

# When the spider met the gram – league tables and the concept of a world class university

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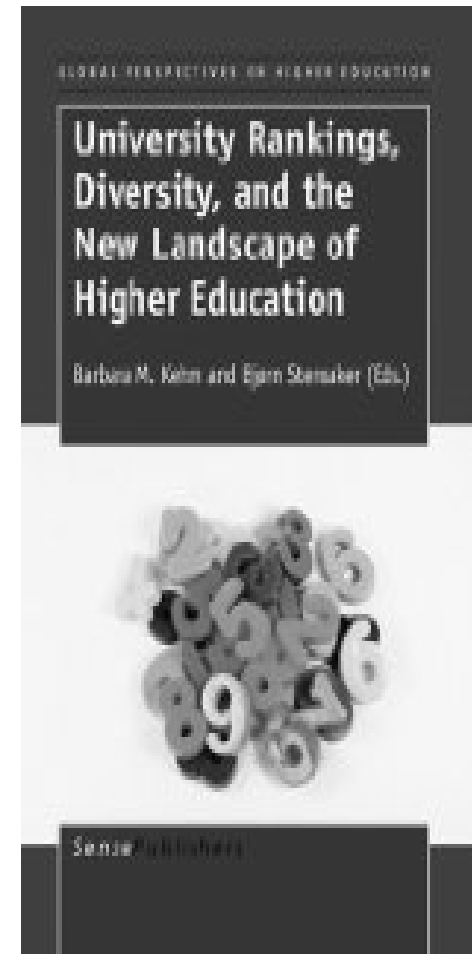
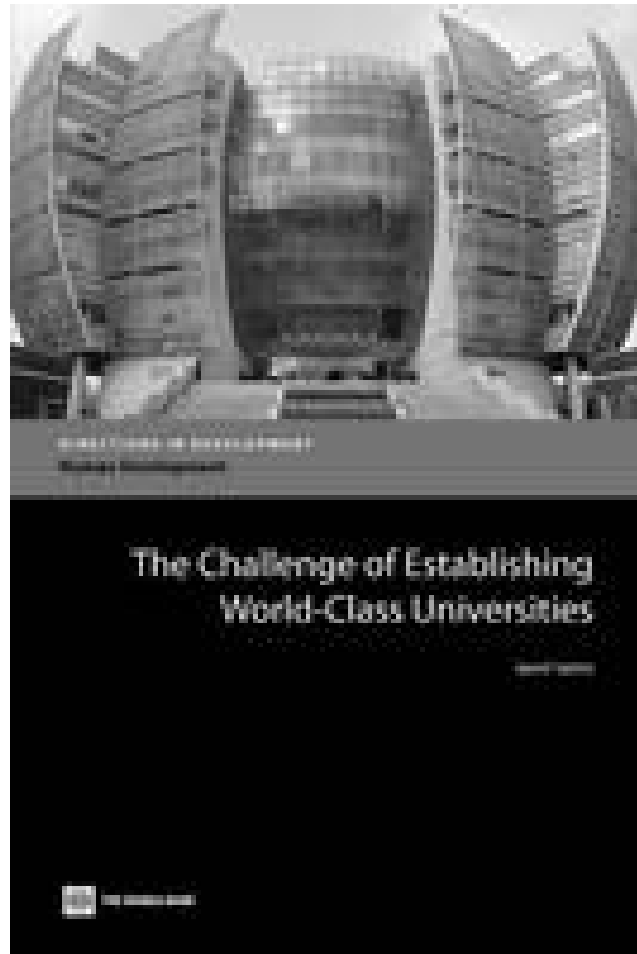
# The concept of a world class university

- ✦ 'Everyone wants a world-class university ...The problem is that no one knows what a world-class university is, and no one has figured out how to get one' (Altbach 2004)
- ✦ Criteria for declaring a WCU vary: research; internationalisation; teaching ...
- ✦ Rarely based on good governance, resources or autonomy
- ✦ Established universities make stronger claims to WCU status
- ✦ For every winner there are many losers (Deem, Lucas & Mok 2008 & 9)
- ✦ Universities in developing countries stand little chance of becoming world class universities

# How does the concept of a world class university (WCU) link to league tables?

- ✦ No agreed definition of what it means so can encompass anything BUT
- ✦ WCU widely used by many higher education institutions either as a descriptor or as an objective & league tables an important element in both descriptors and objectives
- ✦ International league table positioning used to make WCU claims which may sometimes be unjustified (given fragility of data and annual changes to it) or out of date
- ✦ World class claims don't always reflect complex interplay of local, national and international activities found in most universities (Marginson and Sawir 2005; Jones 2007)

# A new academic research topic



# Why league tables?

- ✦ The simplistic answer is globalisation BUT many international league tables are about research, for which truly international funding (except for the EU) is unusual
- ✦ The massive growth in the number of universities and students
- ✦ Increased emphasis on student choice and consumerism
- ✦ Closely linked to neo-liberalism and the encouragement of markets in publicly funded services such as higher education
- ✦ Also linked to commercial publishers' desire to promote their journals and newspaper editors' wish to sell papers
- ✦ League tables are now a national and international obsession of publishers, governments and universities

