

The Impact of League Tables and Ranking Systems on Higher Education Decision Making¹

by

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As the battle for “world class excellence” accelerates, competition for students, faculty, finance and researchers between higher education institutions, nationally and internationally, has intensified. In this environment, the results of formally and relatively benign benchmarking exercises have taken on increased prominence and importance elevating the popularity and notoriety of league tables and ranking systems. To date, critical attention has focused on assessing the methodology behind these different systems and asking whether the resultant tables provide reliable information or denote quality. In contrast, this paper examines what impact, if any, league tables and ranking systems are having on higher education institution decision making. Drawing on a comprehensive survey of higher education leaders and senior managers worldwide, the paper aims to better understand the influences on strategic and operational decision making and choices, and institutional reputation and prestige. The study raises important challenges for both institutional leaders and governments.

Introduction and context

Increasing globalisation of higher education has been credited or blamed, depending upon one's perspective, for the myriad changes and challenges facing higher education. Irrespective of such differences of opinion, policy makers, institutional leaders and commentators do agree that the level of competition between higher education institutions (HEIs) within national jurisdictions and on a worldwide scale for "good" students, faculty and researchers and for finance has accelerated in recent years. As governments seek to extend their national presence in the knowledge marketplace, and higher education and academic research is recognised as a vital engine for economic growth, the battle for "world class excellence" has accelerated. This is particularly evident in the policy context, where national governments and supra-national organisations are placing huge emphasis on achieving greater accountability, improving the quality and relevance of programmes and research, and enforcing sharper differentiation between institutions.

In this context, and perhaps not surprisingly, the results of formally and relatively benign benchmarking exercises have taken on increased prominence and importance. "Although rankings of academic quality have been part of the US academic scene for approximately 100 years" (McDonagh *et al.*, 1998), the escalation of the battle for knowledge production and dissemination has elevated the popularity and notoriety of league tables and ranking systems. Despite the fact that there are 17 000 HEIs worldwide, there appears to be a near-obsession with the status and trajectory of the top 100:

The University itself is ranked among the top UK universities for the quality of its teaching.

Top of the ... Student Satisfaction table.

Our position is clearly the x Finnish University in international rankings.

The number one destination for international students studying in Australia.

Institution accredited by FIMPES, Excelencia académica SEP, x Place in academic programme of ...

Published by, *inter alia*, government and accreditation agencies, higher education, research and commercial organisations, and the popular media, league tables and ranking systems (hereafter LTRS) have become ubiquitous since the 1990s. The *US News and World Report's* special issue on "America's

Best Colleges” has been published annually since 1990, and remains the most popular in that country. Around the world, media organisations including the following have predominated in the publication of such lists: *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (first published in *The Times*, October 1992), the *Financial Times* and *The Sunday Times* (United Kingdom/Ireland), *Der Spiegel* (Germany), *Maclean’s* (Canada), *Reforma* (Mexico). In recent years, government and accreditation agencies and higher education organisations have developed their own systems for evaluating and ranking institutional performance: e.g. CHE (Germany), AQA (Austria), CIEES, CACEI, CNEIP and CONEVET (Mexico), NAAC, NBA (India), Higher Education Council and TUBITAK (Turkey), and Commission on Higher Education and Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (Philippines). In addition, there are a variety of commercial college “guide” books and websites, e.g. the *Good Universities Guide* (Australia), *Bertelsmann Stiftung* (Germany) and Research Infosource Inc. (Canada). As higher education has become globalised, the focus has shifted to worldwide university rankings, e.g. Shanghai Jiaotong University and *The Times Higher Education Supplement*.

LTRS are perceived as providing critical information to help inform choice to a variety of different audiences, *inter alia*: internationally mobile students and faculty, parents, government, sponsors and private investors, academic partners and academic organisations, industrial partners and employers. They are a cue to consumers regarding the conversion potential of a qualification for occupational opportunities and personal attainment, e.g. salary range, a cue to employers about what they can expect from graduates, and a cue to government and policy makers regarding international standards and contribution to national innovations strategies. Thus, LTRS appear to satisfy a “public demand for transparency and information that institutions and government have not been able to meet on their own” (Usher and Savino, 2006).

LTRS aim to grade HEIs according to various indicators or metrics in contrast to classification systems, which provide a typology or framework of HEIs according to mission and type. The former are often conducted on a national or sub-institutional level (e.g. by department or discipline) or increasingly on a regional or global basis. Institutions are compared using a range of indicators which attempt to measure higher education activity across the spectrum. Data is drawn primarily from three different sources: HEI statistics, publicly available information such as teaching quality or research assessments and other nationally “weighted combinations of performance indicator scores” (Bowden, 2000), or questionnaires and feedback from students, competitors, peers or selected opinion-formers (Eccles, 2002; Monks and Ehrenberg, 1999).

Regardless of LTRS type, the key focus is on measuring research and teaching performance – usually in that order – both critical ingredients of institutional prestige (Brewer *et al.*, 2002; Tight, 2000; Grunig, 1997). The choice

and use of particular indicators is related to their suitability to act as “proxies” for quality. For example, information on the student cohort is often used or interpreted as an indicator of institutional selectivity; the number of citations and publications in internationally-rated journals is used as an indicator of academic quality; the financial spend denotes the quality of infrastructure; employment record and patterns indicate the quality of graduates; while reputation is measured by an aggregate of its overall status and standing. Each system uses different assumptions and weightings, but there is significant evidence to suggest convergence around definitions of academic quality (Dill and Soo, 2005). The same “top universities” appear on most LTRS either nationally or internationally, with variations only appearing lower down the scale.

