterns that shape how people within organisations make sense of things and how they interact with rankings, each other, and other institutions. They identify two of the most important mechanisms that induce reactivity, 'the self-fulfilling prophecy' and 'commensuration'.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are:

Processes by which reactions to social measures confirm the expectations or predictions that are embedded in measures or which increase the validity of the measures by encouraging behavior that conforms to it (Espeland & Sauder, 2007, p. 11).

Examples include adopting improved ranking positions as an explicit institutional goal and using rankings to characterise and market the institution to external audiences.

Commensuration is characterised by:

The transformation of qualities into quantities that share a metric . . . (It) shapes what we pay attention to, which things are connected to other things, and how we express sameness and difference. (Espeland & Sauder, 2007, p. 16).

Ranking systems, for example, simplify complex information, decontextualise it so that it can be organised and integrated in particular ways, and eliminate huge amounts of other, qualitative, information that cannot be assimilated within the system. Many of the factors that are most important to prospective students are undervalued or entirely excluded by compilers. But, because numbers are depersonalised, they appear more authoritative and definitive and, once they are decontextualised, they can be put to new purposes in new contexts, such as the internal management of higher education institutions.

The authors argue that these two means of inducing reactivity tend to produce effects at different rates: commensuration can have an immediate effect because it changes the form of information; self-fulfilling prophecies, however, may only emerge gradually, as it takes time for people to alter their expectations and modify their behaviour accordingly. Higher education institutions' initial reactions may be dismissive, but when it becomes clear that others – prospective students, their parents, graduate employers, alumni, other higher education institutions, lay governors and government officials – are taking notice of rankings, managers start to treat them more seriously. They may then seek to understand the ranking systems and how their institutions' data are employed in the calculation of ranking positions. They may criticise the criteria used by compilers, seek to obtain modifications and attempt to 'adjust' the information they present. Later on, institutions might start to invest in improving their rank positions, adjusting decision making to take account of the effects on rankings, using them for promotional purposes, and incorporating them in strategic planning.

In detailing how the most important mechanisms of inducing institutions' reactivity to rankings operate, Espeland and Sauder started to explore the means by which organisational members begin to internalise the logic of rankings and how their influence becomes institutionalised in processes, systems and structures over time. This is not to suggest that these are smooth, uncontested, or inevitable changes. It may even be that, while recognising and criticising the transforming influence of rankings, institutional members feel compelled – by reduced public funding, market forces, institutional leaders, or government or state policy, for example — to facilitate and extend their effects (Gioia & Corley, 2002). Low rankings, in particular, can lead to a — seemingly unstoppable — downward spiral

of negative impacts on funding, student enrolment, staff recruitment, and research capability (Walpole, 1998).

Espeland and Sauder have gone on to develop a more sophisticated understanding of how organisations respond to rankings in a later article (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). They have developed a Foucauldian analysis to explore how rankings have permeated U.S. law schools so extensively, preventing them from resisting their influence, despite vociferous protests (see also Löwenheim, 2008). Drawing on Foucault's conception of discipline, they argue that it is difficult for institutions to buffer these institutional pressures because of the ways in which organisational actors tend to internalise external pressures and become self-disciplining. This internalisation is fostered by the anxiety produced by rankings, the resistance they provoke, and the attraction for administrators and others of trying to manipulate them.

These complex processes of accommodation involve 'an assortment of actors who struggle to reconcile their sense of themselves as professional educators with an imposed market-based logic of accountability' (Sauder & Espeland, 2009, p. 66). Their reactions may vary and change over time — some may try to resist and others may focus on attempts to manipulate the rankings — but, the authors argue, rankings become naturalised and legitimised as arbiters of status for the vast majority of institutions and their members.

Sauder and Espeland's conceptual framework allows them to analyse the influence of rankings in a dynamic and nuanced way. It highlights how rankings are not simply imposed on higher education institutions from outside and that resistance and manipulation are possible. As in their earlier article, their approach also acknowledges how institutions' responses evolve over time, and how rankings seduce as well as coerce. This is an important antidote to those analyses that underestimate the power of institutions to respond actively to environmental forces and that assume they react passively to external pressures. Ultimately, though, even resistance and manipulation lead to the insinuation and normalisation of ranking systems logic, and there is little sense in Sauder and Espeland's analysis of any positive or constructive effects for some institutions and for some stakeholders. Moreover, the Foucauldian concepts they employ do not lend themselves to exploring the reverberations of rankings *within* institutions, for example, how they are used by governing bodies and senior management to drive change, by particular disciplines to argue for more resources, and by individual academics to enhance their career prospects. Also, the language of 'impact' and 'buffer' is one dimensional. Effectively, it only countenances two possible responses to the normative pressure of rankings: conformity or resistance — and ultimately, anyway, resistance turns out to be 'futile'. Yet, conformity to rankings is not an inevitable or prescribed process.

