PHIL BATY

INSIDE “THE” RANKING:

GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS AND INTERNATIONAL VISIBILITY

Humboldt Ferngespräche – Discussion Paper No. 9 – March 2016

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Summary
University rankings have become highly influential and affect both internationalization processes as well as higher institution’s internal policies. In order to be useful, rankings must be transparent, laying open the underlying methodologies. Times Higher Education Magazine publishes the world university rankings, aiming to inform student decision making as well as helping to inform strategic planning within higher education institutions. To get a comprehensive view of a university and to recognize the full range of the universities contributions THE uses a complex methodology. Different weighting is giving to 13 indicators across the five key pillars – teaching, research, international outlook, industry income and citations – all the while ensuring to incorporate subject specific features across these criteria. In order to ensure a highly efficient use of the data collected, THE is working towards modifying the ranking with regard to the subject areas covered. Beyond serving as a tool for informed decision making, the World University Ranking creates competition, thereby driving up standards as well as promoting collaborations.

The text is based on the “Humboldt Ferngespräche” lecture held at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin on 14 December 2016.
It’s been my job for about seven years to take all the wonderful, intangible, life-affirming, paradigm-shifting, world-changing, gloriously complex and unmeasurable things that universities do and reduce them all to a simple single crude number. I’m not always the most popular person in the room. I’ve been called many, many things, as of the world rankings, I’ve been called the “gossip girl” of higher education; I’ve been called things that I can’t really repeat in polite company. But one of the ones I like comes from Zhu Shanlu, the president of Peking University. He called me “the education secretary of the world”. And I think if I say it enough times, people may start to believe it. Of course, he was being crazily over the top in his welcome to me, but it does speak a bit of how influential the rankings have become. They are bringing cultures together, they are promoting internationalisation, they are giving benchmarking data to a wide range of institutions, they are not just perpetuating the old hierarchies, they are giving visibility to rising powers and they are showing the shifting dynamics.

I do repeat that often because it’s flattering, but also because it does say a little bit about why I’m involved in rankings. The world is embracing rankings as legitimate benchmarking tools and as a legitimate way to understanding the sector that we live in, a very quick changing sector that we are part of. Of all the things I’ve been called, one of the things I like most and I repeat most often is the notion that I’m a “franker ranker”. It’s important to me that those of us who
rank are transparent, that we are accountable for what we do and that we are honest and open about how we operate. Rankings have to be accountable, they can only be useful, they can only be helpful if we understand how they are compiled and that means understanding their limitations as well as their strength. I’ll be the first person to admit that rankings are inherently limited, they are never going to tell us everything about what a university does, but I nevertheless think that they are playing an important role.

Times Higher Education takes this business very, very seriously. We put a huge amount of effort into the rankings. We are a magazine, we’ve been around since 1971, but our sister publication, the Times Education Supplement, has a 105 years of history. All the company does, what is now called TES Global, is in education: we work with professionals within our universities, within our schools. We don’t have any outside interest. We understand how professionals working in education operate, we understand their role. Everything we do needs to be based on them. We are not, as some may assume, coming from the consumer perspective; we’ve come from within the universities. We have developed our ranking system in cooperation with universities, in consultation with academics. And, of course, the rankings are a huge consumer tool, but they were developed from within the sector. Everything we do has to be based on trust. And, as I keep saying, we have to be accountable. That means knowing the limitations of rankings, knowing the difficulties and knowing the controversies while we are involved in the ranking business.

WHY UNIVERSITY RANKINGS?
First of all, it is about informing student decision making. There are 4.5 million students who now study outside their home country; the predictions are they will rise to about 8 million by 2025 according to the OECD.¹

Furthermore, a study by Hobsons of 45,000 students found that 1 in 3 international students are consulting the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. So whether you like it or not, rankings are playing an important role in helping students make decisions. Even when the methodologies don’t actually speak directly to consumers, I think that students often want reassurance, they are often paying very high tuition fees. These are investments, probably the largest investments they may ever make. The most important one, certainly: who to trust with their education? They want reassurance that they are going into a respected world, to a renowned university. We do have a responsibility to help students understand the methodology and to help them unpick the composite scores.