To date, most critical attention has focused on assessing the methodology behind these different systems and questioning whether the resultant tables actually do provide reliable information or denote quality. There are three categories of concern:

1. *Technical and methodological processes, e.g.* the way in which data is either collected or interpreted. Given the way in which different disciplines conduct research, publish and disseminate their findings, plus a growing emphasis on technology and knowledge transfer as illustrated by patents, there is a perceived inbuilt bias towards science, biomedical and technology disciplines, English-language publications, and traditional research outputs and formats. Questions have also been raised about whether the peer review process can measure quality or merely perpetuate a popularity contest. The use of indicators as proxies for quality is also viewed as problematic; for example does a larger institutional budget actually translate into better quality infrastructure? Does the number of publications or citations actually denote quality, and is there a correlation between teaching and research quality? (See UNESCO-CEPES, 2002, 2005; IREG, 2006.)
2. *Usefulness of the results as consumer information.* Research on student choice is inconclusive. McDonagh (1998) demonstrates that only 11% of students said rankings were an important factor in their choice, and that low socio-economic students are less likely to use them. However, he also shows that 40% of US students do use newsmagazine rankings. Similarly, research conducted by CHE² and HESCU (2006) suggests reputation can influence German and UK student programme choice, respectively. Grunig (1997) offers a slightly different interpretation, stating that the “halo effect” may be more influential than the particular merits of a programme because other factors are operative, such as “reputational ratings” and “rater bias”. These views diverge from some Australian research which claimed that institutional characteristics – beyond specific programme qualities – were not strong influences “with the exception of ease of access from home” (James et al., 1999). Similarly, Eccles (2002) claims the methodology by which

“information is collected and presented is flawed” and appears to “have little or no effect, in the short term at least, in influencing the choices of prospective students as to the university into which to enrol”. Thus, do league tables and rankings influence student choice? Do they provide the right kind of information for incoming students? Are reputational rankings more influential with “better” students? Is there a difference between undergraduate vs. post-graduate student choice? What kind of information would be useful?

3. *Comparability of complex institutions with different goals and missions* (van der Wende, 2006). Various commentators have questioned the report-card approach to measure the full range of institutional activity across a myriad of disciplines and units. Turner (2005) argues that “institutions are compared with inappropriate peers, ... [but their] inputs/outputs [are] treated in [an] equivalent manner” while Altbach (2006) asks if “it is possible to accurately measure a nation’s academic system, or for that matter the quality of a single institution”. Is there a potential to distort institutional purpose and impose a “one-size-fits-all” definition on HEIs? Eccles (2002) suggests the “measures used favour the strengths of well-established universities, giving undue emphasis to their research and postgraduate strengths at the expense of the new universities, the strengths of which lay in undergraduate teaching”. Furthermore, because new universities consistently rank lower than “older” more well-established universities, could the “Matthew Effect”³ be in operation? Are “elite” institutions caught in a virtuous cycle of cumulative advantage while “poorer” institutions get relatively poorer?

In contrast to these analyses, this paper examines what impact, if any, LTRS are having on institutional and academic behaviour, specifically on institutional decision making and perceptions of government policy making. Based on new research supported by the OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) and the International Association of Universities (IAU) (Hazelkorn, 2006a, 2006b), it presents preliminary data from a comprehensive survey of higher education (HE) leaders and senior managers worldwide. For example, do LTRS influence or inform decision making regarding strategy, mission or priorities? Do they influence collaboration or partnerships? Do HEIs believe that the results of LTRS influence the views or decisions of key stakeholders? Are LTRS influencing broader higher education objectives and priorities? Who should undertake ranking and which metrics should be used?

The paper has three main sections: i) section one presents the views of the various institutions regarding the role and impact of LTRS in their country, and on institutional decision making and higher education, ii) section two considers the ways in which HE senior managers are responding to the challenges which emerge, and iii) section three looks at some of the wider

implications for higher education and HE systems. The paper concludes with some preliminary observations. Because LTRS are becoming widespread, this study has significance for all HEIs and HE systems.

Institutional views about league tables and ranking systems

An international survey of leaders and senior administrators was undertaken in 2006 in order to better understand how LTRS are impacting and influencing higher education decision making. Drawing from the membership lists of IMHE and the IAU, 639 people/institutions were surveyed, with some unquantifiable “snowballing” because of the enthusiasm of participants to get other institutions involved in the study. This accounts, for example, for the significant number of respondents from Germany. Responses were received from 202 institutions, representing a 31.6% response rate, albeit noting the caveat stated above.

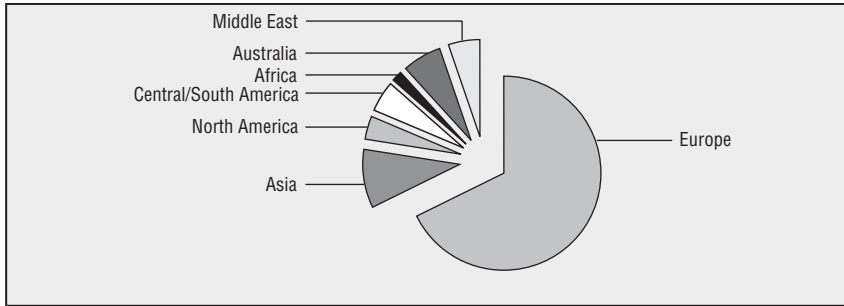
The questionnaire was divided into four sections, and sought to gather the views of HE leaders about the role and influence of LTRS on a wide range of issues affecting their institutions and higher education in their country.

- Overview of LTRS in each country.
- Importance of ranking on institutional decision making.
- Influence of ranking on key stakeholders.
- Influence of ranking on higher education.

The next sections of this paper present some preliminary data from this survey, which is an exploratory perspective of the issues. The variability in population size across the results was influenced by the fact that certain sections of the questionnaire were not applicable to some respondents, *e.g.* whether national league tables or ranking systems were operative in their country. All results were calculated on the basis of respondents to whom the question was applicable and those who replied within the applicable populations. Missing data was excluded from calculations in all cases. The population on which percentage responses were calculated are displayed throughout. Finally, to what extent the German response influenced the result needs further analysis. However, this is a macro overview of institutional behaviour and attitudes, and is not meant as a detailed analysis. The next phase of the research will look in much greater depth at the issues, including the extent to which regional or national differences or other institutional characteristics and experiences are a factor in respondents’ responses.