There have been few attempts in the literature so far to understand why organisations vary in their responses to rankings and why some are more likely than others to change as a result of such external pressures (Martins, 2005). Analysis needs to examine not just the differences in the *degree* of change, but also variations in the *nature* of that change. Whether, where, when and how rankings serve as an incentive for change may depend on the academic unit, the nature of the ranking and the length of time during which a lower than expected (or desired) ranking is experienced (Walpole, 1998). The answers to these questions will depend on careful empirical analysis and cannot simply be 'read off' from the generic features of rankings and the common reactions of higher education institutions and their

members. The remainder of this article attempts to make a start in this more differentiated approach to understand the influence of rankings on higher education institutions in England.

An Analysis of English Case Studies

This section presents the results of a re-analysis of the detailed findings of case studies of six higher education institutions in England (Locke *et al.*, 2008). The case studies were based on semi-structured interviews with key personnel from each of the institutions, for example, representatives from the senior management, governing body, careers services and departments concerned with communication and marketing, and domestic and international recruitment. In addition, two focus groups at school or departmental level were held in each institution where possible. Phrases and sentences quoted below are taken from summaries of these interviews and focus group discussions. The research team also analysed documents provided by the higher education institutions and published material, for example, on web sites. The participating institutions were selected to be as representative of the different types of institution in the sector and positions in league table rankings as possible. Where relevant, this case study material is amplified by the results of an online survey of all higher education institutions in England. The study investigated the impact of five league tables, three national (the *Sunday Times University Guide*, *The Times Good University Guide*, and *The Guardian University Guide*) and two world rankings (*Shanghai Jiao Tong University Academic Ranking of World Universities* and *THES-QS World University Rankings*). The less prestigious institutions only referred to the national league tables in which they featured, while the more prestigious universities referred to both the national and world rankings.

Re-analysis of the case study evidence revealed six main ways in which different types of higher education institution and distinct levels (e.g. governing bodies, senior management, school and department) and parts of institutions (academic, administrative, marketing, recruitment and admissions, curriculum committees, data and planning, and so on) were affected by, reacted to, and used rankings — both national and international — in various ways.

Strategic Positioning and Decision-making

Rankings are now one of the main mechanisms for higher education institutions to position themselves — in markets, as members of particular lobbying groups and in formulating their institutional missions and aims, for example. For those institutions just below the ‘élite’, the national tables are, perhaps, more key to strategic positioning, because they can help to distinguish a university in the minds of the public from the mass of mid-table institutions. It is important for these universities to situate themselves within ‘competitive sets’ or clusters of institutions immediately above and below them in the rankings. One such institution sought to emulate the institutions at the top of their set or band as these have the same ‘background’ and ‘heritage’. The governing body and senior management spent a great deal of time asking why their ‘peer competitors’ had done better in the national tables and what they would have to do to catch them.

Indeed, it is often the lay governors of an institution who have become most exercised about ranking positions and appear more susceptible to ambitious and unrealistic expectations about where the institution could or should be positioned.

League tables simplify complex processes and are familiar from other areas of competitive activity, such as sport and business. They are a handy way for lay governors to exert pressure on a university management who may seem 'complacent' or constrained by academic obduracy and belligerent trade unions. In one former polytechnic, much lower than other similar institutions in the national tables, the vice-chancellor had committed to improving the university's position but, in the view of one governor, 'had made a rod for his own back' and risked his own job security. In another former polytechnic, highly positioned among its peers, the governors were unwilling to bankrupt the university just to improve rankings but were keenly aware of their importance, particularly in the international student market on which the institution relied for a significant proportion of its income.

Redefining Activities and Altering Perceptions

A senior manager in a small university college thought that league tables had highlighted how the institution had not been 'terribly business-focused'. 'The business is education, but we haven't measured that and improved management information'. For departmental staff in a former polytechnic, league tables were part of a more formalised approach to evaluation generally. 'It has taken us aback and made us realise that our tacit knowledge of ourselves and our "ranking" in the subject community may not be objective enough.'