Rankings are also helping to inform strategic planning within higher education institutions. They have taken the function of data collection and analysis out of the back-office and placed it at the centre of strategic decision making and performance measurement. In some countries they have actually helped to develop even the most basic data collection. Institutions are getting better at understanding and knowing themselves, and at collecting information about themselves. So, rankings are playing a very positive role in this regard. Also, they have become kind of a geopolitical indicator. They are helping governments, they are informing government policy. At the European Universities Association back in April 2013 it was discussed how rankings are informing policy making, stimulating national debate and focused analysis. And of course we want to use our data and share it with organisations like the OECD.

There is another reason why we should use rankings. As the statistician W. Edwards Deming said: “In God we trust, all others must bring data.” We can’t rely on hearsay, we can’t rely on gossip, on brand alone, we do want data to inform the world we’re in, we feel that there

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are exciting new forces in higher education emerging and we believe that rankings are helping to demonstrate that; helping to give visibility to the institutions that are rising stars. They create momentum and allow institutions to thrive and to demonstrate their success.

“All others must bring data” – we bring lots and lots of data. The world university rankings are based on three main sources of information. We have bibliometric data provided by Elsevier, that’s an analysis of around 50 million citations to 11 million research papers published over a five year window. We have the Times Higher Education academic reputation survey – last year there was a poll of 10,500 academics from all across the world – and we have our institutional data portal where we gather information on universities. At the moment, about 12,000 universities are giving information, a couple of 100,000 data points. So it’s a rich data base, it’s growing all the time. There has been a very important change for Times Higher Education this year: We’ve been publishing a ranking since 2004, but actually this year, we brought these two main data sources in-house, the data collection is now owned, managed and operated by Times Higher Education. The academic reputation survey likewise is now managed by THE. We own all that data, we can build much richer, much more detailed and much more responsive analyses. We can go well beyond just the rankings. We can provide bespoken information to institutions and to governments. We can create new and different metrics to capture different aspects of performance.

ACADEMIC REPUTATION SURVEY
To make sure we distribute our reputation surveys fairly across the world, we distribute in about 15 languages, aiming to get a true representative sample of global scholarship. Our survey is very evenly distributed across the different discipline areas, and we get a good spread globally that does match the distribution of scholarship across the world. It is a very representative sample, we don’t allow volunteering, we don’t allow sign ups, it is a serious piece of social science.
INSTITUTIONAL DATA COLLECTION
We are asking very simple information from the institutions: “How many doctorates do you award?”; “How many full-time equivalent students do you have?”; “How many staff members do you have?”; “What are your income figures?” Much of it is able to be sourced from the public domain, much of it we have to rely on the institutions to report this information through our data collection portal. Last year we collected data from about 1,200 institutions from around the world and my drive this year is to go deeper and deeper, to get a larger group of institutions in the system, to try and capture a wider range of university’s activities and a richer range of metrics. Thus, rankings can keep evolving to meet the needs of the sector.

BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS
The research impact indicator is based on information that is provided from Elsevier’s Scopus Database. We are looking at around 11 million articles published over a five year period up to 2014, with a good balance between the disciplines and a range of outputs, but primarily journal articles. This year we switched to Elsevier from Thomson Reuters. The main reason we did that is that Elsevier has a larger volume of non-English language publications. Big criticism of these databases is they privilege English-publications, primarily North-American journals. Elsevier’s Scopus indexes 23,000 journals and almost a fifth of the papers are not English.

THE METHODOLOGY
All this comes together in a relatively complex methodology. THE, I think, has the most sophisticated, the most balanced and the most comprehensive rankings methodology. It’s not an exact science, but we put on an awful lot of thought into the indicators we use and the weightings we give. We have three portal data sources, then we build 13 separate performance indicators and we group those into 5
key pillars of activity. We are looking at every aspect of university: we are looking at research excellence, we are looking at the teaching environment, we are looking at international outlook – which is an increasingly important role for any globally facing university – and we are looking at industrial links and industrial income.

Regarding the research pillar, we are actually at several aspects. We are looking at a productivity – how many papers a university publishes from the indexed journals as scaled for the size of the institution. We look at research income of the university, again scaled for the size of the institution, and then we use our reputation survey to look at the research reputation. This is basically asking peers across the world which institutions are the best in their fields based on their direct knowledge. That is a subjective peer assessment.

