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Counting what is measured or measuring what counts?

League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England

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Appendix E Detailed findings from the institutional case studies

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Introduction to Appendix E

Appendix E presents the detailed findings from the case studies of six higher education institutions in England. They are based on semi-structured interviews with key personnel from each of the institutions, e.g. 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 faculty or departmental level were held in each institution where possible. The comments made by individuals express their own views and perceptions and do not necessarily represent the formal approved policy of the institutions. Parts of the case study descriptions are close to verbatim reports of comments made, in order to enable those views and perceptions to be adequately represented. We also analysed documents provided by the higher education institutions to the research team 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; however, they might not necessarily be representative of the 'group' of institutions to which they belong or the higher education (HE) sector as a whole.

The findings are grouped under some common themes, such as 'perceptions of league tables', 'users of league tables' and 'changes made', in order to aid comparison between the case studies. But the descriptions also highlight the particular circumstances and approaches of the different higher education institutions, and the perceptions of personnel in different parts of an institution. More details of the methodology used in generating the case studies are given in Appendix A on research methodologies.

Case study 1: Pre-1992 University

Introduction

The University is positioned in the second half of the top 20 in *The Times* league tables. It has significant research strengths in a number of areas and internationally esteemed departments.

Perceptions of league tables

The University believes that it is very important that it achieves 'good rankings' in the league tables. It sees itself as a 'top 20' institution and should seek to avoid anything below that. The University seeks not merely to sustain its current league table position, but would like to improve it. The group of universities in the top tier of the league tables is regarded as more consistent over time – and this consistency may be seen as a more reliable 'kite mark' than lower rankings. At the lower end a bunching of a larger number of institutions within a limited range of league table scores means that very small changes in performance may have a disproportionate (and therefore misleading) effect on league table position. To be in the top tier is to be in 'the premier league' – important for reflection of the institution in the emerging world rankings which are expected to gain in importance. The most authoritative league table in the UK is felt to be *The Times*. In addition, *The Times* is more widely read than a specialist weekly such as *The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)*. While *The Guardian* is also widely read, its league table is felt to be more idiosyncratic and to suffer from the exclusion of a research element.

Senior members of the University are increasingly conscious of the importance of the growing influence of global rankings, although less detailed knowledge exists about their precise methodologies. Overall, the University is not hostile to league tables. There is a likelihood of a 'premier league' growing anyway, with fees and competition. League tables are doing what everyone does anyway (albeit in a range of different ways perhaps, i.e. rank). They help some universities to rise and generate some institutional mobility. League tables can help to focus institutional energy on tackling weaknesses and contribute generally to less tolerance these days concerning poor performance. The elements that make up league tables are especially important.

Organisational response

There has been a steady and systematic organisational response to league tables. Market pressures generally are increasing and league tables are viewed as part of that. Those parts of the University that are directly concerned with student admissions and recruitment regularly review the league tables and any changing underlying methodologies. The executive committee that oversees recruitment and marketing (which meets once a month) receives regular reports and analyses from the Planning Office on the league tables. The pro vice-chancellors and deans all receive regular reports on league tables, as does the Council. League tables are 'well plugged' into senior decision-making. League tables do tend to assume geographical mobility for their influence on university choice by domestic students, and leading universities are clearly dependent on

attracting the best from around the country. The University systematically surveys incoming undergraduates to better understand the factors influencing their applications' decision-making. In the University's surveys of first-year undergraduates, around 60-70% state that they use league tables in coming to their decisions and it is one of the most influential of the factors.

The Planning Office looks at league tables in quite a focused way, especially the underlying variables and the weightings. It examines how actions by the University may help certain aspects of the league table position but not others, and is careful of any impacts on the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) submissions. Bernard Kingston, the league table compiler from Mayfield University Consultants, visited; he was very clear that all universities should have a team looking at league tables as well as HESA returns.

Data returns and their categorisations are kept under closer review these days, such as for computing, library and staffing expenditure. But this is not just for league table reasons – it is also for ensuring a high accuracy in HESA returns, not only to avoid HEFCE claw back but so that the HESA return itself can be used internally, year on year, as a consistent source of comparative data. HESA data are not open to manipulation. HESA is a stable point for internal planning purposes and needs to be correct for helpful comparisons. There has been some re-categorisation of data, but methodologies could change and leave you high and dry if you start to game the system too much. There is a strong rectitude in the Planning Office on data returns which reinforces the view that league table methodologies are sufficiently changeful and caution is needed over taking 'knee jerk' actions in any particular year. An institution could 'purchase' an expensive solution to a league table problem and suddenly find that the goalposts have been moved.

At the moment the University is focusing very hard on employability (where it has performed less well than in some other areas, leading the University to ask regularly whether it has a decoding issue on employability and graduate destinations – again it is rigorous in applying HESA criteria) and also the NSS (where it does well, though variably across the piece).

Senior managers/council perceptions

Senior managers and the Council are very clear that their primary aim is to fund the strategic plan and not to be blown off course by the league tables. If the strategy is right then the University will go up the league tables is the thinking. The University would not 'bet the farm' just to improve league table rankings. Some of the things that league tables encourage it to do it would want to do anyway. For example, it seems entirely right to the University that it should invest in student facilities. The Council sometimes feel that what gets measured is what gets done and that is the case with league tables. The trick is not to get blown off-course but yet take seriously the messages given by the league tables. League tables represent a 'snapshot' in time, but a strategy is a five-year process. All university councils will use league tables 'as a guide'. Some of the University's KPIs are reflected in the league tables, such as student retention, student satisfaction and

employability. The University would be monitoring and responding to these anyway, but the league tables reinforce it all. The Council is anxious that administrators do not simply manage the data and form-fill, and need reassurance that the University is actually getting better in some areas.

The Council feels that league tables are an important part of building reputation – they may not always be an indication of quality as much as an indicator of reputation. But members are very much aware of what league tables can do. Everyone believes that at the very top and at the very bottom the league tables are about right. That means, for the University, that you have to be in the upper echelon. Council knows that league tables do not always drive improvement rather than reputation and that league tables have to be managed while strategic objectives are met. It is believed that for universities such as this one significant reputation is built around the quality of research, not only teaching. The top 10 in league tables are all research-intensive. However, it is felt by Council also that employability needs to improve significantly – the sign of a good university is that graduates get good jobs. League tables reinforce all of this.

In developing the current corporate plan, the Council has a drive to be in the top 15 of *The Times* league table. This is yet to be formally specified but forms part of the ‘conversations’ at Council and with senior management. League table positions are much more formally part of such conversations than they were a few years ago. Council members believe the University should engage properly and try to do well. As yet the Council is still only in the position of ‘unpicking the global league tables’ and the University’s position in these is coming to be discussed (at least in aspirational terms).

The development of the corporate plan includes clear and specific objectives and KPIs, including those that pertain to the league tables, although it does not specify an actual league table position to be achieved. The KPIs are becoming increasingly focused; the previous ones were more general. The RAE has been a prime research indicator for a number of years, but it is regarded as too episodic. KPIs are disseminated to a greater range of management and are much more explicit. The league table influence pervades further into the institution far more than it did five years ago. But competitors are also changing. League tables get you to ask some searching questions.

Staying in the top 20 consistently is a minimal aim, and rising to about top 15 feels right. Ideally, Council would like top 10 in time. However, it is not hidebound by league tables. With league tables, Council asks whether the position is improving, and whether this is by the right amount. League tables, in the view of Council, do force the University to ensure that close scrutiny of key performance indicators takes place. In some areas, the University has greater reliance on clearing than it would like, and lower employability than it wants. This influences reputation and Council would look for a strategic response. However, the institution would not take – and Council would not expect – action if it were felt that it was the wrong response. League tables reinforce the University’s strategies rather than change them.

It is regarded as inevitable that there is some match between the University's KPIs and league tables on around five or six elements. The University follows the league table methodology in such cases, as long as it is not at variance with its overall approach. The University genuinely respond to elements in the league tables, although league tables are also looked at as a whole. It is a rational decision not to pursue a particular ranking explicitly. There are a number of underlying factors which are good in themselves – if the University puts the effort into those, then it is felt that it will naturally rise up the league tables. This is the only rational approach in a complex institution and complex environments – league tables require a 'subtle' response.

Senior administrators discuss the league table rankings with Council, on a more detailed basis than just the actual ranking. Administrators might point out, for example, that the ranking may have dropped but that the total of points scored has increased. They point out that the league tables are useful when there is a sub-indicator that the University is also interested in. In the administration it is believed important to ensure that senior officers fully understand and are realistic about league tables. They have generally won widespread understanding from the institution, and especially Council, for this approach. It is a lot of work to crucially monitor and analyse the position regarding league tables. Administrators try and maintain a sense of stability about league tables, by adopting a consistent approach. They try and moderate any over-reaction and de-sensitise the league table issue in the institution by analysis, explanation and promoting league tables as now an inescapable aspect of higher education. Reports on league tables generally form part of a wider analysis. Administrators try and provide a bit of realistic interpretation around the league table reports. It is felt best to be fully informed and professional about league tables.

Funding issues

As the variable tuition fees regime has come in, the institutional interest in league tables has increased. If the 'cap' on domestic and European Union (EU) full-time undergraduate tuition fees comes off or is substantially relaxed after the 2009 governmental review – thus allowing the charging of 'premium fees' – then the two issues (fees and league tables) will be discussed in the same breath. Increased differentials in fees are likely to impact significantly on league table sensitivity. It would be difficult for a university to charge higher fees with a low league table position. Also, a low fee may be seen as making a statement in its own right. League tables undoubtedly will have influence here. Variable fees make explicit that the student experience is not the same in all institutions and a high league table position implies a better one than does a low position.

League tables can create a bit of an 'arms race' in the sector, as everyone knows that other universities are not standing still either and universities strong in an area are likely to keep on trying to improve. But that produces dangers for university finances and this University tends to take an incremental approach to league tables – it is hard to know how much difference such and such an increase in expenditure would actually make as they are sure their competitors are doing the same, but do not know by how much. For example, would spending £3 million on 'employability' ensure a real league table difference? Some factors, such as student:staff ratios (SSRs), are more amenable to

identifying the effect of money being spent, and some areas are not. Some in the University speculate as to whether such investments might pay off if the University then moves up the league tables. Although sector responses to league tables may result in its being a zero-sum game as actions cancel out, some feel that one cannot be sure that all universities are responding in the same way to league tables. There are 'competitive sets' within league tables within which everyone 'shuffles a bit'.

Impact on students

A strong view is that many students do have an informal understanding of which are the good universities, and how their grades situate them anyway, but that league tables rather formalise the process. Sometimes students will choose an original list of say 10 or 15 before narrowing down their university and course choices, and this may be influenced by the league tables. If you are not in that top 10 to 20 institutions you may be eliminated straight away. There are some Russell Group institutions below some 94 Group institutions in the league tables – yet at some secondary schools there is still the strong perception that Russell Group (RG) universities are better. Thus the strength of the Russell Group brand may be stronger than the league table brand in such cases.

League tables are felt to be useful shorthand for applicants, despite their flaws. There is too much data to practically investigate for a prospective student – there is an information overload for the applicant. International postgraduate students use league tables, but mainly it is believed that they are compiled for undergraduates. No real postgraduate research or postgraduate teaching league table is available – which is thought to be odd. A high league table position is felt to be particularly important for international student recruitment. It comes up in discussion more and more, especially concerning postgraduate research students, and particularly for science.

While in *The Times* league table ranking position is influenced by a measurement of research performance, it is not clear how valuable this is felt to be by prospective undergraduates. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is not very assertive and seems to deny that league tables exist at all on its web site. But they do exist and the University feels it is healthier to acknowledge that, but indicate they are only one factor among many. Of course, despite criticisms of league tables, when the University wants to collaborate in, say, China, it is likely among other things to consult the equivalent league table in China. Senior managers rely also on academics to have intelligence about the best overseas partners, but they are not always fully aware, even in their own subject. They tend to know individuals rather than the overall performance of a department or institution.

Admissions

League tables are very important on the admissions front. But the extent of this depends on the group of students that are being dealt with. In the case of widening participation, league tables have hardly any bearing for outreach and mature students – these students seem more likely to look at (and want to go to) their local institution anyway. But for independent schools especially, and other 'selective schools' where their students are geographically mobile on a national basis, then league tables are very important. They

are encouraged by their teachers/advisers 'first stop, look at the league tables'. It makes a difference to these students if an institution is not in the top 20, before whittling down to five choices for UCAS. The University will always have a lot of geographically mobile undergraduates and therefore league tables will continue to count.

Advice is offered from the centre to departments as to the market strength for particular courses and levels of conditional offers that might be made, based on analyses of the competition. However, the departmental admissions tutors take the ultimate decision. Scholarships and bursaries policies for home/EU students are formulated centrally and not by the faculties. Admissions tutors in departments say that league tables are very important in applications, even if they are not always sure why. International students, parents, advisers, government agencies and agents all use league tables a lot. It would help enormously in the global market to be in the top 10, and here the league tables carry a big influence. They are part of the 'first sift'. Students are advised by parents, agents and government bodies that league tables should be part of their research in deciding where to go. Postgraduates particularly take account of league tables, but often they may be concerned with the reputation of a particular subject/department, or take account especially of the RAE.

League tables do influence senior views as to what is the best subject mix and profile for the institution. They are considered relevant to questions such as what activity to reduce or withdraw from and what new areas to go into – that is, what sort of A-levels will students have obtained in these particular subjects, and what sort of student experience will they have. League tables have been one factor in determining where to invest in new health areas, such as the decision to go into pharmacy. A whole list of KPIs now 'are aligned with league tables' – but no-one says that the University or the KPIs are league table driven. League tables are regarded as subverting some aspects of government policy; some health and science areas, for example, create league table pressure in tariff scores yet are clearly in the interest of declared public policy.

Widening participation

Council does discuss the impact of tackling widening participation on league table position as this depends to some extent on entry qualifications. It would not want to reduce entry qualifications, however. The University wants to widen participation without worsening the league table position. Part of its approach is aspiration-raising, but the University has also developed close and supportive partnerships with 'higher education in further education' (HE in FE) providers working to widen participation. It is not about social engineering but about raising aspirations. The University continues to select the best students whatever the market. It is still felt difficult to find a consistently better predictive system than A-levels.

There is a strategy for outreach, not least because of an anticipated demographic downturn of possibly around 10% and because the University is in a region with a lower uptake to higher education anyway. Consequently, WP strategies are tied in to admissions policies – unlike the social engineering that may take place in some other 'top' universities who may believe that they must persuade the Government that they are

not too selective and are trying to be more socially open. There is a concern nonetheless that the WP strategy should not drive out well-qualified students with all its implications, including for league tables.