Respondents were asked to provide some basic profiling information describing the main characteristics of their institution and their perception of LTRS. Respondents represent HEIs in 41 different countries and correspondingly 41 different higher education and policy jurisdictions, with the greatest number coming from Europe (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. **Regional distribution of respondents (155 respondents)**



Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

By age, responding institutions are evenly divided into three groups: 36.5% were established post-1970, 23.7% were established between 1945 and 1969, and 39.7% were established pre-1945 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. **Date of creation of respondent institutions (% respondents; 156 respondents)**

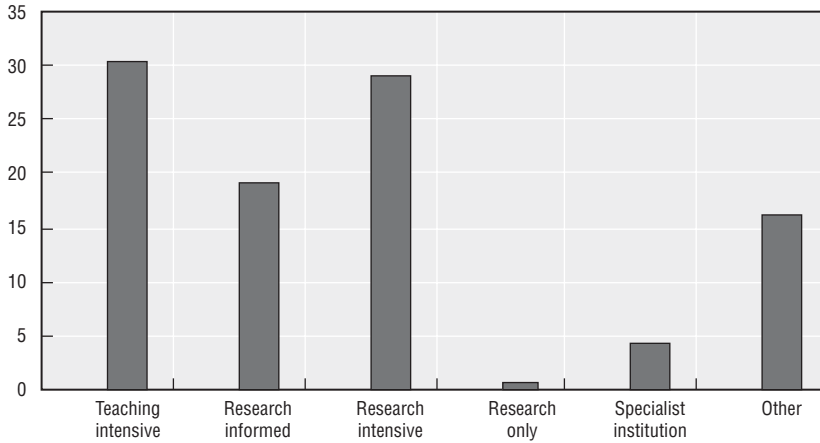


Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

Eighty-three percent of institutional respondents are publicly funded, with the remainder being either wholly or primarily privately funded. Respondent institutions are evenly divided between teaching-intensive (30.4%) and research-intensive (29.2%) institutions; 19.3% described themselves as research-informed, with the remainder being research-only, specialist or other self-designated institutions (see Figure 3).

Given the orientation of this study and a possible correlation between a HEI's current rank and its opinion of LTRS, respondents were asked to identify

Figure 3. **Respondents by institutional classification**
 (% respondents; 161 respondents)



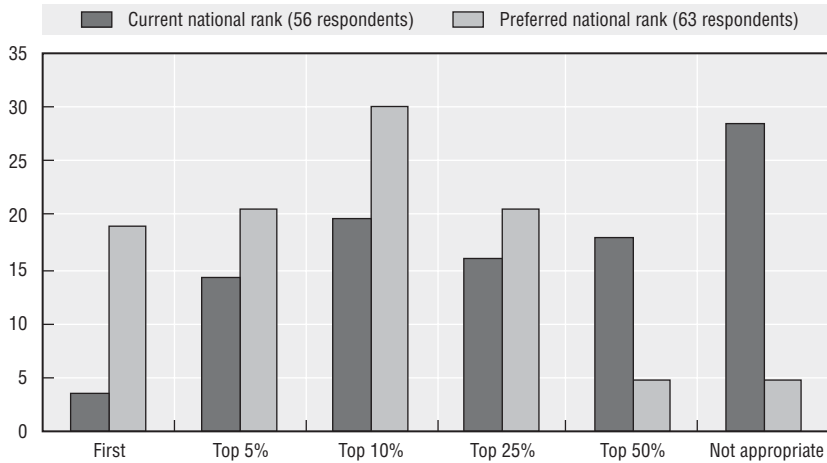
Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

their current position (see Figures 4 and 5). Over 70% of respondents said their institutions were ranked nationally and/or internationally. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said they were not happy with their current institutional ranking; 92.8% and 82%, respectively, want to improve their national or international ranking. Reasons for unhappiness include concerns that the methodology used is “crude and inappropriate” or unable to take into account local contexts or the “special character” of different institutions, and that excessive emphasis is placed on research, reputation and awards over wider educational goals, including teaching.

Figures 4 and 5 also compare current rank with respondents’ preferences. The results strongly suggest that respondents desire a much higher institutional rank, both nationally and internationally. Currently 3% of respondents are nationally ranked first in their country but 12% of the overall sample wants to be so ranked; none are internationally ranked first, but 3% of the all respondents want to be so ranked. Comparing current with preferred rank, 70% of all respondents wish to be in top 10% nationally, and 71% want to be top 25% internationally. The greatest swing is amongst those respondents who indicated that their current ranking is either “not appropriate” or within the top 50% nationally and internationally. For these two groups, there is strong evidence of an “exodus” from these categories, in other words, to be ranked or ranked higher in the future. These shifts are not surprising given the publicity and benefits that are perceived to derive from higher ranking.

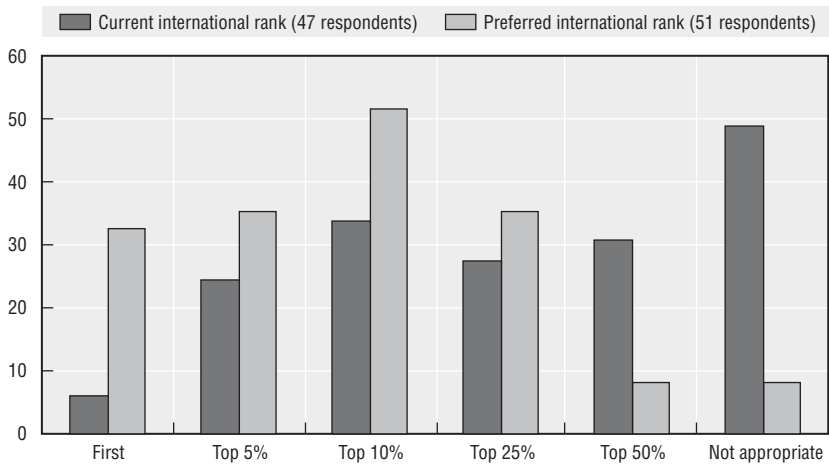
Almost 50% of respondents said LTRS were being developed or used in their country; of these, 14% said that they had been operating for less than five