On teaching, we have to be really honest. We have to say that this is really about teaching environment, it is not about teaching outcomes. It is extremely difficult to get hard metrics on student performance, on the teaching quality itself, so we use a series of proxies. Regarding this we sort of look at the Humboldtian ideal of the university, rewarding a rich research environment. We are looking at research-intensive globally facing universities, so even in our teaching environment indicators

Fig.1: Key pillars of activity. *Times Higher Education*, World University Rankings.

![Diagram of key pillars of activity](image-url)
we reward a high proportion of PhDs to undergraduates. This is based on the thought that students perform better in a research intensive, research rich environment. We also look at income. If you have 100,000 Dollars per student you are inherently likely to be offering a different kind of environment than if you have 20,000 Dollars per student. We do look at relatively simple proxies, like the faculty-to-student ratio and we draw again on our reputation survey to examine the teaching reputation in the universities. Of our five indicators, a 30% weighting is given to what we call the teaching environment.

Looking at industry income is our first nod towards examining knowledge transfer. I think it’s a really important area, but one that we need to develop further. We are looking at developing this more, giving it a very low weighting at 2.5% of the total, but this is simply how much income any university can obtain from industrial partners. How much are businesses willing to put their hands in their pockets in front of university research as opposed to their own R&D budget in the private sector? It’s an area that is hard to capture, but it’s something we’d like to develop further. At the moment however it is given a relatively low weighting.

Let us now focus on the international outlook. I think this is one of the biggest drivers of success, although we give it a low weighting, since the individual indicators are, again, subject to all sorts of geographical factors – e.g. Luxembourg and Switzerland tend to do very well in international outlook for geographical reasons. So we give it a low weighting, but I do think this is what drives pretty much everything else a university does – because it’s about talent, it’s about drawing in international talent. We look at an international faculty: what proportion of the staff is international? What proportion of students is international? How much research is published on an international basis with at least one international co-author? They weight together at 7.5% – it’s a low weighting but I think it’s the driver of everything else: it’s the driver of your reputation and it’s the driver of your research impact.
Fig. 2: Weighting of ranking indicators. *Times Higher Education*, World University Rankings.
The final section – another big research indicator – is on citations: field weighted citations, fully normalized by subject, drawn from the Elsevier database. This really is about pure scholarship, about how much your research is being disseminated and shared around the world, how much your institution is contributing to the creation of new knowledge. Also, it doesn’t privilege any one subject over another. We’re normalizing a subject, so we create global averages for every discipline – roughly 300 disciplines – and we weight against that. So we give as much weight to philosophy, or arts and humanity subjects, as we would for STEM subjects. This is important because some of the world rankings don’t normalize for subject. They just simply reward fields with a very high volume of citation, irrespective of their relative publication behaviour across those subject areas. Hence we find mediocre work in very highly cited areas. Biomedical sciences would actually swamp out excellence in lower cited areas like engineering or social sciences, for example. This is probably our flagship indicator with the single highest weight attached.

We have 13 indicators carefully balanced across a full range of university performance. Other rankings– like the Shanghai ranking – are a 100% based on research. It’s easy, it’s clean, it’s perhaps more straightforward on the grounds that it is what it is, but it’s very narrow. Similarly, other rankings don’t attempt to reward third mission knowledge transfer and they don’t tend to look at teaching. We are trying very hard to get to the most comprehensive view of a university and to recognize the full range of the universities’ contributions. It’s a work in progress though, we keep learning, and we keep responding to feedback.

THE RANKINGS RESULTS
When we published the world ranking results on the 1st of October 2015, the big news was that for the first time in a decade, we had a non-US, non-UK entrant into the top 10 – ETH Zurich. I think that’s testament to an environment where the government places a very high
value on education and is willing to fund its universities very generously, as opposed to some of the other world leading institutions that rely very heavily on private income. Looking across the full top 200 list, the US certainly dominates, with 63 of the top 200 places, United Kingdom has 34. Germany however is now the third best represented nation in the world with 20 institutions in the top 200, led by Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich in 29th place. The Netherlands is an extraordinary success story: 12 of its 13 research led institutions make the world top 200. Australia and Canada are doing very well, but Asia is still some way behind, with only a few world class institutions in the high echelons of rankings. China, for example, has 2 in the world top 50, but it only has 2 in the whole of the 200 – Peking University and Tsinghua University from Beijing. South Korea has four, Hong Kong has three.