Reputation and selectivity

League table position is a proxy for prestige and it can be a great recruitment tool. A handful of universities could stand apart from the league tables. But if you are in a more generalised category, league tables are a key way to build a reputation with the public. The RAE is only every half a decade, unlike league tables, and league tables may come to be seen as more up to date and reliable.

Top departments are comfortable that their peers rank them highly and, although they would prefer to operate in high-ranking institutions, subject positioning may still count for quite a lot. Still, the reputation of a university does matter for a department and for academic staff, who tend not to move down the league tables when they move. There would have to be some real compensating factors for them to want to do so. However, greater fee variability may increase the prospect of league table influence on staff being poached and transferring. But you cannot be top in everything. You have to be selective, not least about the advantages of institutional alliances. Government has to be realistic – which universities do they expect to deliver WP and which some other objectives? The sector and Government do not yet have a common agenda and league tables should reflect this. A more sophisticated plurality of league tables is needed.

Senior managers feel that so much that is good for a university flows from a good reputation. Some hard-headed matters also flow – good staff, funds and fees (especially if the ‘cap’ comes off). But league tables are a major mechanism for achieving reputation, and league tables are one of the main ‘positioners’. As for student markets, student applications tend to ‘cluster’ around a certain ‘band’ of institutions, and league tables help to determine which band they should be interested in.

The National Student Survey

The National Student Survey is very important and league tables highlight this importance, as does the whole idea of the student as a consumer. The NSS provides better feedback than before and is good for students. But some subjects seem to produce more critical students (engineering, for example) and some others more contented students. The NSS has helped the University to ‘rebalance’ teaching with research. It is much the closest thing to the RAE that the University comes across. People are very much boosted by a good NSS result and are gloomier about a poor one. A poor performance by a department in the NSS puts heads (of academic units) ‘on their mettle’ – not just as a result of questioning from the Vice-Chancellor (VC) and senior management, but also as a result of ‘gentle peer pressure’ from the other heads, especially as they know that the NSS influences institutional league table position these days. The problem with the NSS measure is that it does not sample those who do not make it to the final year. This would be an inconceivable omission in commercial retail. One needs to know the views of those in earlier years as well.

Employability

The graduate prospects data are a challenging part of the league tables for the University. Employability is very important and the University has done less well here than it feels it should be doing. As a consequence there has been an internal restructuring in the Careers Office, with new information resources and efforts to forge stronger links with employers. The careers professionals are extremely conscious of league tables. New people have been appointed and the Careers Service restructuring has been responsive to league tables. Employability has moved up the University's agenda and league tables have contributed to this. The University now has an 'employability strategy' for the whole of the University. Faculties and academic units are extremely aware of where they stand as a result of the league tables and there is even a web site for careers staff to help on this. There is clear 'peer' and 'managerial' pressure on departments to take very seriously and engage with employability issues. Interestingly, the best departments tend to be good at both research and employability.

This cultural shift in the strategy and its response is down to the league tables (especially *The Times*). The Careers Service is focusing much more on internal and external relationships (especially employers, with employers coming in for panels, etc). Now the University has the region's biggest careers fair and is working much more closely with the departments. League tables encourage people to ask whether the University is offering the right levels of careers support to students, so there are some net benefits. It invites self-assessment. The fact that league tables take no account of regional factors in graduate prospects is unhelpful.

Views of staff

Even the everyday academic still wants to see the University do well in the league tables. Staff do have a sense of where the University should be in the league tables. Some exceptional departments expect to see the University at the top of every league table and are upset if it is not. Staff can be concerned by adverse league tables and some want to write to the media to complain. Senior administrators resist, indicating that generally the University is doing well. But league tables lead to a lot of soul-searching.

There is a lot of discussion of league tables at heads of academic unit meetings. Heads become transfixed by league tables. The Vice-Chancellor holds heads 'personally responsible' for performances, including in league tables and the NSS. But it is not just Vice-Chancellor pressure – departments all want to try and improve league table and NSS positions, and where there are weaknesses they want to redress them. Staff feel that league tables are not going to go away – they provide a broad brushstroke – and everyone is now stuck with them. Subject league tables and the NSS particularly are important for intra-institutional comparison and pressures for improvement. There is a sense of competition among heads because of the league tables – but more a sense of solidarity and the provision of supportive comments to their less fortunate colleagues. The Vice-Chancellor asks who has the best practice (say in the NSS, which is Department X) and then gets Department X to put on a presentation to say how they did it, and this is quite helpful.

At the first meeting of the year with the heads, the Vice-Chancellor talked extensively about league tables. Some of the heads wondered how it had all come to this in higher education – league tables were seen by some as very damaging and as taking away from what goes on in the classrooms. Some feel that league tables make you cautious and impair thinking about innovation. They are regarded by academics as an unnecessary evil and as a very crude and broad-brush measure. Students do not always avail themselves of careers advice, but league tables are putting pressure on departments to do more on careers anyway.

In the academic units it is said, a little with tongue in cheek, that the administration has got the data and academic staff have got the truth on league table returns! Some staff clearly feel a slight disconnect here between their experiences and the eventual trail that leads to league table outcomes. Even when the University does well in *The Times* league table, staff feel that you can never do well enough. Academics refer to everything being 'league table driven', and league tables have become a shorthand descriptor for the market and competition overall. In the departments, it is believed that league tables are probably the most important thing in the University's market environment. League tables will determine the level of fees that the University can charge. Moreover, the University does not want to have variable fees within the University and thus it wants to drive up standards and scores across the piece. It is not clear to departmental staff if this is in line with government policy or not.

League tables are just one of those many things that academic staff take into account in deciding where to apply for positions. But generally they want to move to higher institutional and academic levels, so league tables will have some influence. And as the number of staff appointed from overseas increases, then (like international students) league tables may become even more influential in enabling universities to attract good staff, especially as the University is approaching a time when a significant number of academics will retire.

Being in the top 20 clearly does matter to staff. There is a sense of pride at being in the top 20 because a lot of people are working hard. Young people (students and staff) are used to lists, especially in the media, these days. At staff level there is regular chat about league tables, and staff email each other about them, but do not formally sit down and discuss them so much. League tables are part of the world and everyday life. If you are ranked high then you feel that schools and parents are pleased. Staff know that the University gets lots of students from India and China, and know that league tables influence them, not least through word of mouth. Increasing usage by such students of the Shanghai world rankings is acknowledged, and awareness of this league table is thus growing. League tables are seen by staff as very important in recruiting international students because the University is in a geographical area that is less well known in some parts of the world. Many staff in the departments would like to know more about the league tables and the way that data submissions are made.

Case study 2: Modern Specialist University

Introduction

Modern Specialist University (MSU) is a post-1992 specialist university ranked in the middle of *The Times* and *Sunday Times* league tables and two-thirds of the way down *The Guardian* institutional tables, although in the top third of the latter's relevant subject table. Its ranking has suffered as a result of the replacement of TQA scores by National Student Survey results, difficulties in submitting data on part-time staff, graduate prospects in its particular field and *The Guardian*'s value-added measure. However, student recruitment is buoyant – especially internationally – domestic reliance on clearing is minimal and retention rates are good. The more vocational parts of the University work closely with business and have a good reputation with industry. These factors are ultimately more important to MSU than league tables.

A specialist university

Being a specialist university may raise issues about direct quantitative comparisons with multi-disciplinary higher education institutions. There are disadvantages of being a specialist university. Where MSU has a very good reputation, this becomes lost in the league tables. MSU does not feature in the world rankings, despite having a good research record relative to other post-1992 universities, being regarded as a flagship domestically within its particular discipline and beginning to develop an international reputation. It receives strong backing from head teachers in the *Sunday Times* opinion survey. It acknowledges that the newspapers are addressing young school leavers with A-levels (or, at least, their parents), although MSU itself represents the full spectrum of higher education provision.

The importance of good ranking positions

Doing well in league tables is important to MSU as a source of peer esteem, institutional pride and, it is anticipated, for future student recruitment. A Pro Vice-Chancellor wants to make sure that MSU's data give it the strongest chance in league tables. But they are compiled and weighted differently and relate to the readerships of the newspapers. In some, Oxbridge will always come top because their readers will expect them to; there is a self-fulfilling element to it. MSU has made tremendous strides, but an institution does not achieve recognition for most improved beginner. Initially, the rankings were viewed as a media relations issue rather than one with structural implications. A planning unit was established, partly to improve data submission and the impact of this on the institution's league table position.

One focus group of academics and administrators felt that league tables are important wherever you are in the rankings. They felt a league table could widen the international community's awareness of the institution. But they could see from what is happening in the schools sector that the tables can distort what education institutions are about. Their discipline deals mainly in qualitative issues, and so there is a fair amount of scepticism about quantitative indicators. The NSS seems to dominate because staff can see how it

is constructed and that it involves the students they deal with. Also, they can focus on the local level, look at the different headings and disaggregate the different elements.

Another focus group believed that league tables are important to the University, because it trades on them. However, they thought that other indicators were more important, such as application rates, enrolment and enrolment against applications as well as student satisfaction.

Data submission

A Pro Vice-Chancellor acknowledged that MSU had not been that clever in returning its data. For example, MSU has a considerable number of fractional and sessional lecturers who are practitioners and who were not originally included in the staff figures. Staff are now more aware of the timing and requirements of league table compilation and willing to provide 'good news' stories for the profiles that are published alongside. A senior manager also acknowledged that the University had been 'rather naïve' about the data used in league tables and surprised by the NSS results, especially in comparison with other institutions and subjects.

There is some concern that data for the league tables are out of date. MSU is also unhappy with the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education survey, as the kinds of models of employment used are not appropriate for the University's specialist areas.

A senior manager thought that the scope to optimise data submitted (e.g. on core student records) that have financial implications is limited. But other areas, such as finance and staffing returns, were thought to be more subjective. Spending was thought to be an interesting indicator, but those higher education institutions without halls of residence may be disadvantaged – similarly with library and computing spend and whether an institution has devolved budgets, such that subject spending may not be counted in HESA returns.

League tables working group

According to the Planning Officer, a visit by a league table compiler had prompted the establishment of a working group. The purpose of the group was to investigate how the tables are compiled, the data submitted to national agencies, the ways in which research scores are calculated and the NSS. It consisted of three pro vice-chancellors and personnel from academic planning, business intelligence and marketing. The first stage was to look at the league tables, how MSU performed etc, and become more aware of what data the University is submitting, when, etc. Initially, it was a knowledge-sharing activity, trying to understand the methodologies behind the tables, where the various pieces of information come from and whether MSU is collecting and recording these in the way it should be. The working group also looked at external publications (e.g. Roberts with Thompson, 2007). There have not been any specific actions so far. But they might look at the way the University records data, e.g. mapping new subject areas to the HESA Joint Academic Coding System codes. There has also been a discussion about the weightings given to research in the league tables.

The methodologies used by the league tables – for example, the way in which the scores for research take into account the proportion of staff submitted for the RAE – has led the Planning Officer to question the motivation of those compiling the tables and the classification of higher education institutions. Her view is that people use league tables as a kind of barometer and do not like it when institutions are not in the positions they expect them to be. MSU has an issue over student:staff ratios and the non-inclusion of technicians, practitioner lecturers etc. These are the areas in which MSU is taking actions.

Until recently, no-one was responsible for signing-off data submissions, or for investigating the consequences. The working group has subsequently been reconstituted as a steering group, now chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and monitors all data submitted to external bodies.

Impact on staff

A senior manager reported that poor rankings had been bad for staff morale, but that they had at least highlighted areas to look at and improve.

Strategic use of league tables

Several senior managers confirmed that the University would not use league tables *per se* as key performance indicators, although it might use particular components, such as the NSS results, graduate destinations and the proportion of firsts and upper seconds. MSU has begun to monitor competitors' positions, as well as the top institutions, to discover what they are doing right, although there is some resistance to looking outside the institution for good practice, especially abroad. The way in which research scores are calculated makes assumptions that senior managers take issue with. This is different from the NSS results, which are taken as published.

According to a senior manager, the indicators within league tables have influenced the development of management information systems. But these are very new at MSU and it is likely that they would have done this anyway. The issue about staffing data may have been picked up quicker because of the influence of league tables. MSU is developing KPIs based on the guidance from the Committee of University Chairmen.

The governors regularly discuss information relating to KPIs and student satisfaction and this includes benchmark data positioning the University alongside selected other UK higher education institutions. One governor thought that, overall, league tables have helped the University. They had introduced a sense of the market and of the consumer, and introduced market discipline. They could drive and motivate the management team, he thought. He also commented that league tables had definitely influenced the University's perception of other higher education institutions, such as other providers in MSU's discipline areas and institutions that attract a large number of international students. The University always thought it was the biggest and best specialist institution in its field. League tables have helped MSU to see other, perhaps smaller but more innovative institutions, leapfrog it in some niche areas. League tables encourage the senior management to question themselves and their assumptions, he thought.

A Pro Vice-Chancellor acknowledged that league tables, and the NSS results in particular, had also helped to obtain institutional backing for changes that might not have been forthcoming otherwise. A faculty manager commented that league tables were more important for the whole institution and less for recruitment. They are a lever for management to make changes. The Head of Communications felt that, generally, league tables have had a positive impact, even where they have been critical.

The dangers of league tables

However, the University is aware of the dangers of allowing league tables to distract from its strategic academic and widening participation goals. For example, the University could encourage all graduates to get jobs as soon as possible, even when these are not appropriate or relevant to their subject, to improve graduate prospects. Or, it could reduce its efforts to widen participation in order to improve retention. A Pro Vice-Chancellor hoped MSU would stand firm against such pressures. In his view, league tables can encourage a very risk-adverse culture in some areas, though not all.

A focus group of academics believed that they gave fewer firsts than departments in other institutions, but viewed this as a sign of quality. They also thought this policy reinforced the brand, which had been developed over time. Their industry is looking at graduates' outputs and where they have studied, not the classification of their degree.

They also mentioned that institutional managers are passing down concerns about league tables, but wondered whether anyone else is really using them. They referred to the discourse around league tables and the need to use the language in order not to be ignored. The RAE and quality assurance cannot be explained in lay terms, whereas league tables attempt to do this.

A different focus group thought the indicators used in league tables were very basic and unreliable and that different league tables use different criteria. Surely, it was suggested, what the University does could be captured in some set of indicators? They felt that the University had been rather reactive, although there was now some recognition that there needs to be a more strategic approach. One example is the improvement to central student facilities. But, they pointed out, students are more dissatisfied with the reductions in tutorial time.

They thought that senior management seek to apply procedures across the University, but this has replaced interactive processes with external consultants, the issuing of reports and increased staff training which takes academics' time away from course delivery, and the emphasis on fundraising. There is top-down pressure on academics to be responsible for everything and the centre expands to absorb the additional income from top-up fees. The two weak spots, they felt, are course organisation and management, and assessment.