Figure 4. **Current national rank vs. preferred rank (% respondents)**



Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

Figure 5. **Current international rank vs. preferred rank (% respondents)**



Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

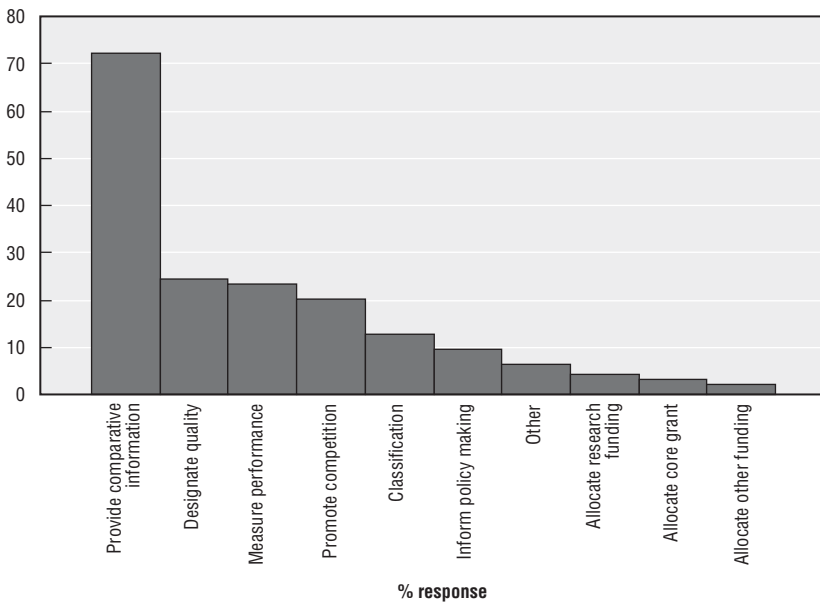
years while 68% said they had been operating for five plus years. In contrast, 60% of respondents said the results of worldwide LTRS were published in their country. Ninety percent of respondents said LTRS are published widely, and cited the media as the principal developer, followed by government departments, accreditation and higher education agencies, and independent research organisations (see Figure 13). The perceived purpose of LTRS is to

provide comparative information, although over 20% of respondents said their purpose was to designate quality, measure performance and promote competition (see Figure 6). As two respondents reveal:

There is enormous attention given to every league table that is published as well as to the quality ranking. And they are taken seriously by students, government and especially by the media. Because of this, they have got a huge influence on university reputation and via this way, they promote competition and influence policy making.

The tables produced by government are used to allocate some funding for teaching and research and not intended as ranking exercises per se, although this is of course how they are perceived. The tables in the popular media do provide comparative data but also attempt to provide interpretation and this is sometimes at odds with the stated purpose.

Figure 6. **Stated purpose of LTRS (% respondents; 94 respondents)**

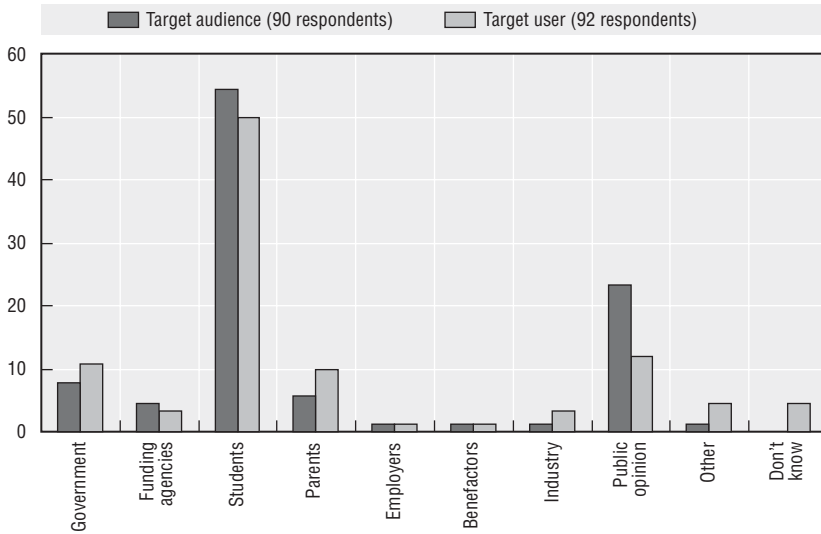


NB. Respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies.
 Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

Reflecting these tensions, a gap is becoming evident between the LTRS target audience and user. As Figure 7 illustrates, students are the most significant target audience and user of LTRS results. Public opinion is also viewed as a target audience but fewer respondents considered it the most significant user; in contrast, government, parents and industry are perceived

as having an increasing significance as a “user”. The impact on public opinion is understandable in the context of the role of the media as the primary developer and disseminator of LTRS results.

Figure 7. Audience vs. user (% respondents)

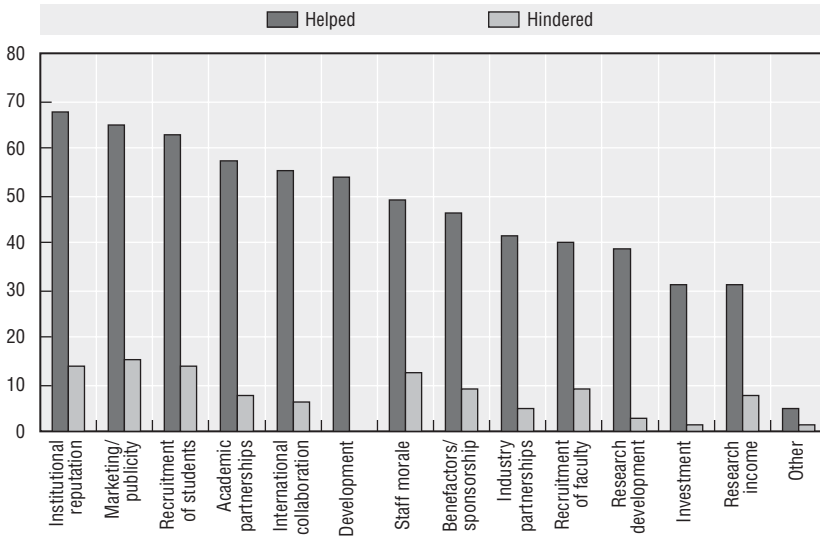


NB. Table shows groups which respondents felt were the most significant.
 Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

Responding to challenges

Fifty-seven percent of respondents think the impact of LTRS has been broadly positive on their institution’s reputation, while 17% believe they have had no impact. More specifically, respondents said that the results of LTRS have broadly helped rather than hindered their institution’s development. Figure 8 and Table 1 illustrate that respondents felt that the results had helped their reputation and aided their publicity, and consequently positively impacted on attracting students, forming academic partnerships, collaboration, programme development and staff morale. For example, almost 50% use their institutional position for publicity purposes: press releases, official presentations and their website. As one respondent said: “It’s not the tables themselves, but how the institution uses those tables/ranking in representing itself to the marketplace. For example, referring to our raking/rating in advertising and marketing material”.