Looking at Germany, it is a strong story: congratulations to Humboldt – it is a world top 50 institution. Germany had an outstanding year. We actually discourage direct comparisons with last year on the basis that we made some significant changes to the underlying data: we moved from Thomson Reuters to Elsevier and we did our own reputational survey. Nevertheless Germany had an extremely strong year. I think part of that has to do with engaging with the rankings’ data. There was a foreign office funded study on what rankings are, how the methodology works, what the data definitions are. There is a lot more harmonisation between how data is collected and reported, as far as the rankings are concerned versus how it’s done nationally. Actually, I think Germany’s engagement with rankings in general – simply understanding the mechanisms, understanding the methodologies and understanding the data definitions – actually helped a lot. We have to acknowledge that there are challenges with rankings in terms of data and data definitions. THE is trying very hard to create a single, globally understood, simple set of definitions – so we all talk about the same things when we talk about full-time equivalent teaching faculty for example.

On our website, you can break down the overall scores into the
five key pillars – teaching, research, citations, international outlook and industry income. Looking at Germany there are some interesting issues around industry income. It’s been reported very highly at the LMU in Munich and at the Technical University of Munich, but it’s a lot different with Humboldt and Heidelberg. The scores for international outlook are good, but this is still an area that would be very important to improve upon. These are low weighted in rankings and they do not give you an immediate rankings score boost. They do however ensure you are much more closely aligned with the reputational elements, they give you far stronger visibility and they create longer lasting wide networks. This means you’re more front of mind, your research is more likely to be highly cited if it is part of an international collaboration and it boosts everything else. Rankings are about people, they’re about talent, so if you’re drawing in and making sure you’re recruiting from the widest possible global talent pool it will drive up all the other aspects of performance.

There is no such thing as an average top 200 institution, they are all very different: they have different histories, different cultures and different governance structures, but there are certain “average characteristics” – one of them is that top institutions tend to be very old. Is there an advantage in having centuries of history? Certainly with regard to reputation, certainly in terms of culture – the ability to develop prestige. History seems to be an important aspect. Top institutions are also exceptionally rich – there are almost a million dollars per faculty in total income and around 70,000 dollars per student. Also, these institutions have pretty favourable faculty-student ratios: 16.5 to 1 – this is the students-to-faculty ratio. For me, the take-away aspect that I couldn’t stress enough is that top institutions are highly international: 22% of all their faculties are international and 21% of their students are international. As I keep pointing out, international outlook is absolutely the key to success in the world university rankings.

I want to point out that we do rank 800 universities. North America and Western Europe do dominate the rankings, but we are seeing far more institutions emerging from East Asia, from the Asia Pacific
Region, and from the BRICS economies – in Brazil and India, in particular, but Africa is rising as well. The rankings are genuinely helping to give us a clearer global picture, but also to recognize and reward rising stars from emerging economies. On the theme of visibility it is important for those institutions to appear within this ranking, as it gives them new opportunities to reach out to partners. It gives them visibility on a global stage, which means that their collaborative opportunities are opened up. It also means that universities actually size one another up using rankings. They can decide whether they may or may not be appropriate partners, certainly on the subject level. We believe rankings don’t just create healthy, positive competition to drive up standards, we also think they strongly promote collaborations by sharing partnerships – which is really, really important. From my perspective, the rankings are making a positive contribution to the world we’re in rather than a negative one.