A governor believed that league tables will have an influence beyond their original purpose and impact on higher education policies and funding. But he had sympathy with the academics' worry that the tables are taking over, as in primary schools etc. For him,

they are important, but not everything can be measured. An academic felt that there ought to be ways of league tables emphasising sustainability and environmental issues that will appeal to students.

Institutional actions

Performance indicators are discussed at committees but not league tables as such. Actions have been taken at faculty level, but this year MSU is focusing across the University on course management, because it performed particularly badly on this in the NSS. The NSS has focused MSU's attention (on course organisation and management, assessment and graduate destinations) but, according to a Pro Vice-Chancellor, it did not tell them anything they did not already know. It did, however, make it apparent that students in other subjects and institutions are happier with aspects such as course organisation.

Course managers now have to report on benchmarks. A Pro Vice-Chancellor suggested that the University cannot go on without improvement in student satisfaction levels. He did not think they can say 'Well, it's just our discipline'. The courses are not modularised and so students cannot choose modules according to the timings of formal sessions. MSU does not have very strong electronic communications channels with students. There are also structural and infrastructural issues in the University.

MSU refers to success in the league tables in its publicity materials. *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*, in particular, are most important. It has a good relationship with the *Sunday Times*. But they are all important, because a poor ranking needs to be addressed. Now it is possible to anticipate the issues that will come up. *The Guardian* promised more detail that might have helped MSU to benchmark itself with other providers in its specialist areas, but this has not been forthcoming.

Benchmarking

A governor welcomed the element of market discipline that league tables have brought and thought that rankings could prompt senior managers to question their own assumptions. However, he felt that benchmarking was a better way of targeting resources, managing performance and being forward-looking and that league tables were one source of evidence but not sufficient for this. A senior manager felt there was a possibility that rankings could encourage risk aversion in some areas.

Users of league tables

A faculty manager suggested that senior managers are the major users of league tables.

Prospective students

A senior manager felt that people tended to be far more influenced by an institution's or a subject's reputation, so the issue is: 'Do league tables impact on an institution's reputation?'. The University has a long-lasting reputation among particular industries. She suspected that students use the league tables to endorse their perceptions. Academics agreed that overseas students may be more likely to use them to make initial selections. The timing of

publication of a league table close to the start of the academic year may also influence whether some students will turn up.

A faculty manager suggested that the different league tables make different judgements about MSU, and few students or employers understand why this is so. Students come to MSU with a specific idea of what it offers – often communicated by word of mouth – and very few prospective students ask them about league tables at fairs and open days. What is important is that students come to study what they thought they were going to study, hence the significance of open days, etc.

League tables have had very little impact on international recruitment so far. Prospective students and their parents are much more interested in employment prospects, and the University can point to very successful alumni. This has more impact than league tables because it is more personally meaningful. One senior manager argued that MSU is just so different in what it does that it cannot be compared with many other institutions.

Academics reported that neither prospective students nor their parents looked at league tables. Students were more interested in coming to a university in this location and the facilities. Overseas students – and their parents – are probably more conscious of league tables, they felt, because of the lack of information about UK higher education.

Staff

A faculty manager commented that league tables do not have a big influence on recruitment of staff. Faculty are more interested in working where MSU is located, in its particular disciplinary environment and the reputation of a particular subject area.

A group of academics stated that they do use league tables to check out things about other institutions, but would not necessarily take these on face value. If the ranking positions of particular institutions surprise them, they will look at why this is so.

Another group said they were interested in the league table positions of other institutions within the UK, and in the *THES World University Rankings*.

Alumni

A group of academics did not think league tables have much influence on alumni relations, because their relationships are with the individual parts of the University. However, according to the Head of Communications there has been significant investment in alumni development in the last five years. The University uses alumni in its publicity around the league tables.

Foreign governments

One senior manager thought that league tables may be used by other countries to select which foreign universities will be allowed to operate within their borders.

National Student Survey and other student feedback

All interviewees reported that poor performance in the NSS and students' experience has been a key issue for MSU. In the first year of the NSS, the University was surprised at the extent of dissatisfaction, although not with all areas, so in the second year MSU decided not to put much effort into improving response rates. As it became clear that the NSS was going to continue, MSU started to put huge efforts into increasing participation, but this did not help much as some courses achieved better results, while others were worse.

The Planning Office is trying to understand whether students in MSU's particular range of disciplines have lower levels of satisfaction, or whether they have a different perception of what they are being asked. The answer, they feel, is probably a mixture of the two. There is an annual internal student survey, but there is an agreement not to target those who will be asked to complete the NSS, so as to avoid questionnaire fatigue. The internal student survey always produces more positive responses than the NSS.

The NSS results have helped to attract the attention of the Vice-Chancellor, for example with regard to course organisation and management, and assessment. But senior managers talked about trying to balance achieving a better NSS result with actually improving the student experience. The results have led to enhancements in student facilities, the establishment of student fora, the introduction of individual tutorials, the extension of library opening hours, efforts to improve course organisation and management, and a review of assessment. Communications with students are being regularised and the post of Dean of Students has been established to replace the previous Director of Student Services.

The NSS results have also prompted a lot of self-reflection, which has helped to broaden debate and keep this issue uppermost in the minds of the University's management. This has filtered through to the constituent parts of the University and course committees. They have looked at organisational structures such as student administration, admissions and induction. Whether this has made a difference at the frontline is not yet proven, according to one senior manager.

Another senior manager said that she would expect students in three or four years' time to have had a rather different experience. The NSS had been the catalyst for this. A lot of it was going to happen anyway, but the NSS was 'a great cudgel' in the Vice-Chancellor's hands to make things happen more quickly.

An academic reported that they had discussed these issues in committees and meetings with students. The NSS results highlighted the need to take students' expectations seriously, which impacts on admissions processes. Certainly the league tables made them think more about these issues and take actions more urgently. He thought that the figures could be massaged, but that it was more important to address the issues that were being raised and deal with the underlying factors.

Communications with compilers

Several senior managers reported that higher education institutions do not feel they have the power to influence the development of the tables. But the Planning Officer believed that institutions should not be allowed to query specific data-quality issues and manipulate their data.

Broader issues

A group of academics felt that league tables may help to represent to Government their disciplinary area and the things they do. They felt they can interrogate the data and what these data mean, but ordinary users cannot or will not do that. They asked, 'Why is difference turned into ranking?' and felt that it might be beneficial to group similar institutions within rankings.

Case study 3: Post-1992 Low University

Introduction

Post-1992 Low University (PLU) has a very large student population and attracts high volumes of undergraduate applications for many of its subjects. Although an esteemed polytechnic, since becoming a university it has generally been positioned quite low in the national league tables.

Perceptions of league tables

PLU accepts the inevitability of league tables. But it regards much of their methodology as weak, obscure or even flawed. By way of example, both the *Sunday Times* and *The Guardian* incorporated in their 2006 league tables an assessment of architecture provision which is jointly offered with a neighbouring, pre-1992 university. The provision is joint: literally the same students, staff and facilities. PLU was ranked 52nd while its pre-1992 partner was ranked 10th for the identical programme.

Even if league tables did not directly impinge on the core business, they certainly do indirectly. Members of staff often appear to react to league tables more than management, who have greater awareness of their disadvantages and inconsistencies, and morale can take a drop when the league tables are published. Some students' self-esteem is also lowered by the league tables. League tables in any business do have an important impact on reputation that, when the underlying methodology is deemed weak, is regarded as unfair. League tables do not really or directly affect government funding, but have a major impact on the recruitment of postgraduate and overseas students. However, for PLU generally strong student demand and a view that league tables do not necessarily align with the wider objectives of the institution help internally to counteract some of the negative impacts of the league tables.

League tables are probably not as significant to PLU financially as major government funding initiatives, such as Leitch, the Skills Agenda and Tomlinson, which are more in the core change area. But league tables are 'a nuisance'. They tend to reinforce traditional, Oxbridge models of higher education, and generally ignore value-added and access issues. Value added measures are felt to be especially important. Government ministers do not help by talking about 'a good university' in similar terms to those used by league tables, thus reinforcing the model (What is a 'good university' anyway? Aren't we one in significant respects?). That approach also encourages overseas governments to use league tables in an inappropriate way to discriminate against universities like PLU when funding scholarships from abroad, and UK governments acquiesce in this. Consequently, league tables encourage 'gaming' while remaining fundamentally flawed.

PLU, like other post-1992 universities, is able to cite good levels of external income, research staff, other support, etc, which boost the impact of its HESA returns by improving and adding to its expenditure on libraries and information technology (IT). But because HESA cannot readily separate out research from teaching income, the outcome measures tend to favour universities with high levels of research activity. PLU and other

post-1992 universities believe they would benefit if value added loomed larger in league tables, and PLU's mission could relate strongly to that. But PLU is realistic; however flawed the league tables are, they will endure, and all national league tables use the same sorts of indicators.

Governors/senior managers

Governors especially are influenced by league tables, often somewhat detrimentally. Governors read newspapers and the league tables have an immediacy and impact. The commercial governors, in particular, recognise the phenomena of league tables and the associated notions of brands and reputation. Some, but not all, think managerial concerns about the methodologies and perceived inaccuracies of league tables may indicate elements of complacency within the institution. The Chairman of the Board of Governors and the Vice-Chancellor have agreed a key performance indicator of 'improving our position in the league tables'. Consequently, some governors are tempted to move away from widening participation commitments. They know that the University is a selecting institution in many subject areas, with high levels of demand, and feel that the University could focus more on raising the A-level tariff for entry, say to an A and two Bs.

Governors agree that league tables are very important, and that the Vice-Chancellor has helped to raise their importance in quite a marked way in the last year or so, but they tend to base opinions on 'anecdotal evidence'. Governors continue to raise questions: 'What is our brand?', 'What is our USP (unique selling point)? – especially with respect to traditional universities. For example, governors are interested in the reasons for poor student retention rates, realising that the figures are not very comfortable (and help push PLU down the league tables). As a result, the whole student experience is under scrutiny. Governors also recognise that students have good networks.

At the Board, league tables are thus a serious agenda item, particularly what they say about student retention, the student experience and the quality of degrees. Governors feel the need to do better in these areas and then PLU will go up the league tables. A big difference to the student experience, plus top-quality buildings and facilities, are needed. Governors do not believe that standards should be diluted, but find it difficult to understand why PLU does not give more first class degrees. Mainly, governors would wish to ensure that students are given a good experience. That would then feed back into the league table position.

Governors have become much more sensitive to league tables in the last two years. The Vice-Chancellor has helped bring them to their attention and has brought in a much more professional management structure. Governors expect that approach to have a payoff in the league tables. But governors do not believe that PLU needs necessarily to go into deficit to go up the league tables. Essentially, a business plan is needed to show how expenditure will pay off in league table terms.

Student recruitment

Postgraduate, and especially international, student recruitment is clearly strongly influenced by league tables. Also, as a large postgraduate provider, the University is

aware that employers take note of league tables, and this is important because many of the postgraduate students are employer-funded. The University takes particular note of its poor showing in the NSS which may, in part, reflect its large size. However, it would do this irrespective of the NSS appearance in league table compilations because it gets to the heart of the institution's commitment to the student as a customer and of the University's mission as a responsive institution that takes learning and teaching, and its wider support, as very important. NSS outcomes have provided it with 'a significant wake-up call'.

For student admissions, the importance of league tables varies across the different markets. At undergraduate level, awareness is not high among regional, local, first generation, and often vocational students. However, where there are large numbers of applications to the more 'selecting' courses, the position can be very different. Applicants to these courses are commonly from very different family backgrounds and they are more aware of league tables. Some schools 'prime' their students about league tables, and at recruitment fairs, for example, they are given 'rules of thumb' that incorporate league table positions. Some independent and grammar schools actually employ staff whose job is to go through the league tables, and similar relevant information, to help guide applicants from their schools. *The Times* is the most influential league table in the school sector and can be found in school libraries, for example.

Programme and subject league tables are sometimes more influential than institutional versions at postgraduate and research student level, where people are more informed and serious about their subject, and where they want to become more specialised or do research. Such students are also 'much more aware' about institutional reputation than at undergraduate level. Often they want to go to a more prestigious university for their postgraduate study than where they studied at undergraduate level. They become very aware of league tables and undertake serious investigation.

Some staff argue that large employers are focusing more on institutional rankings when supporting the training and education of their employees, although less so the local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The top companies in the 'milk round' are very sensitive to institutional league tables. But the picture is more mixed locally, for example when it comes to setting up a linked course with a company.

Currently, PLU is reviewing all entry requirements. The University is still quite a devolved organisation, especially at faculty level, although there is now an emergent shift towards a stronger central and corporate management structure. Consequently, although the recruitment process and setting of entry requirements is highly distributed and localised, PLU is moving towards making it more centralised. In future the centre will negotiate entry tariffs with departments. But it will also ensure that this approach is balanced with institutional commitment to the widening participation agenda. But the WP agenda is also about student success and providing appropriate support so that students can succeed. Otherwise, dropping out at the end of the first year helps neither them nor PLU's league table position.

Five years ago it was rare for parents to ask about league tables. Now they increasingly ask about employability data, etc. Accordingly, league tables may well have a useful purpose and need to be there – but are they fair and are they measuring the right things? In a way they – and the new web sites – are providing an alternative to the glossy world of the prospectus, which features a satisfied student on every page.

Organisational response to league tables

Undoubtedly, the league tables are a major source of concern at PLU. They hurt personally and the (low) position is believed not to reflect the institution accurately.

The University has set up a senior staff working group to examine the impact of league tables, the University's low position and what can be done about it. The remit of the League Table Working Group is to look at all league tables, consider the outcomes and ask whether there are genuine institutional messages, and to consider responses and act upon them. Among key actions, it started by focusing on data submissions and how, using that data, PLU could present itself in a better light. PLU administrators have always prided themselves as being honest and robust in data returns but, in doing so, were they simply 'too naive'? For example, on library expenditure, did they count everything, including activities in the faculties? Did they count all the relevant staff for the SSR returns? In the past the University feels that it has been too unreflective in its data returns.

This year, particularly, PLU is taking league table returns more seriously. It is also now communicating more with the compilers. A representative from one of these was invited in to discuss the various methodologies, how they are formalised, and what PLU should be doing to make best use of data. The visit was of limited value. The compiler did not feel able or was unwilling to explain what PLU should be doing to make best use of the data, or what the University had identified as inconsistencies in the league table. There is residual frustration at the inability to intervene effectively with the league table compilers. They are not public agencies and quote 'commercial-in-confidence' when they do not want to answer or cannot explain their methodology. If there was a HEFCE or a government agency responsible for a league table, one could be more confident that they would respond – but not so the media, which only want to sell newspapers and who are private commercial bodies anyway.