Two areas of activity subject to redefinition were common to several of the case study institutions in our study and directly related to elements of the methodologies for compiling league tables: 'the student experience' and 'graduate employability'. The substitution of the National Student Survey (NSS) results for the increasingly out of date grades for assessed teaching quality awarded to academic departments by the national Quality Assurance Agency seems to have led to the reduction of teaching and learning to the six categories and 22 questions included in the Survey. For the pro-vice chancellor of one older university, the NSS had 'helped' them 'to rebalance teaching with research'. It was a counterweight to the periodic Research Assessment Exercise. It put the spotlight on heads of departments with poor NSS results and introduced peer pressure from other heads to make improvements. In several institutions, this resulted in enhancement of student support services, the building of new study facilities and extensive staff development activities. The impact on teaching quality, the curriculum and students' learning outcomes, however, was not so apparent.

Evolving Responses

Institutions' responses to rankings changed over time. Initially, league tables may be viewed as solely a media relations issue — a success to be celebrated or a public relations crisis to be managed. Most institutions were naïve to begin with, uncomprehending of the methods by which individual tables were compiled, and unaware of the connection between the data they supplied to the national statistics agency and the outcomes of the rankings. In most of the case study institutions, the first action was to establish a 'working group' to analyse the league tables, including consulting with the more forthcoming compilers, and to review how data were gathered and submitted by the institution. Common outcomes were to include data that had previously been missed out, such as departmental expenditure on subject specific libraries and those academics on fractional contracts. Higher ranked universities also had to point out to compilers that they had included them

in tables for disciplines they did not teach, due to the mis-coding of students. Subsequently, discussions about league tables tended to move from this mid-level both upwards, to the senior management and governing body, and downwards, to the departments. However, in several of the lower ranked case study institutions, it was evident that departmental staff remained unclear about the connection between the data they supplied to the centre, the institution's submission to the national agency and the published league tables based on these submissions.

Following these early stages of coming to terms with rankings, institutions began to translate their newfound intelligence into strategic actions. Differences of emphasis between the types of institution were predictable: entry requirements and the correct assignment of research publications and Nobel Prize winners were a priority for the top-ranking institutions; graduate employment was significant for the smaller older university; and the NSS more important for the former polytechnics and university college. There were more subtle differences, however, in the overall approaches. Those outside, but aspiring to the top echelons focused on tackling weaknesses and no longer tolerating poor performance, and were more willing to make resource allocations in an attempt to reach the position they felt they deserved. The highly-ranked university focused more on what a 'top-10 university should be doing', developing and refining its brand and ensuring that its academics, alumni, partners, etc, 'spread the word' to the key markets — in short, it was more concerned with communicating its ranking successes.

Affective Responses

The case studies provided persuasive evidence of the effect of rankings on the 'collective psyche' of an institution and the strong emotional responses they can provoke, despite a common skepticism about the purposes of the publishers and the methods of the compilers. The general tenor of affective responses was predictable: the more highly ranked institutions found 'solace' in their success as represented by their ranking position, which gave staff a 'boost' and helped students and alumni to 'feel good' about their university. However, even here, there were subtle distinctions between younger staff who were 'thrilled to bits and felt part of the success' and older colleagues who were more 'skeptical' about rises in ranking positions.

In all those institutions outside the upper echelons of the league tables, however, the predominant emotion was hurt — a deeply personal but also collective pain. Staff morale could be damaged by a poor result, especially if it occurred in an area that an institution believed it had focused on and developed strengths, such as supporting students' learning or preparing graduates for work. In such circumstances, there was 'a sense of affront' and even 'moral outrage' at the ways in which particular tables were perceived to have misrepresented the institution and the work of its staff.

League tables were described as a source of stress and as leading, in some cases, to individual distress. Poor results could produce considerable soul-searching, 'a sense of impotence' and the feeling that 'you can never do well enough'. They provoked blame — of others within the institution and of oneself. Anxiety was created by changes in ranking methodologies and the uncertainty about what other institutions might be doing to improve their standings. Longer term, these effects could undermine the self-esteem of staff and students, creating 'a malaise that lingers' and a lasting 'gloom' rather than 'dramatic slumps in morale'.

Self-management

Both senior management and departmental staff described rankings as a lever for internal institutional change. On the one hand, they had helped senior administrators to gain backing from the vice-chancellor for actions that would not have been taken otherwise. On the other hand, senior academic managers admitted to using lower than expected results to put pressure on middle managers — or empower them — to introduce improvements. Deans and heads of departments and administrative units had been ‘hauled in’ by senior management to account for a poor showing. Peer pressure from other middle managers had ‘shamed’ their colleagues into making amends or best practice had been disseminated from highly placed departments to those ranked lower. Disappointment with ranking positions had encouraged reviews and self-assessments, and benchmarking with other departments within the institution and with similar departments in other HEIs.