Figure 8. **Helped or hindered (% respondents; 65 respondents)**



NB. Respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies.

Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

But there are also caveats. As one respondent admitted repeatedly, the reply was “dependent upon their rank”. Other respondents reflect this ambiguity:

Reputation is achieved by becoming known – rankings are one way to achieve that, unless there are too many rankings.

Positive rankings encourage the legal authorities to support innovation and new courses. Positive rankings have an impact on teachers and lecturers improving their motivation.

The reputation is rather damaged as single bad results are generalised and excellent results in research or teaching in many other fields are not appropriately acknowledged.

We are in the middle of the pack for comprehensive universities. This is not high enough to have a significant positive impact nor is it low enough to have a negative impact.

Fifty-six percent of respondents have a formal internal mechanism for reviewing their rank, usually by the vice chancellor, president or rector (55.8%) but also by the governing authority (14%). Of these, the majority of respondents have taken either strategic or academic decisions or actions; only three respondents indicated they had taken no formal action. Table 2 below provides a summary of the types of actions taken which are remarkably similar across institutions. Senior leaders are taking the results of LTRS seriously, incorporating

Table 1. **Helped or hindered – Examples**

Examples	
Academic partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “More interest from other institutions” • “Easier to present the institution to partners and funders”
Academic programme development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Poor results lead to reflection and curriculum review”
Benefactors/sponsors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “More financial support” • “We are a more attractive prospect”
Industry partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Less support” vs. “Better known”
Institutional reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Decline in students” vs. “Widespread recognition”
International collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Better known than otherwise would be”
Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We can argue more strongly for the legislators and donors to fund our projects”
Marketing and publicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Less foreign students” vs. “Saying top 10 makes matters easier”
Recruitment of faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Success breeds success”
Recruitment of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Decline in enrolment” vs. “Good students come to us”
Research development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It is possible to attract attention and funding”
Research income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Less grants” vs. “No correlation”
Staff morale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “High rankings are well received” • “Increased pride”

Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

the outcomes into their strategic planning mechanisms, reorganising the institution to achieve better – meaning a higher ranking – outcome, and in general, using the results to identify weaknesses and seek to either resolve institutional problems or eradicate the source, *e.g.* hiring more Nobel Prize winners (a criteria, for example, in the Shanghai Jiaotong University worldwide ranking), and developing better management information system tools to

Table 2. **Actions arising**

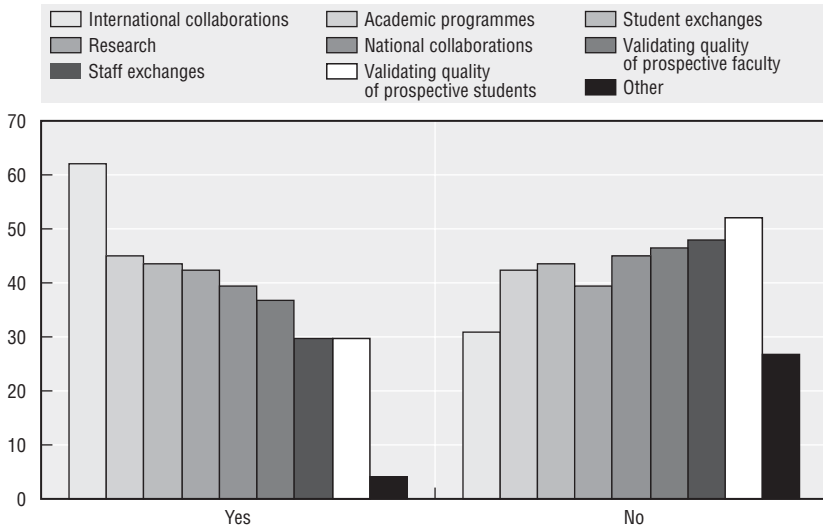
Examples	
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Indicators underlying rankings are explicit part of target agreements between rector and faculties” • “Became part of SWOT [strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats] analysis and benchmarking exercises”
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “New section established/individual assigned to deal with indicator improvements and monitor rankings” • “Reorganisation of structure” • “Organise investigation team; renewed emphasis on the accuracy/amount of data gathered and shared with third parties”
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Rector enforces the serious and precise processing of ranking as well as control of the relevant indicators” • “Development of better management tools”
Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Improve teaching and learning; new academic programmes; increase English language programmes”; “More scholarships and staff appointments”

Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

“control the relevant indicators”. In several instances, respondents indicated that either a special investigation team or individual had been appointed or assigned to oversee organisation change, ensure regular “observation of rankings and methods”, and monitor the performance of peer institutions. While several respondents specifically said they did “not orient our strategy to please the rankings” or “modify our work to please rankings” they did “consider the meaningful measures they provide”.

Peer benchmarking is a critical factor in institutional strategy and helping HEIs determine whether and which collaborations and other partnerships to enter into. Accordingly, over 76% of respondents said that they monitored the performance of other HEIs in their country, and almost 50% said they monitored the performance of peer institutions worldwide. While, as Figure 9 indicates,

Figure 9. **Consider peer ranking prior to discussions**
(% respondents; 71 respondents)



NB. Respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies.

Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

respondents said peer ranking was taken into account particularly with reference to international collaborations, almost 40% of respondents said they did consider an HEI’s rank prior to entering into discussion about other collaborations. Similarly 57% of respondents said they believed LTRS were influencing the willingness of other HEIs to partner with them. Most respondents were clear as to the advantages of such scrutiny:

You need parameters and performance indicators as background for strategic partnerships.

There is an ongoing competition for funds for co-operative programmes. Therefore the partnership with a highly ranked institution helps to succeed.