PLU is also focusing on retention rates and trying to understand them better and whether they really are reliable indicators of 'wastage'. PLU also thinks that the destination returns' methodologies, especially notions of 'graduate jobs', are wrong and not sufficiently sophisticated, particularly in the arts and liberal studies areas. PLU wishes to raise the tariff points for those not coming through its WP route (about 25% are access route entrants). It knows that retention and academic outcomes, as used in the league tables, are better for those with good formal incoming qualifications. It has also looked at the vast number of UCAS course codes at PLU and felt that this was not helping it.

PLU now, like every other institution, attempts to optimise the data used for the league tables but without manipulating them. It feels that this is justified because of the potential

institutional damage caused by the positions in the league tables which are not an accurate reflection. This makes PLU more prepared to 'game' the system than previously, if only to put it on an even footing. However, it would never countenance outright 'fiddling'. (Anyway, there is limited scope to boost its position by so doing with regard to, for example, research-related issues.) Besides, PLU feels that other institutions appear to be 'gaming' successfully (although securing other institutional data to back this up is virtually impossible). Some institutions do better than PLU on indicators for which they cannot possibly be that much better. The volatility in the league tables year on year supports this. This reinforces the view that there is nothing wrong in legitimate optimisation of data returns, not least because it is believed that others are doing this and PLU could not afford to disadvantage itself. There are always some ambiguities to take advantage of in data returns for league tables.

Undoubtedly league tables do influence the institution's capital expenditure plans as it attempts to address the 'shortcomings' identified by the rankings.

Impact on staff

Academic members of staff take league tables very seriously (though do not necessarily feel they can do much to change PLU's positions in them). League tables influence people's perception of where they are in the system. All staff members wonder what a low league table position says about them. They recognise that league tables are flawed and not especially rational. But there is a sense of conferred status among, for example, those academics who are research active and who may see career progression involving a move for improved research opportunities.

At faculty level, staff tend to distinguish the institutional from the subject and are as aware, if not more so, of standing in their subject community as of the institution's standing in the league tables. Staff members in the faculties – notwithstanding their view that league tables are 'irrational' – do feel 'outraged' by the low institutional position in the league tables. They work very hard, think they are doing well, and then they feel they are not rated very highly. They take it personally: 'How did we get such a low ranking when we thought that we were doing so well?', they say. They feel that PLU should not be there when they are just like other institutions that are much higher up the league tables, so why are they up there and we are down here? Staff are likely to say: 'Who is responsible for this?', and particularly: 'Who is collecting and sending in our data?'. They feel far away from the submitted data and that there is insufficient transparency about the process. It is difficult to understand what is going on when you are at the local level. Sometimes they blame management, although they recognise that they may not necessarily have good grounds for doing so. Consequently, they tend not to feel responsible and tend to think that it must be people in other departments who are letting everyone down. They do not feel any strong link with the outcomes. Nonetheless, they are worried by the impact on students and parents. It is recognised, however, that two big relevant issues are student retention and the NSS and that everyone has a part to play in addressing these.

The links that academic departments have to their own subject community incorporate various peer review (including professional body) feedback processes, so league tables are just one factor in the overall equation. Yet academic staff and their morale are influenced by the institutional league tables. Heads of department are especially exercised by league tables, which form part of a more formalised approach to evaluation generally. PLU's worsening position in league tables has taken everyone aback and made departments realise that their tacit knowledge of themselves and their 'ranking' in the subject community may not be objective enough. Students are going elsewhere and the subject community data are not necessarily that reliable. Consequently, although departments are more likely to take more notice of subject-based league tables than institutional ones, they are not sure how widely used or widely publicised such league tables are in comparison with institutional league tables.

However, they are aware that league tables do have an impact on their international student recruitment. They know that overseas students and their advisers take a lot of notice of league tables, not least because they do not have the same knowledge or access to the system in this country and need some form of shorthand guide. But some would like the old Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) subject assessment scores brought back – they were seen as more relevant and PLU also did well in them. These were also peer-to-peer reviews and developmental, and departments felt they received feedback and a fair hearing. Where criticisms resulted, a response was justifiable. The QAA process was more grounded in the sector and more credible. QAA looked at the whole context and was not simply fixated on bits of data. In the case of the league tables, they may be less responsive because their compilation is a private and poorly defined process with unclear purposes.

Clearly, league tables impact on a number of fronts. At lower managerial levels, the impact is more diluted than at senior management levels. Yet they are still a matter of pride and with a low position it means that outside the institution there is often some friendly ribbing from colleagues at other institutions. But middle managers get very exercised about marginal differences between institutions in some of the league table parameters being amplified unduly by the hierarchy in the rankings. League tables might be more useful if based on fine-grained hierarchical data. Everything about an institution cannot be captured objectively or in a league table, it is felt. However, the league tables have stimulated a discussion within the institution as to whether it should be doing better, and that discussion is all to the good. Related questions now being asked as a result are 'Should our students be doing better?', and 'Where should resources go?'

Some at PLU in the professional subjects are critical of the way academic staff are valued in league tables. For example, PhDs count in league tables more than professional and occupational experience. Yet many of the very best teachers are drawn from the workplace, while many of the academics with PhDs do not have a broad experience to inform their teaching. Yet this is not reflected in the league tables. Professional qualifications and practitioner experiences are undervalued in league tables. Members of staff may be more influenced by league tables than students are in deciding to join the University. League tables do not resonate with Business School aspirations to

be a 'professional school', for example, because they use data and weightings based on academic research, academic qualifications and publications. League tables are a disincentive to the recruitment of experienced managers and practitioners from the field rather than well-qualified academics often with less experience to bring to their teaching. While, potentially, professional body accreditation of qualifications can overcome this influence, that will only take place if league tables give due weight to this.

Some staff members ask: 'Why doesn't the sector put pressure on HESA to broaden the data capture?'. That would help stop league table compilers saying they are only using the data that are available. As government policy changes, then the HESA measures should change, such as including levels of revenue earned from in-company training. Levels of professional accreditation could also be measured and used. Currently we are not measuring the full range of institutional activity. The compilers may be private but the data are from the 'public sector', so we should have some purchase somewhere.

National Student Survey

The relatively poor NSS message is taken very seriously. PLU has analysed the outcomes, encouraged and raised the student response rate (to avoid the returns being skewed by a few disaffected students) and started to improve. This is very important because the NSS reflects the heart of the PLU mission. The challenge is that the NSS is subjective rather than objective. A great deal of work is now going on with respect to the academic infrastructure as a consequence of the NSS, for example on turnaround times for student work and ensuring better feedback. The loss of the TQA scores, as they gradually drop out of league tables and are replaced by NSS results, is hurting PLU as it did relatively well in those (it reckons this change alone has cost 20 places). PLU also had very good QAA institutional audits, but feels that it receives no credit for this in the league tables.

PLU recognises that its retention rates have not been very good. This is not just a league table issue, as poor retention is also not fair to the students. Some staff may be happy with poor retention (it shows high standards, some say), but the impact on league table position means that performance in this is picked up 'at the highest levels' in the University now. It has forced PLU to take action and it is acknowledged that, if it can solve this, it could regain a number of places in the league tables. It might, for example, consider giving those students who complete a year, pass exams and are therefore in good academic standing – but then do not return – a suitable award if they have completed a coherent part of the course that would qualify for a certificate. This reflects true success rather than wastage, and more adequately reflects their achievements. There is also the possibility that such students may return to higher education later. Many institutions are thinking this way because of competition.

Graduate employment

Destination surveys are a concern. They are used in many different ways and they were never devised originally with league tables in mind. PLU feels that the snapshot of employment six months after graduation tends to underestimate the longer-term capability of many of its graduates to secure 'graduate jobs'. Often, for good reasons, it

takes a while for some students to get into graduate employment. Consequently, this outcome does not help PLU's league table position. One result has been the creation and funding of a new post in careers to produce more detailed information and analysis on graduates. PLU is now responding to questions not raised five years ago. An Alumni Association has been set up. The current notion of 'graduate jobs' used in destination returns seems particularly biased against arts and liberal studies areas.

Many of PLU's graduates go into local and public services, where employers' sensitivity to league tables is not that marked. The University does not deal much directly with SMEs, who are also less likely to be sensitive to league tables. However, the Association of Graduate Recruiters employers represent a completely different market. These are large-scale professional recruiters who discuss regularly and closely which universities to target for their recruitment ('milk round', etc). Many target up to just 10, some up to 20 institutions, and they undoubtedly use league tables to guide their decisions, usually to focus on those near the top. This reinforces the tendency of some large employers to have their 'own favourites', such as Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities, and which reflect where they went to university. They thereby recruit in their own image, and league tables reinforce this.

Marketing

As for market research, staff in marketing work specifically on league table information and related data, such as the NSS, and in liaison with the Quality Enhancement Manager. This approach represents a new development as PLU's strategic imperative now incorporates the objective of 'getting higher in the league tables'. Such staff are also looking very closely at the University's whole course portfolio and related course development issues in the context of their consequences for league table scores. They look also at labour trends (where courses are going to be needed) and analyse applications – both PLU's and competitors' – and general trends on the UCAS interactive database.

There is now much more explicit competitor analysis, not only using UCAS but also examining the prospectuses and web sites of other institutions, including 'mystery shopping'. It is clear that league tables impact most on postgraduate and international students. At postgraduate level people have become 'more savvy' by that point. The market research staff feel that better ways to build brand image are needed, not least to offset the effects of league tables. If PLU had been towards the top of the league tables, it undoubtedly would have promoted that fact – but it is not and therefore it needs to find alternatives. People outside are becoming more astute and do ask now about league tables, employability, NSS, etc, and PLU has to have good answers for them. So PLU is quite active in having institutional pages on *Facebook*, *MySpace* and *Bebo*, both to promote itself (such as having pages for newly arriving international students) and also to rebut criticisms. The Alumni Association (which only started in July) has a *Facebook* account, with over 90 different groups. It is concerned with new individualised, e-media and personalised approaches to students at all stages, including alumni. This is one way to get around the league tables. They are making PLU work harder to communicate with

students and on a more personal basis. Of course, PLU selectively uses league table data in promotions where this shows the institution in a good light.

It is 'critical' and 'vitaly important' to have a good ranking in the league tables for international recruitment. This is one of the reasons why PLU does not have a larger international population of students. However, the importance of league tables does depend on the country. Singapore, for example, is much more brand conscious than many others, and this is reflected in the attitude of Singapore employers and their reluctance to recruit from outside the very top league table performers. International students as yet are not aware of the NSS so much, in comparison with domestic students. The most visited of the PLU *Facebook* accounts are the international student blogs, and prospective and existing students from Taiwan and China use them a lot. PLU also uses it to set up national groups for its international students. The social networking e-sites are seen as a 'risk' to be managed, but also as offering some opportunity.

Being in the wrong league table quartile also strongly influences partnerships, especially internationally. PLU plays down the relevance of league tables, but recognises that potential partners use them. At a recent conference in India it was clear that league tables were being used very seriously. It was thought not to be unreasonable – where would you start if faced with a whole host of universities in another country? The UK delegation's claims that league tables were 'hopeless' were countered by the Indians saying they were the only place to start. Institutional rankings were the only ones that were raised, not individual programme rankings. Those at the wrong end of the league tables are forced to bring in other evidence to help restore a more balanced perspective.

International students, especially from Asia, like the UK league tables because they appear to offer a clear ranking of institutions all the way down and virtually right through the sector. In comparison, while they know about the 'Ivy League' in the US, they get very confused and do not know how to rate other institutions. PLU tries to offset the league table problem by 'selling the city experience' (although it has to be careful as that does not work for those looking for the security and quiet of an isolated campus) and also by 'being honest'. It is important you know what is right for a particular country. Too much promotional glitz does not work in Asia. Some countries (such as India and Taiwan) like the industrial placements and professional qualifications PLU offers, especially in business and management. 'If you do not tailor your key selling points you are likely to lose reputation in some markets.' Lots of decisions are taken by international students on a 'word-of-mouth' basis – PLU has to use that, hence its interest in international student blogs. Although PLU does not feature in the world rankings, it knows that they are increasingly used at postgraduate level. Parents overseas read up on league tables. They want their high levels of investment to pay off, especially in China and other Asian countries.

Although it has not done it yet, to overcome the league tables internationally PLU may have to take the University 'to distant shores' and get involved in overseas delivery and partnerships, and possibly extend online delivery. It is very difficult to argue with league tables, but increasing retention and creating alumni overseas may provide a counter

argument to them. Also, partners overseas may in time want to go it alone or seek partnerships with those with higher league table rankings. So there are risks.

But PLU says when it is abroad that there is no such thing as a bad UK university because every institution throughout the whole system has to meet minimum QAA standards in order to have university status.

League tables are likely to make the post-1992 universities more exposed to 'second market risk' in Asia, as a number of countries seek to become higher education exporters themselves. Older UK universities with good league table rankings may still get the numbers, but maybe not all the cream, in future. International recruitment inwards helps to support programmes for domestic students too, especially in science and technology, and to raise overall standards.

Domestic collaborations

League tables matter less for domestic collaborations and appear to be less significant for local FE partners. The ex-polytechnics have been in the business a long time and historically are seen by FE colleges as the right partners. Students are becoming more aware of information (including league tables and UCAS entry tariff points), but may be less aware of local progression arrangements. PLU is developing an 'associate college' strategy, taking care to ensure that the benefits are mutual.

Overall, there is generally a push to get 'better students' who are more likely to progress and be retained, including those from FE access routes. Despite the contribution this strategy makes to the achievement of government policy, however, such local collaborations could depress league table performance even further. For example, if it were shown to be worsening student progression and retention, the strategy could come under pressure. Nonetheless, the current aim continues to be to build rich FE college partnerships. PLU is concerned to enrol students whom it believes will do well rather than those who probably cannot succeed. But PLU also recognises that it needs to ensure that they are given good levels of support that will provide an appropriate match to their entry qualifications. Hence, league tables are definitely informing institutional strategy.

The Government is driving towards employers sharing more of the funding. PLU already has a scheme with a big employer on work-based learning, but PLU worries in case league tables might encourage employers in future to restrict their activities to universities that are high up in the league tables – particularly given the flexibility that online delivery provides. Hence employers may well influence future higher education decision-making. Although the Sector Skills Councils might help to counter this, their own engagement might be patchy. League tables are definitely a threat here.

Case study 4: Post-1992 Mid-University

Introduction

Post-1992 Mid-University (PMU) is a post-1992 university with approximately 18,000 students. It does reasonably well in the league tables for this group of universities, around mid-table. It is recognised for its success in attracting students from overseas, who account for around 12% of enrolment, and for pockets of highly esteemed research. As a leading polytechnic, it had been used to being part of the top echelon. Doing well in the National Student Survey, however, 'helps to offset any gloom about league tables'.

