

Table talk

University league tables – how much do they influence you? Younger graduates may have consulted them enthusiastically. Older graduates may still be unaware of their existence. **Howard Davies** offers his perspective.

The positioning of a university in the various published league tables has become something of an obsession. So much so that it is easy to forget that the tables are a very recent invention. The very first league tables were published in 1983 by *US News and World Report*. Now there are dozens of them in the US, both for whole universities and for individual subject disciplines. In the UK, the first published rankings did not appear until 2001. Now three newspapers, the *Sunday Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* publish national tables, which are largely focused on issues relevant to students applying for undergraduate courses.

Even more recently, two global league tables have appeared. The first one was developed by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003, the second by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in London in 2004. The rankings in those tables differ quite markedly, for reasons I shall explore.

It is easy to criticise these league tables. In the first place, the whole concept of universities in competition with each other is a slightly doubtful one. Universities are not like soccer teams, constantly seeking promotion or trying to avoid relegation. Also, the league tables tend to focus on universities as corporate entities, whereas they are collections of departments which, in turn, are collections of individual scholars. Also, there are many oddities in the way the tables are constructed. On some of the UK tables a university can push itself up the table by simply spending more money on libraries, for example. It does not matter if that money is spent well or badly. Or, since the percentage of international faculty is a key factor in one table, you could move up the table by replacing expensive British professors with cheap, overseas doctoral students. It is to be hoped, therefore, that universities do not manage themselves solely with reference to the impact of their decisions on their league standing.

Also, there is evidence that the linkage between rankings and student demand is very loose indeed. A recent academic study showed that there is broadly no correlation in the UK between league table position and applications. Students may look at league tables, and many do, but they do not appear to be a decisive influence on the choice of institution students eventually make.

All that said, the tables are still published, and will no doubt continue to be – though one or two compilers have given up, notably the *Financial Times* in relation

to whole universities (though it still publishes important rankings of management programmes). So what do these tables say about LSE?

In the domestic tables we do pretty well, and indeed our position has been tending to improve a little over the years. It is not a surprise that Oxford and Cambridge always fight it out for the top two positions, with Imperial College, UCL and ourselves typically occupying the next three slots. There is not much sign of these relative positions changing, though interestingly LSE has in the last couple of years become the most sought after university in the country in terms of applications per place. We receive around 15 applications per place compared to only six at Oxford and at Cambridge. The tables themselves are driven by a variety of factors, including staff-student ratios, expenditure on facilities and starting salaries on graduation (where we do very well). They are also influenced by teaching quality scores from the Quality Assurance Agency and by the ranking a university receives in the research assessment exercise which is carried out across the country every seven years or so. In the last one our average position in the subjects we teach was second, overall, which has helped our position in other league tables since 2001.

In the two international league tables the competition is far more intense, of course. In every year of both international tables Harvard has come first, with the rest of the world's universities strung out beneath it.

In the case of the Shanghai Jiao Tong table I am afraid you have to look quite a long way to find LSE. We are ranked somewhere between 200 and 300 (the table does not provide a more precise ranking than that). Why so? Well, the compilers of the table themselves acknowledge that the heavy weight they give to Nobel Prizes and Field medals creates a natural bias in favour of the hard sciences, where most of the Nobel Prizes are given, and against universities which focus on the arts and humanities or on the social sciences, as we do. They have attempted to correct this bias somewhat in the latest edition, which pushed us up a bracket, but given the methodology

there is no chance that we would appear in the top 50. I think we simply have to live with that.

The *Times Higher Education Supplement* table is constructed in a rather different way. Its assessment of the research and academic standing of universities is driven largely by a peer review process, whereby over 1,000 academics are asked to rank the faculties of other institutions in their discipline. In the first and second editions of the table, LSE was ranked number 11 worldwide. That seemed a very positive position to be in, and indeed I was slightly surprised that we were so high. We were therefore not astonished when in 2006 we appeared at number 17 worldwide. In fact, our own position has not deteriorated at all, but there appears to have been some reassessment of staff-student ratios in other universities which has pushed a few above us.

The *Times Higher* also produces another table which we regard as somewhat more relevant to us, which is a derivative of the main table but focusing on the social sciences alone (see below). In the first two years of the table we came second in the social sciences internationally – once again after the inevitable Harvard. In the third edition we had slipped one place to come third behind Oxford and Harvard. Disappointing, but in the relatively fine gradations which lie behind these rankings I would not attach very much significance to a decline of one place. If we continually fell outside the top half dozen in the social sciences that would be a cause for concern.

I imagine that all university heads broadly share my own view of these tables. They are terrific and unquestioned when you score well and better than last time. They are fatally flawed and fundamentally unfair when you move in the opposite direction. ■



Howard Davies

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Rank	University	Country	Social science score
1	Oxford	UK	100.0
2	Harvard	US	98.5
3	LSE	UK	94.9
4	Cambridge	UK	90.8
5	Berkeley	US	89.2
6	Australian National University	Australia	85.0
7	Yale	US	81.2
8	Stanford	US	81.2
9	Chicago	US	75.3
10	Melbourne	Australia	73.0

THE WORLD UNIVERSITY SOCIAL SCIENCES RANKINGS, 2006