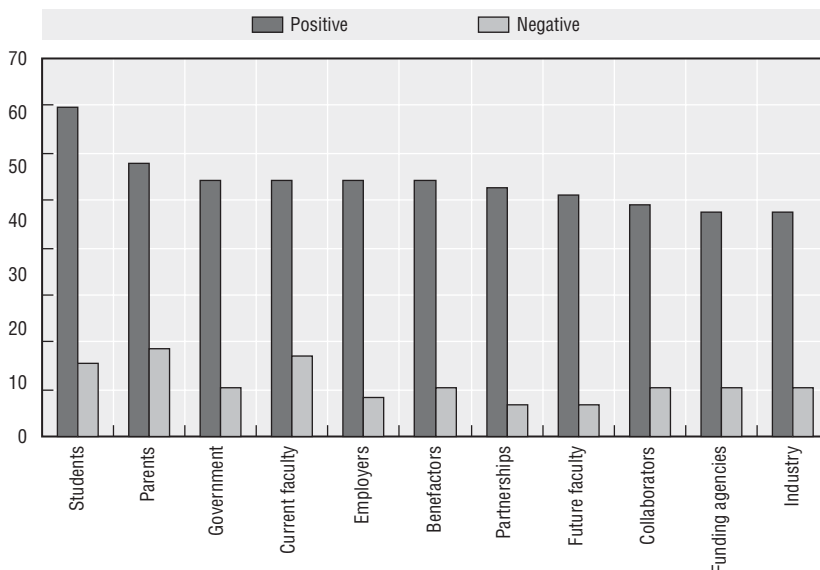
Everybody wants to form partnerships with strong and successful organisations. It helps with accreditation and fund-raising.

I think peer institutions see beyond and through ratings and rankings and use other measures of quality and professional relationships to determine partnership.

Equally significant, given the growing phenomena of international university associations and networks, e.g. Universitas 21, Coimbra, European University Association, and the branding associated with them, almost 34% of respondents said LTRS were influencing the willingness of other HEIs to support their institution’s membership of academic/professional organisations. The value of such memberships is evidenced by the fact that a cursory glance at HEI websites shows that such affiliations often feature as a “quality” proxy.

One of the primary objectives of LTRS is to provide good, comparative or benchmarking information for students, their parents, public opinion and government (see Figures 6 and 6 above). To what extent do LTRS influence the views, opinions and decisions of key stakeholders? Figure 10 and Table 3

Figure 10. LTRS influencing key stakeholders (% respondents; 59 respondents)



NB. Respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies.

Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

Table 3. **Examples of influence on key stakeholders**

Examples	
Benefactors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Depends on the rank” • “More support” • “They feel reassured supporting us” • “Provides international comparators”
Collaborators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Depends on the rank” • “Good for reputation” • “We feel an improvement”
Current faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Increases awareness about the importance of publishing” • “Easier to induce improvement with department head whose rankings are declining”
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Depends on the rank” • “They feel reassured; those not open to us become more receptive” • “Can be confusing”
Funding agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Impact on small part of indicators” • “Have less pretexts to deny funding; and working the legislative process for our main annual budget improves”
Future faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Reassurance” • “Recruitment easier with good reputation”
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “May believe simplistic picture” • “Local government inclined to spend additional money for an excellent university”
Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Depends on the rank”: <i>e.g.</i> “good for reputation” vs. “less interest”
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Benchmarking for judging best university” • “Particularly in an international market where status and prestige are considered in decision making”
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Good for reputation at international level, reassurance”
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “High profile students apply to high profile universities” • “Give too much weight” • “Influence at the margins”

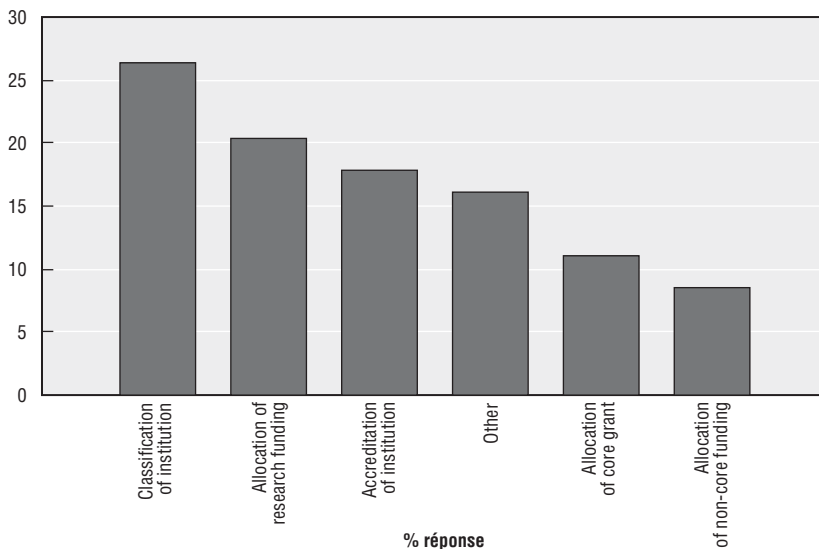
Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

suggest that while respondents felt the impact of LTRS on their key stakeholders was positive, they also had some caveats depending upon their institution’s own rank. Broadly speaking, LTRS are perceived as providing a shorthand “quality mark” which, while simplistic, can be easily understood by a variety of different users and stakeholders. The actual veracity of the indicators or the choice of the particular proxies is not something readily understood by those reading the results. Rather, LTRS users tend to draw broad brushstroke conclusions, using the results to “reassure” themselves about their collaboration, investment, future employer or university choice while at the same time providing the HEI with a rating that can be publicised. Those whose ranking is not prestigious often believe that the “Matthew Effect” creates a cycle of disadvantage.

Implications for higher education

Beyond the HEI, what are the broader implications for higher education? Since government is one of the key stakeholders, to what extent do respondents believe that LTRS are influencing policy decisions, and in what areas? Figure 11 suggests that respondents believe that LTRS are having an impact beyond their original purpose. Considering that the media are the primary developer of LTRS, they are impacting on a wide range of higher education policy issues, including the classification of institutions and the allocation of funding – specifically research funding.

Figure 11. **LTRS influencing policy making? (% respondents; 70 respondents)**



Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

The developers and promoters of LTRS proffer the conception that international benchmarking helps institutions identify true peers, provide an assessment of quality performance or comparative information for students and parents, promote diversity and accountability and/or set strategic goals. Critics, on the contrary, claim LTRS are open to wide-spread misinterpretation. Because they emphasise particular metrics which favour well-established research-intensive HEIs, they effectively render “different activities differently valued, such as research over teaching and sciences over humanities” (Gumport, 2000).