# Why do we pay attention to league tables?

- ✦ Playing the 'research game' (Lucas 2006)
- ✦ Academic quest for status & power (Bourdieu 1988)
- ✦ Concern about institutional and unit reputation
- ✦ Stakeholders think they are important e.g governors, students, alumni, employers
- ✦ They sometimes provide us with useful information eg who are our competitors, who is doing what etc (Hazelkorn 2009)
- ✦ Because governments are obsessed with them

# League tables and student choice

- ✦ Assumed that some league tables are driven by student demand for information (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2009).
- ✦ If so:
- ✦ Why & how do students use league tables? Do different categories of students use them in different ways? Are league tables accessible to all students?
- ✦ How easily can they interpret the data?
- ✦ Do they see the other side of the fence when they complete surveys or is this a case of cognitive dissonance?

# An example of reform using league tables: Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) Framework for English higher education 2009

- ✦ More competition between universities, priority to programmes that teach high level skills (eg team working, IT, communications etc?)
- ✦ Business more engaged in funding & design of programmes
- ✦ Creating more part-time, work-based & foundation degrees to make it easier for adults to go to university (Heath, Fuller, Paton, 2008)
- ✦ Encouraging universities to consider contextual data in admissions
- ✦ Sustaining world class research base by focusing on excellence (only in STEM though?), concentrating research funding where needed to secure critical mass & if can show economic impact (REF)
- ✦ Encouraging collaboration between universities on world class research, especially in high cost science (cost cutting?).

# The BIS HE framework's new league table

- ✦ Programmes to be rated by
- ✦ Contact hours; whether academics or teaching assistants teach; Employment destinations of students: Earnings of former students
- ✦ BUT
- ✦ What do contact hours mean in different disciplines? Do potential students understand these variations?
- ✦ Will everyone want to do finance & economics or medicine, not social work or teaching?
- ✦ Aren't earnings & employment destinations also affected by the economy, social class, gender, ethnicity, disability etc?

# Are there benefits to league tables?

- ✦ Institute of Higher Education Policy USA (2009) : 4 country study (Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan) suggests use of league tables can lead to:
- ✦ Improved data-based decision making
- ✦ Increased participation in broader discussions about
- ✦ measuring institutional success.
- ✦ Improved teaching and learning practices.
- ✦ Identification and replication of model programs.
- ✦ Increased institutional collaboration.
- ✦ **BUT aren't there other means of achieving these things?**

# League tables as the source of all evil?

- ✦ Hazelkorn 2009 – analysis slips into equating institutional focus on research & its effects on academics with league tables but as Lucas (2006) shows, this has a much longer history
- ✦ Research audit processes certainly feed into league tables but these are not the sole driver for research audit and performance management – concerns about effective & selective use of public money; accountability & research-wealth creation relationship are other reasons
- ✦ Nor can concentration on research at expense of teaching be seen as a league table induced approach - some league tables use data on teaching (mostly proxies) and many academics have long preferred research to teaching (see Becher & Trowler 2001, Henkel 2000)