Perceptions of league tables

It is felt, as elsewhere, that the post-1992 universities can never win from league tables. PMU's league table position is not too bad, although as a leading polytechnic people previously had got used to feeling part of some kind of elite. League tables have rather knocked that. The governors get 'quite exercised' about the position in the league tables. Senior managers show governors that the key indicators used in the league tables are 'Russell Group' indicators, and suggest that the league tables, if taken too seriously, could have a detrimental effect on widening participation, for example, and that there is 'a huge mission drift potential'. Governors are aware that the cost of rising up the league tables could be prohibitive – but the governors nonetheless keep coming back to league tables. They are published in a way that is accessible to the types of person who tend to become governors but who are not insiders to the system.

It is recognised that people now unashamedly talk about 'the top', 'world-class', 'good' universities compared to 10 years ago. There is less sense of 'fitness for purpose'. Yet most students do not go to 'world-class universities'. Rankings are reasonably stable these days and so are becoming more believable. It would help if PMU could move up, but the barriers are too strong. Warwick, York, Bath and so on, founded in the 1960s, and who have since risen in the league tables, were formed in a totally different research-funded climate to that of the ex-polytechnics in 1992.

The usefulness of rankings

A well-constructed league table actually does contain a decent set of performance indicators when broken down, and they can be used selectively. They also provide transparency. PMU does not continually fret about league tables all the time: it cannot influence league tables that much and it just has to get on and do its best, say at open days. As long as league tables are not stopping people applying, there is no high anxiety about them. The numbers of applicants the University gets is taken to mean that it is doing something right. If students are recommending PMU that may still be the best indicator.

Users of league tables

Senior management/Board of Governors/Council

There have been a number of debates about league tables at board level. Governors regard them as more important the more one moves away from the region. The

University is regarded by them as both a regional and a national institution, with strengths that play also to an international agenda. The view of the Board is that league tables come more into play and are especially important in international markets (although some governors are saying that they are also increasingly important locally). League tables cannot be ignored – they are a fact of life.

There is no written policy on league tables yet, but there are ‘unwritten statements’ that form part of governors’ conversations with the Vice-Chancellor. Moreover, shortly these will be formalised into something more explicit. Governors are adamant that they will not do the wrong things – but league tables can help to reinforce the right things, such as employability. The Board has supported a new post of Director of Employability, for example. The Chairman has promised that league tables will be part of the key performance indicators. However, there is a feeling at board level that if university league tables are compared with primary and secondary school league tables, the latter measure value-added now, and the university ones consistently should do the same. It is difficult to know who the league tables are aimed at – more ‘Oscar-giving’ than anything else – but there is parent and student pressure for information, not least on employability and the student experience.

Governors have used league tables at the gross level to judge how PMU stands up against some of its competitors in the league tables – and some useful comparators are found. They feel the need to know more about how students (as customers) make their choices. However, there are other stakeholders besides customers, such as Government. Universities do have to take account of government policies in the public interest, on widening participation and access, for example, and they inform HEFCE funding. But many of these do not feature in league tables at all, and are even at odds with government policy, leading to an unhealthy conflict. Maybe Government should publish a wider set of metrics and benchmarks, etc. Some institutions may not tell if they have spent money to get up the league tables. However, the Board will not reduce academic standards to get more firsts and upper seconds to get up the league tables. League tables are thought to have had an unfortunate impact on some universities.

The strategic plan states that the aim is to be in the top quartile with ‘benchmark’ institutions. But governors believe that league tables are bound to arise in such a context, while the moves on KPIs are bound to generate more interest at board level in the league tables too. League tables will form part of a basket of measures. The Board has had discussions about presenting PMU in a favourable light on data returns, but does not have an explicit policy. It believes staff members tend to be very correct and upright on data returns, but perhaps this is being slightly naive – after all, everyone else is doing everything not to penalise themselves through data submissions. PMU should ‘reasonably exploit any ambiguity’ in league tables and their returns but, of course, not falsification. Governors are told by senior management that the University is better than the league tables positions.

Governors feel that the determining factor in the influence of league tables could be the international market. Its income is vital and PMU could not afford to lose big market share

because of league tables. But they would prefer the league tables tail not to wag the university dog. League tables impact also on staff morale and, as staff members are regarded as one of the stakeholders, league tables are on the Board's agenda partly because of their impact on staff morale. But governors feel that it will be far better to get league tables to measure the right things.

Senior administrators undoubtedly also give increasing attention and concern to league tables. Some fundamentally disagree with the methodologies but recognise that they are not going away. League tables are taking up an increasing amount of their time. They do try and make sure that the data are correct. League tables are very influential, as school students, tutors, advisers and parents are much more media savvy these days. The destination survey is much more of an issue than it used to be and open days are used to help circumvent league tables. The buying public, and especially international students, are quite anxious to know where a university stands in the league tables. People outside the University are definitely engaging with them. Some staff would prefer to have a government league table as it is believed that they could influence it more.

Academic staff

Faculties are very aware of the league tables and discuss them at Faculty Board. Most seek to do what they can to help the University's league tables position but are never quite sure if it has an effect. They do look at student support, employability, the number of upper seconds and so on, but a lot of it is outside their control. Faculties cannot always see the link to the overall institutional league tables position.

From the faculties' perspective, league tables are inevitably important. Undergraduate teaching is the core business for most and if their customers are using league tables then they have to take account of them. They are a main source of influence over parents, but they are also influential on schools and career advisers. There are a lot of institutions out there and it is difficult for many people outside the system to get a handle on it. They are not going to look closely at every institution. The individual components of league tables are OK – it is the aggregation into institutional ranking that is the problem.

Undoubtedly, PMU central staff have become more aware of things that they can influence and those that they cannot in the league tables. Some feel that there are tensions with the Board of Governors – they are felt to have more ambitious and unrealistic expectations about where PMU should be in the league tables. In schools (secondary, primary) a dynamic head teacher can make a difference to league tables (and newspapers make the most of such stories), and governors think it should be the same for universities. Some governors may be on bodies elsewhere (such as schools or hospital trusts) where such views on being able to do something about league tables are more dominant.

Prospective domestic students

It is still not clear how parents and employers see the NSS. The University is exercised by the NSS – it gives feedback directly on the student experience. It asks whether it has a student support structure that helps in the NSS. League tables do not really give rise to

the preoccupation with the NSS – this would happen anyway. All course leaders have to include an NSS ‘score’ in their annual report and indicate how they are dealing with it. The impact of league tables on staff can be slightly demoralising. They cannot understand why PMU is relatively low. They think that they are doing quite well and other indicators suggest that too. There is also a sense of impotence with league tables – individuals feel they cannot influence them, or even that a department can.

Attention to league tables is more important when student recruitment is not so buoyant. At the moment, home/EU demand is good and league tables are not so vital – but PMU worries about the coming demographic dip, the possible loosening of the cap on tuition fees, the growth of private providers, etc, making life harder and possibly reinforcing the influence of league tables. There is a general reputation issue – league tables will become more important as competition increases. But so will accreditation and the student experience. But accreditation only certifies a common minimum threshold and not the fine-grained evaluations that people want and get from league tables. League tables are seen to be becoming more valuable by stakeholders. A-level entry points are important to PMU, and it has moved entry points up for applicants and held these at confirmation. The University is influenced by the league tables performance of its competitors.

Overseas students and government and funding bodies

There will always be a significant element of the international student market not influenced by league tables – the individual, self-supporting student especially. Agents are using league tables more and more – and ‘a little knowledge is a dangerous thing’. Every agent works for a multiple number of universities (the only way the economics work for them), but this reinforces the tendency to use league tables. PMU recognises that it is making a rod for its own back by selectively using the league tables – adding credibility to the league tables by doing this. It feels like a zero-sum game. Everyone is marketing a very similar/same product. At the lower end of the league tables, some institutions are making headway on price differential grounds and aggressive discounting. PMU has tried not to get involved because of its income reliance on international students and because it sends the wrong quality signal. It does give 10% bursaries to self-funding students for the first year. PMU hopes that there is a quality message in what it does here.

Around 25% of international recruitment comes from articulated agreements where league tables so far have been irrelevant; 10% of international student recruitment comes from overseas government sources where league tables are very important; and about 65% comes from private individuals, often in concert with families, teachers and employers, who are beginning to use league tables more and more as one of the criteria. Usually the parents, teachers and sponsors use league tables rather than do the individual students. When travelling abroad, PMU staff carry briefing notes and selective extracts from the league tables to help counter the overall league tables impact. The International Office photocopies elements of league tables where PMU has done quite well and distributes them, and it does have an effect in tackling any suggestions of mediocrity arising from league tables position. Overall league tables rankings are very important, but they contain components that can be used selectively and importantly,

such as on location, courses, lifestyle and so on. League tables are not (yet) an element of the British Council's Education UK portal through which a number of enquiries come, which helps.

The VC has not, as yet, said explicitly that it is an institutional objective to raise our position in the league tables, unlike some other VCs. PMU's league tables position may be regarded as 'solidly in the middle ground'. So it is not totally a major concern. Internationally, however, league tables are a different matter. PMU has 2,000 international fee-paying students out of 18,000 students overall (45% from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong), plus another 1,500 EU students. That is, more than one out of six students comes from outside the UK. This makes it vulnerable, not least to league tables positions and influences. Plus there is UK government encouragement for international student recruitment, and there are increasing EU monies available. A significant inflow of international students is from Asia. It is a big income stream for the University and the revenue comes without strings – it is fungible. At the moment the numbers are robust and grew slightly this year. There are a range of articulation agreements, mainly with China, which helps for the moment to insulate PMU from league tables in these markets.

But league tables considerations are very relevant in all its markets, and especially in Asia. The role of 'third parties' in using UK league tables to inform student application routes is quite marked in Asia (parents, agents, etc), making them very influential. In Europe, potential students tend to use league tables themselves. There is increased usage of league tables in the international student market, and it is generally negative for PMU, especially in places such as Greece which traditionally have been good markets for it. But numbers of Greek students to PMU are declining year on year in a 'catastrophic spiral'. This hurts most in engineering.

League tables have a very high profile in Malaysia, and PMU has had around 100 students from there enrolling each year. Recently, the principal government awarding body (MARA) has used league table information to close PMU off as a destination. Consequently PMU has 'bent over backwards' to provide greater discounting offers. Despite this the University had no students at all from MARA last year or this year. Students are told by MARA that they will not be considered for support for universities like PMU that are not in the top 50 of league tables. MARA also takes stands at trade fairs in Malaysia and guides prospective students to the higher league table performers. The Pro Vice-Chancellor went out and found that MARA used the league tables and PMU's position in them 'as an objective block' on further discussions of the matter. That the league table is a disqualifier is not even open to question for them.

League table positions are used by the governments of China and India in decisions on the allocations of scholarships for studying abroad. Joint UK government schemes are also subject to these decisions in these two countries – so PMU presumes that the UK Government is happy to go along with the Chinese and Indian governments. The UK Government may say that the (official) RAE rankings usage abroad means that UK governments cannot object to league tables being used in this way. This RAE argument

opens the door to other bodies to use league tables because RAE rankings are often a component of them.

Gulf State embassies also use league tables – and the Gulf is the last significant redoubt of significant government support for students abroad. Scholarships issued by the ministries of education in the Gulf States are usually taken in concert with the embassies in the UK, who find that league tables are hugely easy to use for their decisions and as a substitute for developing their own more detailed knowledge of UK institutions. PMU lobbies Gulf State embassies in London assiduously (the attachés are invited down for dinner, etc). Consequently the University seeks to help itself despite the system. Personal relationships can still trump the system. PMU more than doubled students from Saudi Arabia this year, for example. The University benefits a bit because many Gulf States do not want their students going to places in the UK where there are large Muslim communities because students could be radicalised. So they place caps on places such as Bradford, Leicester, etc, and this helps PMU.

Employers

There is a strong view that employers take league tables very seriously, especially when it comes to the targeted institutions. Employers are also subject to league tables themselves these days (see the *Sunday Times*), which means that they probably are even more inclined to take account of university league tables now. SMEs do not take as much interest – they are just looking for good quality local students.

Impact on funding and finances

League tables are certainly taken seriously because of their potential financial consequences and their impact on certain markets. The impact on the international market is the most significant. International student income constitutes around 12% of the total teaching income that PMU receives so it has to be careful about any consequences from the league tables. International students have less information than other students so PMU is aware that league tables are bound to have a significant influence here.

On funding, there is a basic recognition that it is difficult to move significantly up the league tables no matter how much is spent. OK, PMU may rise a bit, but it is doubtful that it could get into the top 40s. Consequently, PMU has not really decided to spend money to go up the league tables, not least because you can only do it once. The financial implications of league tables are 'not input' factors. Some governors say things like what would happen if we spend say another £1 million on the library, could we go up the league tables, and PMU administrators say it would be marginal. Mostly, governors so far have agreed financial decisions based on funding the strategic plan. Some administrators feel that they do need educating a bit, however.

Changes made

Some elements, such as those to do with the student experience, PMU would want to do anyway and it is not simply responding to league tables. However, when attending international trade and student recruitment fairs, especially in the Asia Pacific region, the University finds that there are plenty of markets that are quite sensitive to league tables.

But many of its more local markets are not. It is very clear that league tables do not fit consistently with many government policies, particularly widening participation, Aim Higher, and the Skills Agenda. The University has a lot of community engagement with the poorer wards of the locality in helping to tackle multi-deprivation, and in working with other partners, but this is not reflected in the league tables. The current strategic plan emphasises social inclusion, globalisation and enterprise. Institutional leaders feel the need to get people to buy into this, then PMU will rise up the league tables.

The University has looked at how it reports data that are having a negative impact on league tables. It makes sure that data returns are 'optimal' and that it is collecting all that is appropriate in the various categories (such as library or IT expenditure, or how staff are counted), so that it does not harm the University's case in the league tables.

As elsewhere the destination survey is a problem with the six-month snapshot. HESA, it is felt, should extend the current pilot of a 10% longitudinal study for graduates 18 months out, and be more flexible as to what counts as graduate employment. As auditors (of HESA returns) only do sample returns, PMU could interpret some jobs (especially in SMEs) 'more favourably' than the University does, such as when someone is 'managing director' of a two-person operation. Usually there is a mismatch between salary and job position that might give the game away, and auditors do query – but generally PMU plays by the book. Sometimes the goal of improving league table position, or some component that contributes to it, can be used internally to ask for and receive more resources.

There is no real formal organisational response to the league tables in the way of a standing committee. It is much more that senior management will indicate how importantly league tables are regarded and expect key staff to respond as appropriate 'as and when'. So far, with the NSS, the response has been more in the way of improving communication with students, on matters such as feedback, rather than throwing a lot of money at it. However, the initial NSS did provide PMU with a 'wake-up' call. The issues were not necessarily fundamental ones and have been quite easy to fix.