As well as feeding competition between institutions, league tables had also helped to foster competition between departments in the same university. This was encouraged either through the subject based tables produced by several of the publishers or by the institution itself disaggregating, by department, the data collated and submitted to the national agency and circulating them internally. Together with benchmarking exercises, this element of internal competition was given impetus by performance management systems that targeted areas of ‘weakness’ and aimed to ‘raise the average’ through all individual units improving their performance. Ranking systems had given ‘more focus’ and attached ‘greater urgency’ to such initiatives.

These findings, and others from the case studies and survey, suggest that rankings are constraining decision-making and channeling it in certain directions. In particular, they appear to generate among personnel in institutions a fear of failure, of criticism from peers and the media and of ‘blaming and shaming’. Several interviewees highlighted the danger of this tendency engendering risk aversion and restricting innovation. One respondent from a former polytechnic claimed this was preventing the institution from becoming a ‘properly modern university’.

Degrees of Control: Resisting, Managing, Exploiting and ‘Gaming’ the Rankings

A very small number of institutions in the UK have sought to mitigate the negative effects of league tables on their reputation by refusing to give permission to the national statistics agency, HESA, to release their data to compilers. There is evidence that this number is growing, but it remains a tiny fraction, and the vast majority appear to wish to gain any kudos they can from whichever table or individual indicator shows them in a good light, or to avoid the imputed criticism of being afraid of being ‘shown up’. In response to threats to withdraw, compilers maintain they will simply substitute HESA data with information already in the public domain over which the institution will have no control.

Interviewees from all the case study institutions asserted that they were not ‘driven’ by the league tables and some professed the naïve belief that focusing on the ‘right things’ should automatically lead to improved ranking positions. Some respondents distinguished between ‘real quality’ and the attributes favored by league table compilers. While they acknowledged that their competitors were almost certainly attempting to improve their own positions, there was no strong

sense of the zero sum nature of rankings systems or the realisation that they may have to expend a lot of effort just to ‘stand still’ and maintain the same rank. Also, it was clear that the identification of the ‘right things’ to concentrate on and what to do about them was being shaped by rankings systems and the key indicators employed by compilers. Those institutions developing more sophisticated approaches to rankings had at least identified which indicators they could have some impact on, applying ‘the 80:20 principle’ (focusing 80% of their efforts on the 20% of the indicators they believed could be influenced). In the lower-ranked institutions, the focus tended to be on spending on facilities and ‘the student experience’.

In the majority of cases, institutions had concluded they could do something about their student survey and first destination (FDR) results, despite the lack of evidence for this. Many had mobilised final year students to complete the NSS on the assumption that ‘satisfied customers’ tend not to respond as willingly as those who were dissatisfied, and so results would improve. Some had tried this with the FDR survey, but had only succeeded in slightly increasing the proportion of unemployed graduates recorded. A few lower-ranked institutions had taken a more differentiated approach to improving their NSS response rate by avoiding large departments with a record of being dissatisfied. These same institutions were also seeking to counter bad publicity circulating on social networking sites and to disseminate positive messages about their institution. One interviewee believed that a personalised and individualised approach to students at all stages of their relationship with the university, from applicant to alumnus, might be one way of circumventing the league tables in the future.

Senior managers at these same institutions acknowledged having to spend considerable amounts of time managing reactions to league table results and demonstrating — to governors, staff and external constituencies — that they were taking an informed, professional and realistic approach. They were trying to maintain a degree of ‘stability’ and agree a level-headed and consistent attitude, ‘toning down’ extreme reactions. They sought to ‘de-sensitise’ the league table ‘issue’ in the institution by ‘routinising’ and ‘accepting them’. These managers would place their analyses of rankings in a wider context, provide a ‘filter swallow’ and ‘spread some jam’ around their reports.

New Forms of Statistical Comparison: beyond rankings?

