4
Rankings, Student Choice and Recruitment

I have a colleague who graduated from the University of Columbia and she’s holding a very high position at [my] university. They did not tell me, but I could read their minds that if I am lucky enough to graduate at this [Japanese] university I could not be as highly appreciated as the one who graduated from Columbia University (International student from Vietnam attending private pre-1900 research intensive university, Japan).

I was a bit concerned initially because I know that there are other universities that have more international recognition. I did struggle for quite a while as to whether I should go with my gut feeling or go to somewhere that would give me more options because I would like to study postgraduate (sic) in America or Europe (Student attending post-1970 teaching intensive university, Australia).

Rising popularity of rankings

While rankings have existed for almost 100 years, they have gained international popularity and notoriety only since the 1980s. A large element of their success has been their ability to (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, 38). Clarke (2007, 35) says that the growing demand for rankings has been “fuelled by several trends in higher education, including increasing participation rates, higher costs, and the view of students as consumers who expect value for money”. Morse (2010a) made a similar point; given the substantial costs associated with some private colleges in the US – around USD 50,000 per year (EUR 37,000) or USD 200,000 (EUR 148,000) for an undergraduate degree – “there is a real need for information to determine the relative merits of schools given their cost”. The value proposition is also asserted by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education which remarked:
Students invest both time and money in their education. As a result, it is important for potential students to have access to comprehensive and relevant information about higher education before they choose (HSV, 2009, 6).

A 2010 survey of users of rankings found the most favourable view came from students (Adams and Baker, 2010, chart 2), while a US survey found 84 percent of voters believe colleges should be obliged to make information available regarding their graduation rates, loan repayments and job placement rates (Hart Research Associates, 2013, 16). This tidal wave of reaction has underpinned the birth and subsequently the widespread growth in the number and type of rankings, users and uses, far beyond the original target audience of students and their parents, over the last decade. Indeed, the number of rankings which now focus on value for money is on the rise (Kaminer, 2013).

USNWR Best Colleges and CHE-HochschulRanking emphasize their value and appeal for students and parents: the former believes “students and their families should have as much information as possible about the comparative merits of the education programs at America’s colleges and universities” (USNWR, 2010a). Its objective is amplified by the headline: “Find the Best School for You” (USNWR, 2013) while the latter asks:

Want to navigate better through the extensive range of study opportunities offered by Germany’s universities? Want to know which study programme at which university best suits your wishes and needs? Yes? Then why not use our university ranking! (DAAD, 2010)

The Obama administration’s plan to rate universities according to value for money, follows initiatives by, amongst others, the UK and Australian governments, to put institutional data online for easy accessibility and comparison.

In parallel, there has been a surge in more student-friendly university guides increasingly available online, e.g. RealUni.com, the Push Guide, Springboard, the Times Good University Guides, Apply2Uni. The Princeton Review “The Best 378 Colleges” produces 62 rankings lists, each of which identifies the top 20, according to a variety of headings such as Best College Dorms and Most LGBT Friendly (Princeton Review, 2013). The various rate-my-professor sites have been controversial but social media has the potential to be overtake more traditional formats; these include, inter alia: Students Review (http://www.studentsreview.com/), Unigo (http://www.unigo.com/), College Confidential (http://www.collegeconfidential.com/), and Mynextcollege (https://www.facebook.com/mynextcollege) (McKay, 2013).