Many at PMU say that they are aware of league tables but are not driven by them. PMU has no intention of getting involved in a financial 'arms race' of the kind that seems to have occurred with some pre-1992 universities anxious to rise up the global league tables and become recognised as 'world class'. It does have an eye on variable fees and the extent to which the tuition fee cap may be lifted after the 2009 governmental review. Senior levels of the University fear that increased tuition fees are a threat to lower-ranking institutions if this is combined with HEFCE relaxing its policies on the capping of student numbers. Cash-strapped but higher-ranking institutions may then look to an expansion of undergraduate numbers as a way of avoiding severe financial difficulty, thus challenging the market position of those institutions lower down. If the fee is raised from say £3,000 maximum to £5,000 then it may not matter much and PMU would probably charge the maximum. But if it is raised to say £8,000 then that would be different and more variability in the system would probably come about. There would be a particular threat in the social sciences, arts and humanities, not least as there may be less HEFCE funding for such student places. Alongside the demographic dip PMU would have to look

closely at the financial situation, and the league tables would be a major consideration. If there was a big impact on the international market then that would be a matter of concern. The University will only start to model these scenarios financially in about a year or so.

PMU claims not to be driven by league tables. It is strongly focused on its reputation, and league tables rankings are a species of that. They are very important internationally for recruitment, although less important for reputation locally, where employer experience of PMU is still more important – some employers will say now that they ‘do not know why you are ranked so low in the league tables’. Also, postgraduate students have become more aware of league tables. Careers staff/advisers in schools do read league tables very carefully. They have very little else other than league tables as a basis for giving their advice. Initially it was thought that league tables were not significant enough to change practice on data returns – but that has changed. This is both a change by individuals because they want the University to do well in the league tables, but also as a response to ‘encouragement’ by senior management. Everyone knows too that variable fees, and the prospect of that dimension increasing in the future, are making parents especially interested in league tables.

It is not entirely clear to everyone that league tables have the amount of impact on student choice as is claimed – but in any case it is agreed that PMU must be seen to be responding as if they did. Otherwise people will say that it should have paid more attention to league tables if things go wrong. Also, QAA has an emphasis on the student experience when it visits now (institutional audit) and this reinforces all those tendencies to take league tables and the NSS very seriously. There is an interconnectivity of all these things.

Previously PMU did not collect data on the schools that its students attended (it was not a mandatory field for HESA) but now it does. It enables the University to take a view as to what is the highest qualification at the level of entry and whether it should make any allowances for poor A-level scores for candidates from some underperforming schools. People in some departments think more can be done on the data returns and that ‘we are missing a trick’ to put the institution in an even better light. But others are more sceptical about how far the institution can go here, and the extent to which it really is the best use of resources.

The NSS and other types of student feedback

PMU has also done quite well in the recent NSS, and staff members are ‘delighted’ at this; it helps to offset any gloom about league tables. Moreover, students do look at the NSS. The University does a thorough analysis of NSS findings, and central staff will work with individual departments to correct deficiencies. The NSS is part of the managerial ‘toolkit’.

The NSS gets a lot of attention paid to it, especially by Marketing. The University needs to get the student experience right – they are the best ambassadors. League tables’ usage of the NSS is another good reason. Annual PMU research on students and

parents every October in recent years, on the effect of league tables on its student enrolment application decisions, makes it very clear that league table influence is high and growing locally (55% say league tables have a very important or important influence, more than any other factor).

As it is so difficult to influence many of the things that get used in league tables, many staff feel that the NSS is more important in its own right and a better measure than league tables. However, PMU is improving data collection and verification all the time – this is the main action from league tables. However, it is difficult to trace through the impact on HESA and then on to league tables. Central staff are two or three levels down the line. Administrators used to operate with the view that when it came to data returns the best approach was to collect the data as efficiently as possible and to send it off as quickly as possible. Now that has changed – a lot more time and effort are put into it because of the significance of its impact on league tables.

Marketing/promotion

Clearly, a huge effort goes into media work to counter the league tables – four press officers deal with reputation and profile-building, and promote ‘the very good work that we do’. PMU has vastly increased its newspaper cuttings as part of the effort to raise everyone’s understanding of what it does well. The University invited in and talked with the editor and others from the various league tables compilers – mainly to find out how it should submit numbers. The message from the compilers (McLeod, Kingston) was that PMU should submit data differently. The University should not overstate things, but data could be combined more effectively, such as including all staff in the SSR, because that is what other universities do and there is more competition around. Some universities have recruited more professors, but not PMU. The University also focuses very closely on the profile that accompanies league tables – it is ‘the new best friend of the profile side of the newspaper league tables’ – and does a lot here.

Broader implications

Even if more variable fees come in, then it would be the institutions at the very bottom who would be threatened most and PMU feels that it would still survive, except it would be closer to the tail because of institutions falling out at the bottom. However, it would be very concerned if increased tuition fee rises and variability were accompanied by stronger capping of funded numbers. That would make life a lot more difficult and league tables in that situation would have more of an impact. It is easy to imagine a mix of league tables and these other factors (fees, capped numbers, declining demographics) threatening the survival of some institutions at the bottom end of the league tables, although PMU feels that it would probably be OK.

In the sciences PMU continues to take widening participation seriously, despite the potential deleterious influence on league tables as a result of lower entry qualifications and possibly decreasing retention rates at the end of the first year. PMU still needs the student recruitment volume in science and if articulation with FE is a way of doing this, then they have to pursue it almost irrespective of league tables. The Faculty has just started to pilot bridging courses with FE, for example. But science staff are more mindful

that they have to recruit students who are likely to benefit from the courses and stay with them. In a sense there is currently tension between the need to get good league table positions and the need to recruit enough students. These staff say it will be interesting to see if this tension can be reconciled. The increasing importance of league tables is not just a demand-side push for them, although that certainly exists. It is also a supply-side push as well as more and more information becomes accessible. Demographic change and decline post-2011 will make 'dog-eat-dog' competition even more pronounced and enhance the usage and influence of league tables in their view.

Case study 5: Research Intensive University

Introduction

Research Intensive University (RIU) is a Russell Group university consistently near the top of the national league tables and in the top 30 of the world rankings considered in this report. It presents itself as a global research-intensive university with a greater interest in the world rankings than the national league tables. Recent corporate rebranding has helped to clarify the University's image, and brand recognition in international markets and the external impact of the rankings are regarded as more important than their internal use.

Perceptions of league tables

According to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, the world rankings (including *Newsweek* but particularly *THES*) are more influential because RIU positions itself as a global university. Domestically, *The Times* league table is more widely quoted and has been around longer. The University has engaged with both *The Times* and *The Guardian*.

There are two good things about the league tables: their multiplicity and the different methodological approaches. Their different methodologies show strength in depth as the institution is near the top in all of them. The institution needs to be doing good things in research as a research-intensive university. If there was only one league table, it would be difficult because there are quite a lot of universities that are very good at teaching or research, but not the other. Also, as a manager, it is useful to have different league tables with different methodologies coming out at different times, because one can occasionally use them as levers, which is not unhelpful, although it is not what they are intended for.

One of the senior administrators commented that, domestically, league tables contribute to a general aura around the institution – enhancing the reputation and raising its profile. The subject tables are not that important, because they vary from year to year and sometimes do not align with the overall rankings. The overall ranking is more important in enhancing institutional reputation. Internationally, people look more in detail – so the subject tables are more important. People come to fairs with copies of the tables. Overall, it would not matter to the institution if the league tables disappeared overnight as there are other indicators that are more important, in particular the Research Assessment Exercise, research income, the National Student Survey, etc.

Another senior member of staff noted that people generally do not understand the methodology and the fact that the Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranking, for example, covers a very specific facet of a university. They are confused by the different ranking positions in different tables. If you do understand how they are compiled, many of the indicators do not seem fair or transparent. People are excited in the institution about a recent good ranking, but there is general confusion and therefore scepticism about the rankings. Compilers are not explaining the improvement in position by the changes in methodology. League tables need stories (i.e. changes) in order to sell papers.

The usefulness of rankings

Again, the Pro Vice-Chancellor felt that league tables have been helpful – they generate discussion about universities (like literary or art prizes), which cannot be a bad thing. The whole of the UK benefits from the periodic focus on universities. It does raise issues about the kind of institution one is. The reason RIU has moved up the tables is that it is better at submitting data, having previously suffered from academics not giving their full institutional affiliation when publishing articles. The corporate rebranding has had a benefit, too, although league tables were not the motivator for that. It has made sure that all Nobel prize winners are appropriately ascribed to RIU. These are games, but we are all clever in universities and we must make sure we are playing within the rules of the game and as well as we can.

At departmental level, one member of staff expressed scepticism about league tables and stated that she would only take notice of them if her department or the institution was placed lower than expected on several of them. Her particular department had been placed 20 in *The Guardian* subject league table, but this was based on incomplete data (NSS, class sizes, facilities). The league tables give a false impression of accuracy, and such lacunae are irritating. There are few signs that applicants use them. The current students were concerned with the lower than expected ranking position, but the accreditation body had just re-accredited the courses, so they were happy that specialists had given the all clear. It was not felt that there was a message from the institution centrally that league tables were particularly important.

According to a member of Council, falling catastrophically in the league table is identified as a major risk and it would be very concerning if that happened. It would be picked up very quickly as a news item. There would not be a right of reply allowing the institution to explain it away. In that sense, relative failure in league tables will have more impact than relative success.

The rankings are having a big influence on overseas funding decisions, but the league tables do not really matter in the real world. The *Daily Mail* probably would not carry a story on rankings, even if the *THES* gets very exercised about them. In Government, the RAE is more influential than rankings. But people love '100 best' lists and it is natural to want to know where you are in the rankings. Within universities there is keen competition and we are getting used to being ranked throughout our lives: schools, business and industry. There is a lot of kudos in getting a high ranking. We like to know who our competitors are and seeing it in black and white satisfies this.

A senior member of staff commented that the institution would be foolish if it did not take league tables seriously. Everyone likes lists and prospective students will use league tables because they are widely known. RIU has a healthy approach to them, as a year-on-year benchmark and one reference point, but not an end in themselves. That might change if the institution slips down the tables.

The Pro Vice-Chancellor mentioned that it is useful for Government to see that UK HE plc is doing really well [in the world rankings]. The way RIU is perceived is of such complexity

that the league tables are a simple way of making arguments to Government about research funding with the Treasury [in competition with other countries] – as long as one treats them as diverse and, to a greater or lesser extent, methodologically flawed, and says this very lightly rather than in a dismissive way. The diversity and multiplicity of the league tables is their strength.

Users of league tables

Senior management/Board of Governors/Council

The Council has in the past been concerned about poor performance in the league table. The University of Leiden ranking was reported to Council (albeit in the margins of the meeting). There are two key performance indicators which refer to the league tables. The league tables first appeared in RIU's KPIs two years ago in order to demonstrate whether it is a global university, which is all about reputation. Reputation among the academic community will vary quite widely from the general media.

The University has paid a lot of attention to student surveys in the past, especially regarding student accommodation, security, etc. At the Council's away-day some time was spent discussing the student experience, prompted by the league tables and the National Student Survey. The two surveys were analysed in some detail, together with an internal audit of student responses. This subject has returned to Council on a number of occasions, as what is effectively a customer satisfaction survey is regarded as very important. RIU's findings do not always mirror those of the national survey. Actions are taken, for example on the estate and academic facilities, but league tables give impetus to these rather than being the main motivation. Council receives details of the latest league tables and the institution's key competitors.

Prospective domestic students

One senior administrator commented that league tables are more important for RIU in terms of reputation than for student recruitment. However, prospective students, parents and careers advisers do pay attention to the rankings. The University is increasingly engaging with parents and has produced a magazine for this stakeholder group. How students select a university course is different from the way their parents do. The subject comes first, then the location and, finally, reputation. For postgraduate students the nature of the course is the most important.

It is difficult to get a picture of how these league tables are influencing the various audiences. They are less important for an undergraduate student audience. They do feed into the wider environment, funding decisions and staff recruitment internationally. According to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, the ambitious middle class look at rankings in a very different way to those who are traditionally under-represented in universities. The latter would find a university being in the top 10 a cause for anxiety. We need to be very careful about what the purposes of the league tables are. UK students look more at the subject tables in *The Guardian*, which weights teaching and facilities more highly.

Prospective international students

For international students, the decisions may be more family-influenced than personal. If the student is supported by the government, the extent to which the funding body is regulating where the student can go may vary. In some countries, these organisations are influenced by league tables and will only fund students who are going to study at institutions ranked above a certain position or departments which have received a certain grade in the Research Assessment Exercise.

According to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, for teaching RIU had not used the subject tables so much as the general teaching ethos – educating the global citizen – which they have developed: volunteering and community engagement, etc. Undergraduates do not care too much about the research rating. What they like is the feeling that they are going to a university that is appropriate for the kind of career they would like to go on to. They are concerned about the totality of the institution rather than whether they have the best nanotechnologist in Europe teaching them.

Overseas governments/scholarship bodies, etc

RIU's position in the global rankings (particularly *THES*) has made a huge difference when the institution is negotiating with scholarship bodies, funding bodies and government education ministries abroad. They look first at the RAE and then at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University and *THES* rankings. *Newsweek* may also be used. They take these very seriously. The Vice-Chancellor explained how a delegation from a small but very rich country visiting recently said that they had used the RAE and league tables to select RIU as one of five universities to send scholars to.

It will be interesting to see whether the new RAE profiles will be convertible into a ranking. Overseas parents look more at the world rankings than the national league tables, which are more concerned with the student experience.

Employers

According to a senior member of staff from the careers department, employers tend to use the subject tables rather than the overall institutional rankings.

Academics

The Pro Vice-Chancellor said that the institution did not erupt in glee when RIU achieved a good ranking position, but younger colleagues were thrilled to bits and felt part of the success. Older colleagues were more sceptical about the methodology. But it did have an effect on staff morale.

However, according to one of the heads of department interviewed, it is unlikely that academics (even overseas academics) will use league tables when looking to move jobs. It is much more about well-known individual researchers in a department attracting them. Some academics might use league tables to confirm a decision already made. It is difficult to directly relate staff recruitment to league tables, and certainly not within the UK – it is subjects and people that are more critical. For people moving continents, the league tables are more important.

Higher education institutions

RIU does quite a lot of work in ranking other institutions, particularly on postgraduates and postdoctoral staff. They have not done any particular work on the impact of league tables on international student recruitment and early researchers but, anecdotally, it would seem that rankings have had an impact in this area, although it is difficult to separate rankings from other factors like the RAE, etc.

According to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, RIU uses the world rankings to check out potential overseas universities to collaborate with and would only ignore these if there was a particular pocket of excellence in a lower-ranked institution. To some extent, the league tables do influence RIU's perception of other universities – they confirm their assumptions. But, again, they are one of a number of factors. League tables are not that influential for decisions about which higher education institution to collaborate with. The Russell Group is more important. Individual contacts are also influential.