Respondents were asked to engage in this debate by indicating whether they considered a range of statements often made about the significance of LTRS to be either true or false (see Table 4). Institutional responses mirror the

Table 4. **Impact of LTRS: True or false (% respondents; 115 respondents)**

	True (%)	False (%)
Favour established universities	83	17
Establish hierarchy of HEIs	81	19
Open to distortion and inaccuracies	82	18
Provide comparative information	74	26
Emphasise research strengths	65	35
Help HEIs set goals for strategic planning	65	35
Provide assessment of HEI performance	52	48
Promote accountability	48	52
Can make or break an HEI's reputation	42	58
Provide assessment of HE quality	41	59
Promote institutional diversity	38	62
Enable HEIs to identify true peers	33	67
Encourage fair competition	25	75
Provide full overview of an HEI	11	89

Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

critical commentary found in the literature. The overwhelming majority said LTRS did not provide a full overview of an institution and instead favoured the strengths of well-established universities, and emphasised research and postgraduate strengths. In so doing, they helped establish a hierarchy which did little to promote institutional diversity or differentiation. In an era when governments favour greater market-led competition between HEIs, respondents did not agree that LTRS encouraged *fair* competition, primarily because they are open to “distortion, inaccuracies and obscurities”. More positively, LTRS could help institutions set strategic planning goals and did provide comparative information to students and parents.

There is a growing consensus that because LTRS will become a constant presence in the increasingly globalised and competitive higher education environment, it is advisable to become involved in the formulation of an agreed “best practice” for LTRS. Two respondents stated:

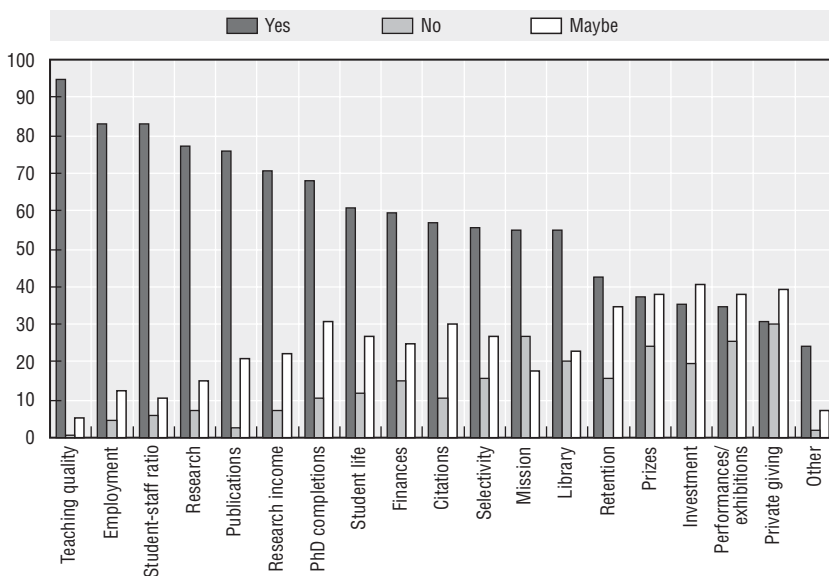
A problem with ranking systems is that they may not measure what the authors think they are measuring and the readers think they are measure something else. This may be overcome by authors of ranking systems and higher education institutions working together to use quality-related information in the most appropriate and helpful way; and to educate the public regarding the rationale and limitations of league tables and ranking systems.

Given that many of the methodological problems are very challenging to resolve and certain stakeholders will use the outcomes anyway, there is a need to engage with the publishers and the stakeholders in order to better

understand their objectives and to educate them about the respective strengths and weaknesses (real and perceived) of the “leading” systems.

Accordingly, respondents were asked to specify how an “ideal LTRS” system would operate. In Figure 12, which indicates levels of support for each of the proposed metrics, respondents identify from a range of commonly used metrics those indicators which they think are the most appropriate. Despite criticism about the metrics used, respondents gave low “marks” to only a few indicators, each of which is explicable by the fact that they are relevant to or beneficial to relatively few or specialist HEIs: alumni or private giving, investment, Nobel or similar prizes, and exhibitions and performances. Several metrics, e.g. teaching quality, employment, student-staff ratio, and research activity, publications and income, receive the greatest support with minimum doubt or negativity expressed. Ideally, the media should not develop LTRS; rather, respondents favour independent research organisations, accreditation agencies or international organisations (Figure 13).

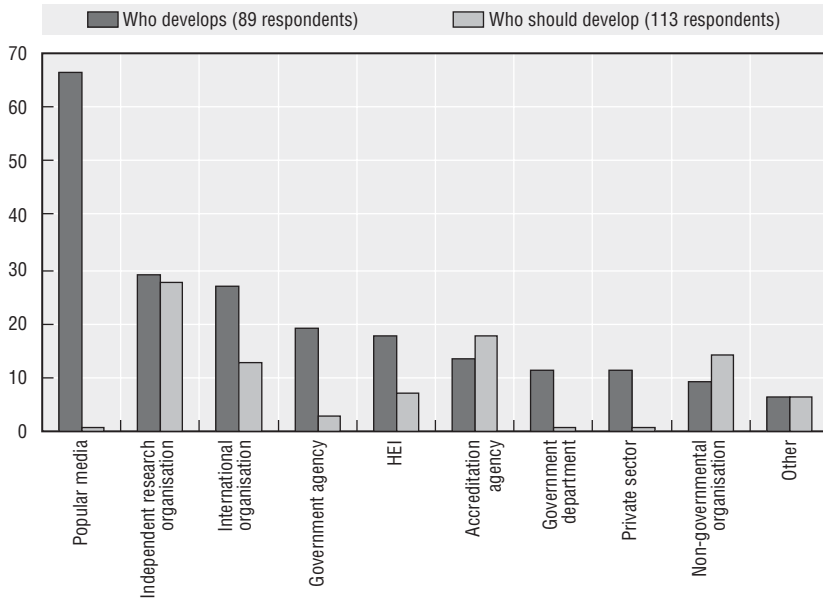
Figure 12. **Ideal metrics (% respondents; 111 respondents)**



NB. Respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies
 Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

In contrast, respondents have strong views about who should conduct such evaluations (Figure 13). While the media or commercial organisations are currently the primary “developer” of LTRS, respondents favour this role being taken on by independent research organisations and accreditation agencies or

Figure 13. **LTRS developer vs. ideal developer (% respondents)**



NB. Respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies.