It is a really important process for us to open up our data to give as much information to the public as possible. You can look exactly at the faculty-student ratios, you can look at the gender balance on campus, you can look at the total student numbers and you can get a description of the institutions as well. Having this huge database, we also own a lot of data that we are able to share with the institutions and create performance benchmarks.
QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Prof. Dr. Florian Waldow, Professor for comparative and international education, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin:
You said that the THE ranking is a serious piece of social science. If it is a serious piece of social science, what a social scientist would be very much interested in is not that much the rank order but rather – what does it mean? What are the scores? How different are they? What does it mean that our university is now in 49th place and TU München is in 53rd place? So, how different are the scores? How significant are the differences? Much can be objected regarding the rankings produced by the OECD, but at least they try to lay open significance levels in the way they present the data. The newspapers don’t care about that, they look at the rankings anyway. That’s the impression I get when I look at the THE website. I haven’t looked at the technical details, but on the website you only emphasise the rankings, first rank, second rank, third rank. Can you say something about how significant these differences are? My suspicion is that in many cases, whether you are in 49th or 69th position, doesn’t really make a difference.

Phil Baty:
I think this is a really important point. First of all I think we have to just accept that there is a sort of human desire to rank. If we didn’t rank we would be considerably less engaging and interesting to the 17 or 18 million people who come to the site. So, there is a pragmatic aspect to the actual creation of the rank list.

Prof. Dr. Florian Waldow:
Meaning, the newspaper sells better?

Phil Baty:
Of course, being a commercial organisation, this is a fair point. Having
brought in our own data team in the last 18 months there is a lot more we can do around confidence intervals and the reporting of uncertainties around the actual rank numbers. We do a lot of things to help the user. We band the institutions outside the top 200, where we feel the data differentials become very narrow. We do group the institutions into groups, so after the 200 we go into groups of 50, and then a few 100 down we go into groups of a 100. Outside the 600, we are actually just putting them in a general pocket and encourage people to look into the individual scores. But now that we have built in data expertise there may be a mechanism for us to start putting some form of confidence into the lane. At least, we’re doing more with information.

I think part of the challenge we’ve had is that for years we have actually been sort of a publisher of other peoples’ data. For many years, we were publishing effectively Thomson Reuters’ information. They were doing the data collection, they were doing the data analysis, providing us with the ranked list and we were the publisher. But now that we have the internal capacity I think there will be a lot more openness around sharing information, creating additional reports and reporting in more visually interesting ways. So, for example, there is a lot of work being done on the data side around clustering of institutions, actually trying to create new and interesting groupings of institutions. But I accept that we need to put more in in terms of the uncertainty aspects around the data. We do things like only going to one decimal place, putting many people into joint positions, and we do a lot of banding. Still, the differences outside the top 50 are getting very narrow. We do have to do more on the technical side to acknowledge that.

Anna van Santen, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin:
The Charité – Berlin’s university medical school – in only ranked in the pre-clinical and clinical rankings. Could you maybe give us a few more details about the subject rankings that you do?
Phil Baty:
We only do six subject tables. We are working really hard this year trying go into more subject detail, but for now, we do six and obviously very broad subject areas: arts and humanity, social sciences, life sciences, and, in your case, we bunch all the clinical subjects together. We do feel that we need to move forward in trying to go into much finer detail to recognize much more narrow differentials. With our methodology being so broad and having this large number of indicators, we could go to 300 and something subjects, if we would just base the ranking on our publication data. Part of the problem is working with the universities. Our ranking process is very much a collaboration with the universities. We ask the institutions to give us the time and the resource to fill in our data portal forms. Actually, we find that the more information we ask for, the more challenging it is for an institution. We are working towards moving to eight subject areas next year, disaggregating engineering and technology and also disaggregating business and social sciences. We may well push into 30 subject areas, but with less data.

In terms of the methodologies, it’s the same 13 indicators we use, but we put a slightly different weight on different aspects. If it’s a field like clinical medicine, where there’s a high level of confidence in bibliometric analysis, we’ll give that a higher weight and put less weight on some of the reputational aspects. If we’re in a field where bibliometric aspects are less well regarded in terms of research evaluation, for example in the social sciences, where there are different types of output or in the arts and humanities, where there are many other ways of publishing research beyond the journals, we give less weight to bibliometrics and journal publications and more weight to reputational factors. So, it’s really the same 13 indicators, but with a slightly different emphasis depending on the subject area. In 2016 we are still very much in the experimental mode. By opening the data collection portal in the beginning of the year we are able to assess how much information universities are able or willing to share with us and how much consistency we can get through reporting. A big
problem is actually the taxonomy of subject areas. Different countries are reporting in different ways and are also grouping their subjects in different ways. This is a huge challenge, but one we want to put some resource into.