A senior academic said that centrally people look at different tables and their different emphases. A department looks at rankings and decides who they might collaborate with. Rankings of particular faculties are more important than rankings of institutions. We look at other nations' domestic rankings for our discipline. But we also look at the world rankings. People in universities are far too clever to believe that major shifts in universities' positions are about performance rather than methodology. There is an element of randomness.

Also, a number of colleagues have identified the area of international collaborations – there is a growing awareness of where particular universities are in the rankings. But it has not led to rankings-driven decisions about whom to collaborate with. These kinds of decisions are more about relationships with departments or individuals. There will be informal discussions about the latest ranking at strategic meetings, but that will be the extent of it.

The Communications Director suggested that other higher education institutions, particularly abroad, may use world rankings in deciding about collaborations, but it is a broader issue about the reputation of a university. RIU does not really understand the key components of reputation for some key opinion-forming groups and is keen to understand this better. League tables will play a part in that, particularly internationally. The institution will probably be doing some research on corporate reputation (not specifically league tables, but these could form a part of this).

Alumni

A dean felt that the effect of achieving good rankings also applies to alumni, but that the UK is only just waking up to them. How you feel about your degree and the place where you spent your formative years is important. Alumni are delighted by the value good rankings give their degree. How alumni feel about a university is going to become much more important. There is a marketing point to this, and the key relationship of graduates is with their faculty or department and not with the university in which it is based.

The Pro Vice-Chancellor described the use of league tables in alumni relations as light touch: RIU's message is that graduates are key ambassadors for the University and what really makes a global university is the way its graduates talk about their institution and the way people talk about them as RIU graduates. The Vice-Chancellor sent a newsletter to alumni and alerted them to the improved ranking position, and the response has been just astonishing, getting in touch – almost like 'a post-coital glow'.

Impact on staff morale

The Head of Student Recruitment thought that league table performance does impact on staff morale, although the write-up on the institution's web site did not do the recent climb in one of the rankings justice. It put the improvement down to academic staff, but academic-related and other staff must also have been partly responsible.

A dean felt that the league tables are important for recruiting and retaining staff, morale and the feel-good factor. Overall trajectory is more important than absolute position for faculty.

Impact on current students

According to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, students are thrilled when the institution does well and disappointed when it does not do so well, and they want to know why. They are interested in how league tables work and the institution provides information on this.

Working group to consider league tables

A league tables working group was set up at the request of the Vice-Chancellor, probably because rankings were becoming more important. Other universities do quite a lot to improve their positions, and RIU thought it should look more strategically at league tables and not just rest on its laurels. The working group's objectives were to ensure that the institution was presented as positively and clearly as possible to the publishers and users, and to provide a forum for information exchange and related issues about league tables.

One of the other aims was to identify why some departments were not in the top 20 in the UK, because this seemed inconceivable. The institution also appeared in the top 10 for some subjects which it does not teach and never will.

The league tables working group became focused on getting the data presentation right rather than considering broader issues about trying to influence the compilation of the tables. It started by trying to understand the methodological issues, to ensure that the institution gets the focus on the HESA data right. The group did talk to as many of the compilers as they could, but they were not always able to ascertain the basis of some of the calculations. So it had a relatively narrow focus on data submission, which determined its membership, covering mainly core registry functions. The Communications Department was involved because of newspapers' role in league tables. During the life of the working group it became clear that this was more about registry work than the public relations function.

The group did come up with some recommendations. They were more about improving information and the understanding of league tables, and to have them in mind when submitting data. Some activities would not have happened without the working group (for example, engaging with the international employers involved in the *THES* ranking), but others were happening anyway and the working group helped to formalise them (promoting employability, prizes for students who have done well at the institution to influence head teachers' reviews). The recommendations were put to the Vice-Chancellor and the senior management team and forwarded on to different parts of the institution, such as finance and planning. There are no plans to reconvene the group.

Data return is the main issue – how the institution returns full and accurate data. In particular, departmental library spending was not being picked up in the overall spending figures. A governor believed that it is not easy to manipulate the league tables, but there is a 'black art' to data collection and presentation. If you can understand that, then you are going to do better, and we are all in no doubt that it's worth the effort to do it.

Changes made

Through the working group, the institution established how the league tables worked, but it is not changing its behaviour enormously. There are some things which it would be doing anyway, but league tables have given them a bit more impetus.

The working group on league tables was set up to examine how the tables worked and the recommendations were about things that RIU would have done anyway for other reasons. There is no sense in which league tables would become part of a strategic goal, only as one indicator of progress towards achieving a goal. Since the working group was dissolved, the institution has felt it is more important to reach the targets it has set itself. Strong performance in the RAE is absolutely crucial.

League tables have helped in terms of the external image, but the Head of Student Recruitment felt they also help in more subtle ways: institutional thinking. In the crudest terms, you can look at the things a university might be doing and ask 'Should a top-10 university not be doing this?' as a driver of change, e.g. admissions and the quality of students admitted and their progression through their course, particularly in respect of various qualifications (value added), but also having a more sophisticated understanding of international universities and how their students might perform here.

There had been a decision to raise entry requirements a few years ago, under the previous Vice-Chancellor, but this was not necessarily as a result of league tables. However, it had certainly helped to improve the institution's reputation. There had been unnecessary variation within departments and it was proving difficult to teach mixed classes. The current Vice-Chancellor has raised them again, and RIU has decided not to take any students through clearing. The question was asked, 'If we are one of the top 25 universities in the world, should we really be going through clearing?'. Part of the reason for this was institutional reputation underpinned by league tables. But it would be incorrect to say that the decision was made just because of league tables. The Head of Planning pointed out that performance in some of the metrics that may contribute towards

league tables are among the top 'key risks', particularly on widening participation and entry requirements. The driver for this is quality and other goals within the institution, not league tables.

One of the reasons the institution will not chase particular positions in the world rankings (unlike other institutions) is that the methodologies can change and you can be diverted away from your prime mission: 'Stick firmly to your values and the league table positions will take care of themselves'. Under its current Vice-Chancellor, RIU has a much clearer idea of its strategic objectives and of what it should be doing to support those objectives. It is easier for RIU to be this high-minded, and others might have to be more single-minded. If the University started to drop down the league tables, they would have to look at why that was happening. The risk schedule has a whole series of metrics (e.g. research income) which are being monitored relative to other institutions, and actions are being taken to address where they are faltering. If the reason for a fall in league table position contradicted the strategic goals of the institution, they would have to forcefully challenge the methodology.

League tables have been very helpful, especially recently. And they can be used as a lever to make changes within the institution. A governor pointed out that *The Guardian* league table includes library spend, but the way it was counted did not include some departmental library spend, so this has been added. Academics understand the importance of league tables, so will be much more willing to provide information for this purpose.

One senior academic stated that there might not be any policies directly attributed to the league tables, but that may be because RIU is doing well in the rankings. You can see a momentum in the senior management team, but league tables are not discussed that much. There is deep down a healthy scepticism in the institution in attempts to quantify a multi-faceted quality like reputation.

There have not been any structural or organisational changes resulting from league tables in one of the departments researched. League tables might be useful in raising issues among the heads of departments, like the quality of facilities, but they would not in themselves provide justification for any action. League tables do not influence strategic decisions. Departments in RIU are able to take risks and retain a longer-term view. League tables do not conflict with other external requirements or pressures. However, individual indicators, especially the RAE, have more impact. The Research Excellence Framework may have more influence than the existing RAE, especially on where to submit journal articles. The department is looking for the top 3-4% of students, so it is unlikely that league tables will deflect this approach.

The Head of Communications suggested that the University has not changed its strategic targets as a result of league tables. But part of the reason RIU is thinking more about the student experience is because league tables have helped to promote this issue more generally. They were thinking about it before, but league tables have helped to inform

some shifts in strategic thinking around that. But they are more interested in the raw data from the NSS and other sources than in how they are used in league tables.

The NSS and other types of student feedback

The working group on league tables did consider the role of the NSS, especially when some departments had done well in the Teaching Quality Assessments. The Pro Vice-Chancellor felt that it was seriously worrying – scandalous, actually – that some universities did not reach the data threshold but still came out top.

League tables also have a role in encouraging other students to fill in the NSS. The head of the institution sends out three or four messages a year indicating that this is their chance to say something and the institution has no means of filtering the responses. It is very important for future students. Students look more at subject tables, whereas the institution is more interested in the institutional tables.

According to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, in the case of the NSS last year when RIU did not reach the 50% threshold, the Vice-Chancellor was in touch with those departments to stress the importance of achieving a good response rate. The Vice-Chancellor also writes to all students several times a year saying that it is important to respond (although not telling them *how* to respond), telling them that this will impact on how the institution behaves because the results are fed back to the senior management. It complements internal surveys that show the quality and depth of the feedback to students. The Head of Student Recruitment reported that they are beginning to map the separate breakdowns of iGraduate and the NSS onto internal student evaluations. The results need an awful lot of face-to-face decoding; for example, on the surface it appears that students do not care about careers advice but, at the level of departments, there is very strong support for careers education. The value of student-led feedback is seriously changing practice much more than any league tables. The league tables remind the institution of the importance of communication. That is a big issue for RIU. It is a global university, but it could be more outward-looking than it is. The league tables give the really important message to departments: 'You're working in a really good institution, but not everyone recognises it and there are ways in which you can help, by publishing more, by doing more about your teaching, being involved in outreach activity'.

One member of staff did not give the NSS much credence because the findings were so poorly presented on the Teaching Quality Information web site that prospective students were unlikely to use it much. Unpublished league tables like the Student Barometer (iGraduate) are more influential than the NSS. This is a more important driver for deciding what actions to take, because there is institutional ownership of it (having paid for it) and you can analyse the detail much more. The Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI2) is now using this in gauging the new initiatives. RIU has a working group looking at the results of various student surveys.

Communication with compilers

Since the league tables working group was dissolved, the ongoing work has been about ensuring that the institution has the proper procedures for responding to information

requests from the compilers and that the institutional data reflect everything going on at departmental level, as well as centrally. RIU recognises the importance of league tables to some of its external audiences and so has taken a more corporate approach to this. However, there is only informal monitoring of the effect of the actions taken.

With regard to careers, the Advisory Committee was raising questions about the league tables. Bernard Kingston was invited to talk to the Committee and they were pleased with his openness. RIU undertook its own longitudinal survey of the 2001/02 cohort, prompted by the league tables and concerns about the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education methodology. The Head of Careers also reported that the *THES* had asked RIU for suggestions of employer reviewers to include in their survey.

Market research/promotion

On specific activities, RIU uses promotion and marketing activities in a light touch way. It acknowledges that league tables are flawed, but says 'Isn't it nice when we do well in them?'. Everyone goes away feeling good, which is important on graduation days when we are setting in place the next stage of what, we hope, will be a lifelong relationship with the graduate and her or his family. In media relations, it is important overseas, giving them straplines like: 'One of the world's leading universities'.

RIU references the world rankings in some of its corporate messaging – that it is a top-25 university. Comments on its position in new rankings are generally only on the web site rather than trying to do anything more proactive. According to one senior administrator, one reason is an underlying concern about methodologies and there is the reality that something produced by one part of the media is not usually covered by other parts. But the *THES* ranking has produced a lot of coverage in other media, perhaps because it is only a trade publication and not directly in competition with the nationals. The general feeling at RIU is that much of its rise in a recent table is due to methodological changes, although these tend to favour RIU, e.g. greater emphasis on peer review. But we have to take this with as much a pinch of salt as others.

RIU tends to focus on the world rankings. The methodology of the subject tables seems to change quite a bit. It will use rankings where it does well, but will include other indicators alongside, like Nobel prize winners, other distinguished alumni, the scale of institutional income and the quality of students. It is slightly tautological, as they feed into the league tables, but they are as strong as indicators as the rankings themselves.

Case study 6: University College (UC)

Introduction

University College (UC) is a small, single campus higher education institution near a small city which largely focuses on sport, teacher education, humanities and social sciences and is a member of GuildHE. Approximately half of its recruitment is local. It is a teaching-led institution which currently appears in the top 75 in *The Guardian* league table. Although in the lowest quartile of the *Sunday Times* table, it is included among the same newspaper's top seven university colleges and the top 20 institutions with the most satisfied students. It has had positive responses in the National Student Survey (NSS) and good scores for teaching quality in the past, but its completion rate is falling and it has a relatively low level of expenditure per student.

Perceptions of league tables

UC uses the *Sunday Times* in particular, as it is perceived to have a more balanced ranking and it groups type of higher education institution, so that they can measure themselves against other HE colleges. The College also pays attention to the NSS, but nothing else. There is no point in comparing apples and pears. The *Sunday Times* ranking is more accessible.

According to the Principal, league tables are very important to UC. For all their imperfections, they are a useful benchmark. Potentially, if the institution is highly ranked, rankings are good for public relations. They are also a pointer for where the institution could do better. They help motivation. In active terms, the most important is for public relations. League tables are important because everybody thinks they are important. They have become more important because people take them increasingly seriously, including UC's other key stakeholders: potential students, parents (who will ask on open days: 'How are you doing in the league tables?'). League tables may only be a symptom of competitiveness, for students, research income, staff etc. In a similar way, the use of head-hunters in recruiting staff has become a sign of searching for excellence. Improving ranking has definitely become a strategic goal, because league tables, and the NSS in particular, have become more important. League tables concentrate the mind wonderfully.

An interesting league table or index would show successful widening participation (WP), low dropout, good degrees and graduate prospects. According to the Principal, that would be akin to saying: 'Judge me on indicators of what I say we're supposed to be doing well. If we're not good at those, then "my future should be freed up"!'.

One of the senior administrators expressed the belief that the published league tables are designed to retain the status quo. They include entry standards and good degrees, which are double-counting, and do not include (or give much weight to) value-added. Focus group participants indicated that league tables should not really conflict with other external pressures. Many researchers at UC are not entered in the Research

Assessment Exercise (RAE), but are still researching in order to improve teaching. According to a council member, whichever league table one does best in is the most important. Not many people actually look at the separate indicators. Students may look at the subject breakdowns.

The usefulness of rankings

Again, the Principal felt that league tables have helped generally. They are a bit frustrating, depressing and demotivating at times, when the institution is near bottom for research. That is fine as long, however, as UC is in the top 20 for teaching and student satisfaction. The *THES* featured a ranking based on the NSS, but excluded non-university institutions. Yet some GuildHE members do well in the NSS.

According to another senior member of staff, it is important to strive to do well in league tables, since the categories they measure tell you what you are doing well and not so well in. They focus on different things. The NSS and *The Guardian's* 'value-added' measure are most important. Any good results are used in marketing. But, more importantly, it shows how competitive it is getting and you see how seriously other institutions are taking them. If the College can improve its position, it can attract more students. And it is a great motivating factor for staff. League tables can also show where there is work to be done. They are a useful tool. *The Times* is of little value to UC, because of the focus on research. There are arguments that none of the league tables are worth anything, but they do get an awful lot of press, and they are a means by which the College can judge itself and others.