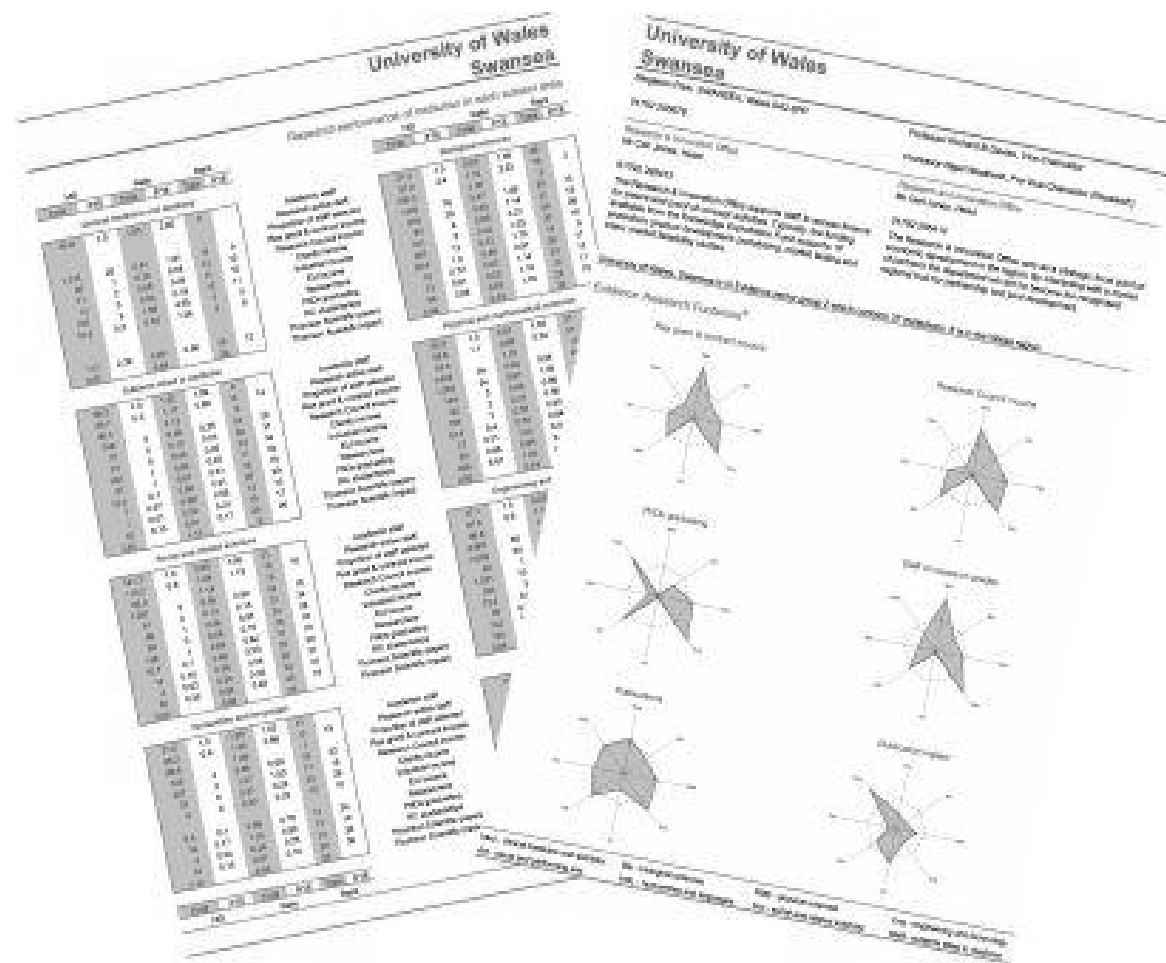
# Can we afford to ignore league tables?

- ✦ Many university rectors/presidents and governments would say no BUT
- ✦ Some universities have withdrawn from them e.g  
Wolverhampton University UK, has instructed the Higher Education Statistics Agency not to release its data to any private organisation
- ✦ Could we take more responsibility for their production & content?
- ✦ Could we train our stakeholders to interpret them sensibly?

# Spidergrams and higher education: an alternative to league tables?

- ✦ Provide institutional level information on a range of indicators (e.g research, teaching, widening participation, employer engagement)
- ✦ Seem easy to understand and have their supporters e.g HEFCE, Chris Brink VC of Newcastle BUT
- ✦ They provide a static not dynamic picture and are one-dimensional
- ✦ Not all the data are collected at the same time period (eg citation data by calendar year, research income data by financial year)
- ✦ They provide an over-view not a drilling-down
- ✦ Only expert readers can fully interpret the data

# Evidence Ltd (UK) *Education Research Yearbook*: examples of customised data using charts and spidergrams



# Does world class equal being highly ranked in league tables?

- ✦ Since there is a profusion of league tables, clearly not
- ✦ Every institution looks for a league table in which it can come top
- ✦ What goes up must come down – positionings are fragile
- ✦ The concept implies selectivity but the number of claimants to WCU status makes it seem universal
- ✦ Truly being world class only matters to a tiny number of universities but pretending to be matters to many more

# World class universities and sustainability

- ✦ Many of the characteristics measured in league tables & which contribute to notions of WCUs depend on using non-renewable resources:
- ✦ International recruitment of students and staff
- ✦ Academic and student mobility
- ✦ International gatherings of researchers
- ✦ Expensive commercial academic journals few can now afford (Ciancanelli 2007)
- ✦ Easy availability of public and private research funds
- ✦ Can this carbon heavy and resource rich pattern of activity be sustained during the next decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ?

# Who/what is excluded from world class status

- ✦ Most universities in the developing world
- ✦ Open access/open source publications
- ✦ Publications not written in English
- ✦ Universities without international academics & students
- ✦ Capacity building in the developing world
- ✦ Institutions with a local or regional mission

# League tables & the purposes of universities

- ✦ Is league table culture distorting the purposes of universities?
- ✦ Already big shifts – Kwiek (2005) HE in battle over use of public funding; shift from HE as public to private good (Nyborg 2003); move away from Delanty's (2001) notion of universities as creating & transmitting national cultures
- ✦ Purposes of universities in transition (Deem 2008) - from shared open access knowledge to private knowledge for wealth creation (Ciancanelli 2007), greater emphasis on third mission (Nedeva 2007), students as customers, research as impact, a degree as work preparation etc
- ✦ If the values and purposes of higher education are distorted by a focus on what can be measured and put into tables, where does this leave education for citizenship & personal development & the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake?
- ✦ Lessons to be learned from the failure of the targets culture in other public services (Seddon 2008)

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