Chapter 3
The Origins of International Rankings

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ABSTRACT

The chapter traces the development of international rankings of universities from their domestic predecessors in the United States and United Kingdom in particular. It soon became clear that different measures were required because of the scarcity of data collected on the same basis worldwide. This remains their overriding challenge, particularly where teaching quality is concerned. It is also why the best-read rankings – those published by QS, the Shanghai Rankings Consultancy and Times Higher Education – are based primarily on research quality. The process has become more sophisticated since the first international rankings appeared in 2003 and 2004, with a much wider variety of users than the early compilers expected, but they are unlikely ever to satisfy critics in the academic world.

INTRODUCTION

International rankings of universities arrived apparently out of the blue in 2003 and 2004, first with the publication of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, 2003) and then with the World University Rankings produced by QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) and published by The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES; 2004a). Both were the product of several years of discussion and development, however, and built on the experience of domestic rankings in a number of countries. There had also been at least two short-lived attempts at regional rankings before the process became global.

US News and World Report is usually credited with the original university rankings, having published the first league tables of American universities in 1983. But systematic comparisons of universities have a much longer history: the US Bureau of Education published classifications of universities – although not actual rankings – as far back as 1870. The modern day higher education league table made its debut in August 1962 (The Times, 1962), when The Times published what became The Norrington Table of Oxford University colleges. Based entirely on the results of undergraduates, it acquired its name after

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Sir Arthur Norrington, the President of Trinity College, suggested a different scoring system in a letter to the newspaper the following year (The Times, 1963). The table has appeared ever since and is now produced by the university itself after attempts to ban it led to sometimes inaccurate versions put together by students using results posted on college noticeboards.

Twenty years would pass before entire universities were ranked by US News, and almost 30 before the process was introduced to the UK, again in The Times. Nor was the process accepted without a fight by UK universities, whose vice-chancellors regarded them as "wrong in principle" and lobbied unsuccessfully for their immediate abolition.[1] By the mid-1990s, domestic rankings were springing up across Europe and Asia. In the UK alone, four national newspapers were publishing university league tables at one stage[2], all with significantly different criteria, although all taking advantage of the wide range of statistics published by the Government and university organisations.

By then, there had also been an attempt at a European ranking when the French newspaper, Liberation, published a supplement entitled Les 100 Meilleures Universités en Europe, in December 1989. It actually did not attempt a ranking of the best universities overall, but did list the top five institutions in 11 subjects, as well as identifying up to 20 nominees in each category and suggesting shorter (alphabetical) lists of leading universities in ten subjects where there were too few responses to produce a ranking.

The exercise was entirely reputational, with 600 academics out of 2,500 who were approached naming the top five universities in their discipline. The French were "slightly overrepresented" and there were no Swiss or Scandinavian academics because their countries were not part of the Erasmus exchange scheme network, which was used to contact respondents. Cambridge topped three of the tables, Oxford two and London two (one of them for the combined strength of its medical schools and the other recognising Imperial College's strength in medicine). A UK clean sweep was prevented by two French business schools: INSEAD for management and HEC for commerce, as well as the University of Louvain in psychology and the Venice University of Architecture, the only leading institution that has not featured subsequently in subject rankings.

The rankings were more than a decade ahead of their time as international comparisons and little noticed outside France. The only other regional ranking to be published before the arrival of global comparisons was for Asia, where the Hong Kong-based Asiaweek, part of the Time Magazine stable, produced tables for three years around the turn of the millennium. Separate rankings were published for comprehensive and specialist scientific institutions, using a wide variety of different indicators, including selectivity in admissions, academic reputation, financial and academic resources, research performance, staffing levels, postgraduate student numbers, citations and internet bandwidth. The process relied on universities completing questionnaires, but a number of leading Asian universities refused to do so because of objections to the methodology, leading to embarrassing omissions by the time the last ranking appeared in 2000. A number of universities in mainland China opted out of the survey, as did some in Pakistan, India and Thailand, as well as half of those in New Zealand. Kyoto University headed the final ranking of 77 multidisciplinary universities, but Tokyo, which topped the first two rankings, was among those boycotting the exercise (The Guardian, 2001).

Most subsequent rankings – and virtually all the global ones – have also aggregated a number of measures to assess universities' performance. US News, for example, uses 16 different indicators, including academic reputation, selectivity in admissions, retention rates and resources (both academic and financial) in its national ranking of universities. Although boycotted by some institutions, which are critical of its methodology, the rankings have outlived the print version of the magazine and are by far the best-known assessments of American universities. The magazine now also publishes rankings of

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