**Johannes Moes, International Office, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin:**
I am interested in how differences between higher education systems are incorporated into the methodology. As far as I understood, tuition fees are part of the categories. There are none in Germany – does that rank us lower? If you were to calculate €10,000 tuition fees for Germany, how would that change the results? How does your methodology cope with differences in systems regarding tuition fees?

**Phil Baty:**
We don’t include fees per se, but we do have a couple of indicators that look at total income. Regarding teaching environment we look at the institutions’ entire income, scaled for its size. So of course wealth does play a part, circumstanced context does matter. If you’re Stanford or Caltech and you’re sitting on huge endowments and have large sources of private income, that will help your ranking. The only real adjustment we make is that we apply purchasing powers parities. We do try and level out the financial side of things in terms of different national economies, but of course we don’t factor in poverty or underfunding. We see the world ranking as real politics, in the sense that it’s a brutal and competitive world. Government or private sector investments will show as part of the inputs, but they got limited weights. We’re very much focused on outputs in terms of citations and various output measures. It’s a balancing act between inputs and outputs. So, fees per se don’t count, but total income does.

We’ve been ranking since 2004, but actually this is the first time in our history that we’ve actually got a serious number of really great data people in-house, and we own the data ourselves. We can start
doing a lot of analyses; we can, for example, do what-if-scenarios. One of the things I get asked to do a lot when I’m in the developing world, for example, is to look at value for money. Many US institutions may be the richest, but in terms of inputs per outputs they may be among the most inefficient in the use of that money. Now, for the first time ever, we can do more with that information. We are currently looking at what we can do in terms of extracting more interesting results from the data regarding value for money, starting to factor in more local circumstances and scenarios. The world rankings are a level playing field, in the sense that everyone is equally judged on a brutally realistic basis.

Ulrich Schreiterer, Berlin Social Science Center:
Leaving questions of methodology and legitimacy aside, I wonder how you deal with the open criticism that the global university research rankings not just measure a given state of existence of a sector, but rather propagate or coin a standard model, which everybody—given the dynamics of competition—has to comply with or strive for. Isn’t this leading to a more homogenous sector worldwide and, even more so, coining a type of university that might be a little bit out of touch with the real needs of economics or societal change?

I’m also interested in the technical aspect of rankings. Listening to your last reply, I was wondering if THE is now creating a spin-off, as other publishing companies such as Elsevier do, offering consultancies to universities on how to become better. This is a business model which might be really rewarding for a publishing house, having, so to say, a global consultancy service on how to become a world class university.

Phil Baty:
The interesting thing, being here in this particular institution, of course, is that the world rankings have idealised a particular model of what a world class university should look like. To a large extent,
the Humboldtian model is an example of what a university should be in terms of the teaching and research missions. The great US institutions that tend to be on top of the rankings such as Harvard did become kind of a global model of excellence and I think they do take on a lot of the Humboldtian notions of what universities are. That does of course disadvantage Germany to a certain extent, since there is a lot of separation between teaching and research. A lot of research is being done outside the teaching environment, sometimes outside universities. It also causes all sorts of challenges. But yes, I think there is a sense that the world rankings did have to come up with a model. It is probably the Chinese that are to blame, for they basically idealized Harvard when deciding what to do to make their universities more competitive. I think there is a huge amount to say for combining teaching and research under one roof. It’s about having undergraduates in the same environment as new knowledge creation, so that students are presented with genuine research challenges. Part of their future roles will be about resilience and answering questions rather than being skilled and trained for particular jobs. I think that it’s okay that we’ve idealised something, because obviously the rankings need different metrics to measure different types of excellence.