For a senior administrator, league tables have had an influence beyond their original purpose, to sell newspapers. The general perceptions about higher education institutions do influence RAE panel members' judgements. Rankings are designed to tell people what they want to hear – like the top four in the Premier League. League tables are just another thing to deal with. The institutional audit and Ofsted inspections have more impact, institutionally. He argued that you could inflate the grades you award in order to improve your rankings, and even suggested that most higher education institutions will tend to do this – pointing out that the proportion of upper seconds has increased, so that this has become the modal degree.

Users of league tables

According to the Principal, it is hard to determine who the most significant users of league tables are – it could be argued that he is the most significant user! The College takes league tables increasingly seriously. Relative to other institutions, UC has been a bit complacent. The institution needs to be more proactive to ensure that it continues to do well. He suggested that some higher education institutions even tutor their students for the NSS. Otherwise, the users are prospective students, parents and, to a lesser extent, employers. The funding bodies privately take notice, alongside a basket of other measures, despite what Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) senior officials say officially. From what they say privately, they are very aware of league tables.

League tables are important on the basis that they are used by staff and potential students and their parents. They are out there and so they are important. People look, but the Principal is not sure they have that much effect [on student choice]. They help the institution to become known. If the institution is not included, it is more difficult to become known. They may confirm choices already made on the basis of subject and location. Only if an institution is ranked low would it put students off. Middle would be fine, high would be great.

League tables are more relevant for employers, governors etc, because they are about reputation. It is a badge for the external, uninitiated. According to a senior member of staff, league tables have highlighted the fact that UC has not been terribly business-focused. The business is education, but they have not measured that and improved management information.

Senior management, Council

According to a member of the Council, UC had not taken much notice of the league tables until it became a University College. Rankings are important because of their impact on student recruitment. Specialist employers (e.g. law, engineering) take little notice of them, but general recruiters may do. He thought that league tables are incredibly dangerous, bad and have no positive purpose, but they are here to stay and you have to use them. A university council can use rankings to make things happen, as a stick against the administration, but this is very unwise. League tables have a power beyond rationality. League tables only influenced his perception of other higher education institutions in relation to UC. The Council recently diverted senior management at UC from setting a specific target to improve the College's league tables ranking. It is now worded to achieve the top quartile of comparable higher education institutions.

According to the Principal, UC's new strategic plan is much smarter in terms of key performance indicators (KPIs). There are data beneath the indicators in the league tables. The management information is league-table like, measuring efficiency. The governing body is interested in these. The strategy includes the specific goals of getting into the top half of national league tables and the top 10 for student satisfaction. In the recent *THES* student experience survey, it appeared that campus-based universities are doing better, so the perception of the estate seems to be key. This may feed into student satisfaction.

The College is only in its infancy in benchmarking its performance, e.g. on entry standards, and according to one senior staff member they are not very smart in target setting. The Council is more interested in league tables than staff are because members feel they influence student recruitment. There was discussion (particularly among the governors from other higher education institutions and former HE employees) about whether UC should bring in a statistician to help them do better, but with very little evidence of whether league tables actually influence student choice (compared with the older universities). It is just a perception, but people can get carried away, even when it is not rational.

The new UC strategy identifies three-year targets, including the indicators underlying the league tables (especially the *Sunday Times* and NSS). There was an interesting debate in the senior management team about whether the league tables should be a key performance indicator or an actual target in their own right (as currently in the draft of the strategy). The difference is whether the College says that it is allocating resources to improve its positioning in the league tables or to actually improve learning and teaching, or whatever. UC needs to do this perhaps more than larger higher education institutions, because it needs to be that bit better in order to survive.

According to the Head of Marketing, having a strategic goal of being in the top 10 for student satisfaction and making a serious attempt to achieve it is what is important, not necessarily achieving it.

The Council has not really considered individual performance indicators, but the league tables have become part of the benchmarking process. The performance of other higher education institutions is monitored, especially regional and similar types of institution. Rankings are also important for overseas collaborations.

Prospective students

According to one of the governors, the most significant users of league tables are prospective students, or at least their parents. Compared with 20 years ago, university prospectuses no longer mention staff quality. Non-graduate parents do not know what to look for, and may regard the physical environment as more important than learning and teaching.

One of the focus group participants was not sure whether students take any notice of league tables, but thought that parents might. From an administrative point of view, she was sceptical about the validity of the data in the league tables and the way they are presented. They have to be treated with a health warning. As a parent you would use rankings later on after deciding on the subject and type of location, to look at student satisfaction. But over half of UC's students are locally recruited. The subject tables may be more important but, if they include research, they may not be as relevant, as the College is not really research active.

Parents

Two senior members of staff commented that parents are the most significant users of league tables, and more than prospective students. The importance of parents was confirmed by one of the admissions officers. Parents have more influence on where students go – or, rather, the fact that they are going into higher education. Parents are much more aware of the reputation of an institution because of the investment they are making. UC attracts quite a lot of students by word of mouth. Once you get people in the door, they like the College. The interviewee was not aware of much reaction by the institution to league tables when they are published.

Employers

Employers are more likely to use league tables when deciding which institutions to collaborate with on workforce development.

Higher education institutions

According to the Principal, league tables influence the perception of other higher education institutions, mostly confirming their prejudices and perceptions, over time, of how some higher education institutions are improving. UC benchmarks itself with other higher education institutions of similar size, mission and region, and they look to see what is generally going on in the sector.

UC has international collaboration in particular countries, but this is not based on rankings. It is working with other institutions to develop collaborative research on education, sport and health and create a virtual critical mass. League tables have only indirectly prompted this, but they might be part of the goals. They are a tangible target to aim for. Rankings encourage you to ask: 'Why are we where we are?', 'What do we have to do to improve?' and 'What are others doing that we're not?'.

A senior member of staff commented that, in his opinion, league tables have not really influenced UC's perception of other higher education institutions, and that they would only notice if an institution moved dramatically. Subconsciously, he said, you accept league tables as meaningful because they are so simple and they feed reputation management.

The Principal believes that league tables informally influence the pigeonholing of institutions and thereby restrict an institution's actions. Ministers say that 'parity of esteem' is important, but the reality is still a matter of 'Unto those that hath, shall be given'. Whatever they say, it is research that really makes the difference for the Treasury – it is the research and design wing of UK plc. On the other hand, he would argue, who is educating the workforce and training the teachers? And, if you're serious about widening participation, you need to 'get 'em young'.

One senior member of staff said he had no evidence of the influence of league tables on other higher education institutions' perception of UC. It helps to appear in the league tables, but they would not influence whether to collaborate with them. League tables raise the profile of higher education generally and nationally.

Another commented that league tables have not altered UC's perception of other higher education institutions, but they have helped them to realise that they are not that far behind them, despite the university/non-university distinction. Rankings have changed institutions' priorities and shaped national opinion, and the national funding bodies must have been influenced, therefore, too. But, he felt, nobody will admit to that. Some indicators, like the RAE and NSS, have a life of their own. There may be funding implications from some of the performance indicators now calculated, as happens in some other areas.

The Council member interviewed indicated that league tables may influence other higher education institutions in deciding whether to collaborate with UC but, probably, only at governing body level.

One of the senior administrators said that he keeps an eye on other higher education institutions' positions in league tables, e.g. local institutions. But he does take into account the demand and the entry requirements, which may affect the honours classifications achieved. He doubts that other higher education institutions take much notice of UC's league table position.

Impact on staff morale and recruitment

According to a senior (administrative) member of staff, league tables do not impact on staff morale. She also noted that academics had not really considered the dropout rate as an issue before it affected UC's league table position this year. People do not really understand how the newspaper got the data on retention. The Head of Marketing has helped UC to see that there are key issues here that impact on funding. But they are slow in picking up on most of these business-related indicators.

There has not been much of an impact on staff recruitment policies although, subconsciously, the Principal said that he may refer to league tables when head-hunting a new Dean of School, at least to look at other GuildHE institutions or post-1992 universities or that particular subject area.

Working party to consider league tables

Much effort has been made at UC to improve management information systems (MIS). Greater emphasis is placed on data gathering etc, and an MIS manager has been appointed.

NSS results and retention rates have been discussed at school level, and more detailed and robust data are needed to interpret the nationally collected data. A withdrawn student can count more towards dropout rate in a small institution than in a large higher education institution.

According to the Principal, organisations are increasingly becoming more aware of the importance of submitting data and how they are used to compile the rankings. UC has not been particularly clever at doing this. It has done well in the NSS and Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) and they focus on these areas, because they are a caring, sharing, teaching-led institution. Out of 30 teaching-led institutions in GuildHE, the institution is always near the top. NSS is a useful benchmark, with GuildHE or regionally.

Changes made

The Principal commented that there have been no significant organisational changes to date directly as a result of league tables. The Head of Marketing is much keener on league tables and performance, because they do make you think. UC is thinking about setting up, or charging, a committee with the task of making sure it does better in the

rankings, with the Head of Marketing as a member. It will probably use existing committees for this purpose.

According to a senior staff member, the distinction that some higher education institutions make between being driven by the league tables or focusing on quality improvements which will hopefully feed through to the ranking is ridiculous. He felt that they will almost always be focusing on those areas that are reflected in league tables, and so are being driven by them. Higher education institutions may be reluctant to acknowledge the influence of league tables but, in reality, they have been affected by them.

Another senior staff member said there is still a lot that needs to happen in order to translate the market intelligence that UC has started to gather into strategic change. The College needs to safeguard its NSS result, because everyone else is focusing attention on it. It needs to understand exactly what it is that students are being asked in the survey and focus on those areas where the College is falling down. But UC is just at the start of deciding what to do, and feeding this through to targets for individual staff. UC has also reorganised the schools. He said that league tables are here to stay and will influence how people rate an institution.

UC has taken the initiative to use comparators in marketing. The College has also been looking at whether all its spending feeds into the league tables. Efforts to improve retention (poor at UC on some programmes) and employability are definitely related to the league tables, although it depends on how these are defined. The council member felt that national league tables had generally helped to improve student services in higher education institutions. Specific actions have been taken and more resource has been spent on retention and employment/ability. Efforts have been made to improve facilities. League tables have led to specific actions in promotion and marketing, improving facilities, careers education and KPIs. League tables do not affect course offerings, as these take too long to develop to really impact.

The council member felt that league tables work broadly against more sensible and proper external evaluations, such as institutional audit and financial audit. Excessive spending on facilities and improving retention could put the institution in financial jeopardy. In general, league tables have definitely influenced higher education institutions' responses. Some have focused on increasing research income (as distinct from RAE). He felt that the Russell Group is a ranking in itself and that ministers probably look at the world rankings in relation to Britain's competitiveness. The Scottish Executive may be increasingly worried about the position of Scottish universities in the world rankings.

According to the focus group of academics and administrators, league tables have been helpful and a hindrance depending on whether UC has done well or not. There has not been much use of poor results to prompt improvement. Data on retention rates are only being used for the first time this year, and they confirmed that they did not know about this until UC dropped in one of the league tables. Fewer first years returned in 2007/08 than was expected. UC has set up an admissions and recruitment committee to develop

a retention strategy. It relates closely to UC's widening participation policy, but the College has not got to grips with it, they felt.

The thinking around the new strategic plan and the use of league tables as KPIs has not yet filtered down to schools, according to the focus group participants. But school plans will have to be completed soon, and league tables will have a greater impact than they have had in the past.

The NSS and other types of student feedback

According to the Principal, the NSS and any indicators relating to teaching quality and overall student experience are important to UC. The College wants to look at entry requirements. There are sometimes tensions between different benchmarks: e.g. between widening participation and entry requirements or retention rates. League tables are relatively crude indicators and you need to drill down, but the newspapers do not do this. UC wants to do well in any league tables that its stakeholders take seriously.

UC has not done so well this time in the NSS because NHS students were included for the first time. Because of the professional requirements, it is a hard course – lots of placements, joint modules etc – and the students compare notes with other students at the College who have fewer requirements. The differences between institutions are not large, but they are exaggerated by rankings. But, however crude, league tables do say something. As a result, senior managers can go along to a director and say, 'Sort it!'

According to a senior member of staff, his marketing reports (e.g. analysis of the NSS) are fed into the management team and now into the strategic plan. Some subjects recruit well and yet could do more to improve their service to students. But the NSS is not objective, it is a subjective survey and depends on students' expectations, which might be low at UC and that is why the College has done well in the past few years [this point of view was supported by another senior administrator]. Trends over time might be informative. The organisational structures are in place, but how the findings will be used to take action has not yet been determined. The NSS is more consistent than the league tables as a whole, however. And it is becoming more and more important in *The Guardian* and *The Times* tables. UC should be able to compete with regional institutions on the NSS, quality of teaching and facilities (spending per student). His appointment was a sign that UC wanted to understand its market better. Institutions themselves are one of the key users of league tables and the NSS. Oxbridge would not live and die by the NSS (unlike the RAE), but UC would.

According to another senior administrator, the College has made much of its position in the NSS, as it has done very well in it. As well as marketing, UC is looking at those areas where students express dissatisfaction, for quality assurance and enhancement purposes.

For the focus group participants, the NSS has raised problems with living accommodation and sport. But league tables do not have an influence on course offerings or flexibility. The NSS provides subject-specific comments. UC should be good at value-added

because it takes students with a low entry score and turns them out with good degrees. But the participants indicated that they do not know the data and that it would be really useful to have an analysis of changes from year to year at the College.

Market research/promotion

According to the Principal, promotional and marketing activities, media relations and course offerings have definitely been influenced by league tables. In the future, alumni will be more important. UC's data management is poor and the College will need to do more in the future on this. Fairly radical changes will be made.

A senior administrator commented that a more analytical approach to marketing has been adopted partly as a result of league tables. UC does not really have a planning function. The prospectus relies on statements from the NSS. Course offerings and content, learning and teaching (retention strategy, feedback to students on assessment, learning support in the first year), facilities, media relations, alumni and a review of data submission have been influenced by NSS comments, but not careers, staff recruitment or research.

UC highlighted how well it did in the *Sunday Times* league table. The College has focused on particular parts of the NSS. It helps to make a story if you improve dramatically, which happened in *The Guardian*, but it was from the bottom, so this was not used in publicity. Improvement in facilities and, in particular, living accommodation is part of the 'master plan'.

Broader influences

According to a senior administrator, there have been issues of data submission, e.g. non-completion on postgraduate continuing and professional development courses. Although this would not cause UC to close this course, it might make them think twice about putting similar courses on.

A focus group participant commented that a lot more weight is being put on outcomes, data and accountability and it has changed the way that institutions are managed and what it feels like working in them. The market is expanding and you have to become competitive. Other people will be looking at these things even if UC does not.