The re-analysis of the six case studies included in the original study provides ample evidence and numerous examples of the ways in which different higher education institutions have been affected by, responded to and used rankings at various points and at different levels of the organisation. This analysis illustrates how institutions at various positions in the rankings, operating in different markets and with contrasting histories, resources and reputations will differ in their approaches to mitigating the negative effects and maximising the advantages of rankings. Whether it is a ‘top’ university seeking to sustain its reputation and improve its brand recognition globally, or a lowly-ranked institution ‘waking up’ to the importance of reputation, learning the rules of the league tables game and ‘catching up’ with its peers, rankings had exerted a major influence on institutional behavior. Clearly, the case study institutions were evolving in their responses and, no doubt, an institution’s approach could shift significantly, for example, due to a change of leadership or of mission. Their tactics have

continued to develop, not least as the methodologies of ranking systems have been revised or the bases of particular indicators — such as the NSS or research quality assessment — have been reformed.

Major developments since the original study was undertaken have included the extension of national data collection and the emergence of increasingly sophisticated online tools for comparing statistical information about higher education courses, institutions, and even national systems. Examples of these are the 2012 revised version of the UK web site *Unistats* (<http://unistats.direct.gov.uk>) — ‘The official website for comparing UK higher education course data’ — and U-Multirank (<http://www.u-multirank.eu>) — ‘a new multi-dimensional ranking of higher education institutions of all types, from all parts of Europe and the world’. Key characteristics of these systems include: their development on the basis of consultation with providers and users of the data, and their continuing iteration through evaluation; the generation of new categories of data, often ‘self-reported’ by institutions which seek to better describe university ‘performance’; more comprehensive data rather than a limited number of indicators, that aim to represent a wider range of university activities; the facility for users to decide how and by which indicators they wish to rank institutions; and greater degrees of specificity in the data, for example, on individual courses and subject disciplines as well as whole institutions.

While these tools and systems can be presented as challenging conventional newspaper rankings by being more individualised for the user and, potentially, undermining fixed reputational hierarchies of institutions, they represent an intensification of rankings logic and its internalisation and institutionalisation by organisations and their members. The development processes directly engage with multiple segments of university populations, from those required to gather, generate and submit data (for example, on learning and teaching activities and forms of assessment); to those concerned with how the university ‘appears’ once the web sites are ‘live’; to those seeking to improve its standing on the sites in subsequent years. New institutional posts are created, and appropriately qualified individuals are seconded for significant parts of their time, to produce, monitor and ‘refine’ the data submitted to the agencies responsible for the comparison web sites. Institutional managers seek to align internal procedures, reporting and accountability systems with the logic of the online tools. Further empirical research is required to investigate the degree to (and the ways in) which this intensification of rankings logic actually influences strategic decision-making.

Discussion

This penultimate section of the article discusses the foregoing analysis in the light of the conceptual frameworks presented earlier and the developing marketisation of higher education in the UK.

Clearly, rankings and comparison web sites deploy reactive measures, as higher education institutions and their members are changing and being transformed by the ways in which the ranking systems evaluate institutional reputation and resources. The quantitative indicators selected by the compilers are largely those that are available or easily converted rather than close proxies of the qualities they seek to represent, i.e. they count what is measured rather than measure what counts. They exclude much of what might be considered to indicate good quality or high performance because they reduce complex qualitative processes to shared

metrics. So, for example, admissions processes become driven by the need to attract the highest qualified applicants; learning and teaching are restricted to 'student satisfaction' and the ratio of staff to students; and careers services are steered to concentrate on immediate post-graduation employment.

Ranking systems also generate self-fulfilling prophecies. They employ a deficit model of a university that seeks to quantify the degree of inferiority to Oxford and Cambridge in the UK league tables and to Harvard in the international rankings (Little & Locke, 2011). They do this by giving the 'best' institution in the aggregated measures a maximum score of, say, 100 and calculating the lower scores according to how close they are to this maximum. This deficit model encourages lower status institutions to imitate those with high status by attempting to maximise their scores in the key indicators. This leads to isomorphism among higher education institutions and undermines diversity within the national system.

The transformation of higher education institutions by rankings within an increasingly marketised environment occurs initially through a process of internalisation of ranking systems logic by organisational members who are then seduced and compelled to institutionalise this in processes, systems and structures. Despite — or, perhaps, because of — an initial sense of dissonance between the actual and expected (or desired) ranking position, institutional members seek to better understand the ranking methods and how their institution's data contribute to its relative positioning. On discovering they cannot (except for the influential 'elite' institutions) persuade the compilers to modify their ranking systems to fit their own institutional model and mission, they find ways to optimise their data to fit the existing rankings. If the institution's trajectory is upwards in the tables, organisational members will feel good about this external recognition, despite their enduring skepticism. If it is downwards, they will feel devalued and demoralised and seek to offer excuses and justifications and criticise the publishers of league tables but, nevertheless, remain obsessed by the rankings. Either way, institutions will assert they are not driven by league tables while doing their utmost to keep up with — or ahead of — their peers and managing the perceptions and expectations of their key stakeholders. Every decision then needs to be assessed for its likely impact on the institution's ranking position. Ranking systems logic becomes normalised, and hence legitimised, if reluctantly. Gradually, and subtly, this begins to change perceptions of higher education, expectations of institutions and the behavior of their members.