So when we create the world rankings, this “world class institution” is a model. I think it is absolutely appropriate that different countries and different cultures could have at least some institutions that are publishing world class research and world leading journals that are of that kind of model. There is homogenisation at the very top level, but, if we think about it, the world ranking is only about 4% of the worlds’ higher education institutions. There is room for diversity in a wider system. I think that it is possible for us to encourage diversity through what we do beyond the world ranking. It is important for me to try and examine different aspects of performance. Now that we have this data: could we have an impact ranking? Could we have a social inclusion ranking? Could we have a teaching only ranking? These are much harder metrics to capture, but I’m really keen to celebrate
diversity. The California Model is a good one for example. You can have your Berkeleys, but you can also have your community colleges all within the same system. My sense is that rankers have a responsibility to create different metrics for different types of mission – and that’s very much part of our agenda.

As far as your second question is concerned, bringing in our data in-house for the first time this year was a very, very expensive process. We’ve invested very heavily and clearly there is a business model behind that. I’m much more interested in providing data for benchmarking rather than consultancy. The main tool that we have from the business side now, is actually a subscription access to the underlying data, a little bit like Scival from Elsevier or InCites from Thomson Reuters. The idea is you open up the back end of the rankings, you let people look at the raw data, and then they can build their own missions and build their own analysis on how they might want to understand their strengths and weaknesses. So, yes, there is a commercial model to allowing more access to the data, but on a commercial basis. I would certainly never feel qualified to offer consultancy in the sense of: “this is what you should do” and “this is what you should look like”. I think that it’s wrong because we’re basically now a data company, but also a publishing company. I’d much rather say, “here is some data that helps you understand yourself and you make your own choices based on the information. We can help you see.”

Lia Hiltz, Embassy of Canada:
I know it’s a holy grail to attempt to measure student outcomes, but in an ideal world what would you need to do in terms of tracking or getting past the privacy concerns, just to be able to get to real data rather than working with so many different proxies?

Phil Baty:
You’re absolutely right. It is the Holy Grail. There are some huge
challenges. What I’m grappling with in the UK is to create what they are calling the “teaching excellence framework”. It is the idea that research has driven too much by what universities do, for example in terms of the reward structures for careers. The notion is we’ve neglected teaching and we need to quantify and to measure it, and reward excellence and teaching. But of course you’re left with some difficult proxies. In the UK we have the national students satisfaction survey which is helpful, but also raises questions around whether satisfying your students really is your role. It also raises the question whether we should move to situations that you see in America, where institutions sometimes follow a model along the lines of “the less challenging you are, the easier the ride you give your students and the more satisfied they may be”. There is a huge discussion around those sorts of areas.

For graduates, there is a simple mechanism: “Does a student go on to have a meaningful career?” “Does a student actually get a job at all?” This is something we would be able to look at. We have to do that on national level first. In many contexts it is already reported on the national level, but harmonising internationally is a huge challenge. The ideal scenario, as you say, has privacy issues. Let’s say there is some form of unique identification you can give every single student so you can track them completely. That would be a dream for analysts, but for various reasons a nightmare in many other respects.

At the moment, we are looking at various proxies. Is there a global student engagement survey for example, not a satisfaction survey? There is a lot of work in the American national engagement surveys – is that a good proxy? Can we harmonise outcomes data at least in terms of “did they get a meaningful job or not”? So, it is an area into which we are putting quite a lot of time and resources, trying to get it right. But is also an area that we feel is going to be really tough to get right. You’re often left with proxies that are a little bit unsatisfactory. Probably the most interesting thing was the AHELO project, the OECD’s assessment of higher education learning outcomes, where there was actually an idea of a standardised test like PISA – PISA for universities. But they were more or less scuppered by the UK, and by
America in particular, saying that they won’t put any resource into it. There is an argument that says the current elite institutions didn’t see any need to have any type of new metric that might question their current elite status. The whole notion of learning gain and value add and teaching is very exciting in the sense that you get to know how much you actually add to the student. That’s something that is never adequately covered in higher education. I remember speaking to a previous senior leader at Tokyo University and he was complaining that most of his students were incredibly lazy and did very, very little because the very fact they got entry to Tokyo University meant they were set up for life, they would get the best jobs. This is perhaps cultural capital rather than actual learning gain.

The amount of money people invest and the lack of genuine information about teaching and learning is a huge, huge gap globally. If it were filled easily, we would have done it already. Still we are investing in that area and we are trying to look hard at getting meaningful indicators, but it’s going to be a big challenge.
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