Source: Hazelkorn (2006a).

non-governmental or international organisations. Some respondents suggested that the HEIs should do this exercise themselves while others said no one should.

Another area of controversy has been the way in which the data is collected, and the unit of analysis used. Ideally, respondents favour institutional data (23%) or that which is publicly available or gathered by questionnaires (19%) rather than by peer review (which currently forms a key element of the Times Worldwide Survey). Despite criticism about the difficulty comparing whole institutions with different missions, 41% of respondents favour evaluations at the institutional level compared with 21% or 30% respectively who favour programme or departmental level. While the latter two units of analysis, in aggregate, are greater than institutional preference, institutional comparisons are still ranked highest. Finally, in contrast to the current purpose of LTRS (see Figure 6 above), respondents said an ideal LTRS should:

- “Give fair and unbiased picture of the strengths and weaknesses of a university.”
- “Provide student choice for a programme and institution.”
- “Provide accountability and enhancing quality.”

- “Design and apply practical assessment components and procedures.”
- “Fair(ish) comparison among institutions of similar type (as in the USA).”
- “Provide comparisons for specific goals.”

Observations

League tables and ranking systems at a national level are on the rise, but worldwide rankings also have a wider penetration. Indeed, it is particularly interesting that they are circulated and publicised even in countries which do not have their own national version. Anecdotally, many politicians, policy makers and HEI leaders refer to the Shanghai Jiaotong University rankings as a metaphor for worldwide rankings. This suggests that worldwide comparisons will become even more significant for particular institutions in the future. In this respect, the majority of respondents clearly indicated that they strongly desire their institution to be ranked within the top 10% nationally and the top 25% internationally. This was evident by the gap between current and desired ranking but also by the significant swing by those who wish to see their institutions ranked or ranked more highly in the future. This swing is linked to the advantages that are perceived to follow from high rankings.

LTRS were originally conceived and are today still perceived as providing comparative information to key audiences, *e.g.* students, public opinion and parents. There is, however, evidence that their influence and impact is becoming wider, beyond the original audience and intentions. Respondents identified this trend pointing out that government and industry are also “users” of LTRS results. This “change of use” is also evident in the fact that respondents said LTRS were influencing key policy-making areas, *e.g.* classification of institutions and the allocation of funding. Similarly, there is evidence that LTRS are influencing key stakeholders. This has a positive impact if the HEI is highly rated, but it can have a potentially harmful impact if the reverse is true. Accordingly, respondents acknowledge that institutional reputation can be enhanced or damaged depending upon position. There may be a distinction between perception and reality, but respondents’ responses suggest that perception is already considerable.

The apparent contradiction between respondents’ criticism of LTRS and the fact that respondents felt LTRS had overwhelmingly helped rather than hindered their institution is not surprising. Individuals, or institutions in this case, can be critical of a process or outcome but also realise that the process can have beneficial aspects – perhaps depending on its particular impact on one’s own institution – and/or that the process cannot be easily ignored. The majority of respondents indicated that they had a formal review process, usually steered by the president or rector but often by the governing authority. As a result, they were embedding the process within their strategic decision

making and SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis processes, making structural and organisational changes, integrating recruitment with strategy, and ensuring senior members of staff were well briefed on the significance of improving performance. For many institutions, getting a higher rank – in worldwide rankings – has become a key strategic goal. Part of this process involves continual peer benchmarking to ensure that partnerships and collaborations reinforce strategic objectives and advantage. Thus, despite criticisms of methodology or concept, HEIs are taking the results of LTRS seriously and using them to inform institutional decision making and to make changes. This is not surprising given the fact that respondents firmly believe that rankings are influencing reputation, status, stakeholders and policy makers.

Are these actions or changes shifting institutional mission? Or, are HEIs skewing their mission and strategies in order to better meet ranking criteria? The full extent or impact on higher education is not yet clear but the majority of respondents are concerned about the (negative) influence of LTRS on higher education and higher education policy. It is particularly interesting to note that this criticism does not appear to be simply a reflection of current status, albeit this is certainly an issue for much greater interrogation in the next stage of data analysis. Despite some contradictions in their replies – HEIs are unhappy with current metrics albeit they did not demur from proposing these same metrics in their ideal LTRS – there is a realisation that some form of national and international comparators are both useful and inevitable. As one respondent stated: LTRS are “dangerous, often ill-informed but difficult to influence and most definitely here to stay!”

This paper provides an overview of some challenges which leaders and senior managers/administrators in higher education are currently facing. The wider impact – for example, the extent to which LTRS impact on diversity and differentiation by emphasising a “one size fits all” model of institution or reinforce advantage or disadvantage, *à la* “Matthew Effect” – needs to be more fully assessed. Yet, it is inevitable that in a globally competitive environment, governments and institutions will seek to enhance their share of knowledge production, innovation and outputs. LTRS have become a popular shorthand way of doing this. Despite their arguably narrow set of metrics, highly ranked institutions believe they are or will be, and are perceived to be, better rewarded with more funding and prestige – and all the accoutrements that follow. Thus, institutions are acting rationally and strategically, effectively becoming what is being measured. However, the issues are much more complex and far-reaching (see for example, Deem *et al.*, 2006). If decision and policy makers are making choices based on metrics, proxies and processes which may in themselves be questionable, what are the implications of and for those choices? To what extent are LTRS fuelling a market-based approach not just regarding

student choice but also regarding policy making and the distribution of public and private resources, and is this the optimum way to make such decisions? These are important challenges for both institutional leaders and governments.

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Notes

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2. Comments made by Gero Federkeil, CHE Centre for Higher Education Development, Germany at the aforementioned symposium.
3. The “Matthew Effect” is based on a line in St. Matthew’s Gospel that says, “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath” (Matthew 25:29). This line has often been summarised as: “The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.”

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