Having identified those elements of rankings systems that the organisation might have some influence over — student survey responses or expenditure on library and computing facilities, for example — institutions seek to make changes. Efforts may be made to introduce benchmarking and 'peer competition', to bring all units up to the level of the best performing departments, and to lever institutional change. League table measures are introduced into management information systems and the data are disaggregated by department, unit or function. Resources may be redistributed or partially allocated in ways that are 'ranking friendly'. Work is redefined and becomes more 'customer-focused' and 'business-facing'. Programmes are reviewed, new partners are assessed and recruitment is informed by reference to the rankings. Almost regardless of the position of the institution in the tables, the marketing professionals will find some way of using rankings to promote the organisation to its major markets, even if this means being

highly selective, only comparing the institution with a limited range of 'peers', or constructing entirely new tables to show it in a favorable light. Increasingly, institutions are adopting improved ranking positions as an explicit institutional goal. By these, and other means, the logic of ranking systems becomes embedded in institutional practices, routines, plans and, ultimately, missions.

However, as this analysis has sought to demonstrate, these processes of internalisation and institutionalisation vary between types of institutions at different places in the rankings. Responses to rankings may have been more similar between different types of higher education institution to start with but, as institutions have become more sophisticated in their approaches, and as small differences between them become magnified and exaggerated (and even created) by ranking systems, their strategies have gradually become differentiated by their positions in clusters of institutions with similar ranking positions. They have become ensnared by different self-fulfilling prophecies according to whether they feature in the world rankings or the national tables, and which indicators they perceive they can improve on in the comparison web sites. Accordingly, they may decide, for example, to bolster their global reputations by concentrating resources on highly-cited researchers in science fields, modify their curricula to maximise graduate employment, or emphasise how student-focused they are in providing an 'excellent' learning experience.

Conclusions

Rankings have both facilitated and shaped the marketisation of higher education in England, the UK as a whole, and elsewhere. They have facilitated marketisation by introducing greater competition between and within higher education institutions (Hazelkorn, 2011). Ultimately, they accomplish the transformation of qualities into quantities, which is both required by, and a consequence of, the commodification and privatisation of higher education. Rankings have also helped to embed the logic of the market within organisational structures and processes and within the minds and practices of organisational members. They influence institutions to become more business-like (Martins, 2005). They have enabled senior institutional managers to foster internal competition between academic units and create internal markets. In some ways, in a highly regulated UK higher education market (Locke, 2011b), rankings and comparison sites have become a substitute for more authentic market mechanisms, such as unregulated tuition fees, uncapped student numbers and the free market entry of private providers of higher education services.

However, UK higher education continues to be dominated by an enduring reputational hierarchy of institutions and, of course, ranking systems are sustained by, and themselves, reinforce this hierarchy (while, at the same time, modifying it). The world rankings also serve to establish an overall system that reaffirms structures of hierarchy and authority in the international context (Löwenheim, 2008). Competition between institutions is localised within the rankings, occurring primarily between those of a similar ranking position, and the nature of this competition varies at different points in the tables (Grewal, Dearden & Lilien, 2008). So, the efforts of highly ranked universities and lower placed institutions to improve their reputation and increase the resources available to them are very different. And, while the compilers of the national rankings — along with governments — try to organise all higher education institutions into a single system, in reality, different

types of institutions operate in very different markets. Ranking systems also significantly modify and reshape higher education markets by appearing to influence institutions' major 'customers' and external constituencies, such as prospective students (domestic and international), employers of graduates, 'lay' governors, governments and their intermediary agencies, and research funders. By doing so, they create new forms of inequality between institutions (Sauder & Lancaster, 2006).

The empirical evidence and analysis presented here clearly indicate the need to go beyond the investigation of 'impacts' and develop an understanding of how higher education institutions start — and continue — to engage with processes of marketisation, as a way of surviving, prospering and managing status anxiety in changing and challenging environments, and how this is made possible and modified by ranking systems.

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