The Price of a Ranked University

What an Institution Pays to Move Up a Table

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European institutions have reorganised themselves around a position in a global ranking that most of them cannot reach and none of them commissioned. This article examines the cost: the four investments that a ranking rewards, the field that is closed to pay for them, the staff who are recruited for a score, the student who is recruited for a fee, and the governance that a position in a table exerts without an election. It argues that a ranking measures a research reputation that is produced by concentration, and that an institution which buys a rank has bought a strategy that it did not choose and cannot afford to maintain.

Contents **Page**

1. The Table Nobody Commissioned **85**
2. Four Investments **86**
3. The Field That Is Closed **86**
4. The Recruited Researcher **87**
5. The Student Who Pays for It **87**
6. The Governance That a Rank Exerts **88**
7. The Data **88**
8. The Discipline That Cannot Compete **89**
9. The Small System **89**
10. The Sequence of a Policy **89**
11. Conclusions **90**

1. The Table Nobody Commissioned

The global rankings were created by publishers and consultancies for a readership of students and journalists, and they have become an instrument of institutional strategy.

The mechanism is not mysterious. A position in a table is read by applicants, by partners, by ministries and by the institution's own staff, and the reading produces a pressure that no regulation creates. The consequence is a set of institutions that allocate their resources to

move a number that a private body computes with a method it does not publish in full.

The instrument is a statement of the indicators that the institution uses to judge itself, adopted by its council, with the reasons and the fields that it declines to compete in. A statement of that kind is the only defence available to a body that is ranked by others.

2. Four Investments

A ranking rewards four things, and each of them is bought with money that comes from somewhere.

The first is the research output weighted by citations, which is bought with the recruitment of productive researchers and the reduction of their teaching. The second is the international staff and students, which is bought with recruitment offices abroad and with scholarships that subsidise a fee.

The third is the ratio of the staff to the students, which is bought by admitting fewer students or by hiring more staff, and which is the most expensive of the four in a system with a fixed income per place. The fourth is the reputation among a panel of respondents, which is bought by visibility: the conferences, the advertisements, the presence in the media of the research that the first investment produced.

3. The Field That Is Closed

The money that an institution spends to move up a table is taken from a field that it closes, and the closure is never announced as a consequence.

A department of teacher education, of nursing, of regional economics: each produces graduates that a region needs and few citations that a ranking counts. The consequence is a portfolio that converges on the fields that the indicator rewards, and a divergence of the institutions of a system from the needs of their territories.

The instrument is a portfolio decision taken explicitly: the fields that the institution maintains because the territory needs them, funded from a source that the ranking does not see, and reported as a part of the mission. A decision of that kind converts an accidental closure into a stated commitment.

4. The Recruited Researcher

The researcher who is recruited to raise a score is recruited on a contract that is funded by the score, and the arrangement is circular.

A university that hires a highly cited researcher for a salary that the department cannot afford has bought a position in a table and a cost in perpetuity. The consequence is a staff whose salary structure is distorted by a small number of appointments, and a department that must fund the difference from its teaching.

The instrument is a recruitment on a business case: the income that a post is expected to generate, the teaching that it will not do, and the period over which the investment is reviewed. A case of that kind is the ordinary discipline of a public institution and it is rarely applied to the appointments that a ranking rewards.

5. The Student Who Pays for It

The international student is, in a number of systems, the source of the income with which the institution buys its position in a table.

A fee charged to a student from outside the area at a multiple of the domestic fee finances the research and the facilities that the ranking counts, and the student receives a teaching that may be delivered in large cohorts by staff on fixed-term contracts. The consequence is a cross-subsidy that is invisible in the accounts and that the student discovers in the first semester.

The instrument is an accounting of the fee: the cost of the programme that the student follows and the share of her fee that is spent on it, published by programme. An accounting of that kind is the minimum of an honest relation with the population that funds the strategy.



Figure 1 Relative expenditure attributable to each indicator

6. The Governance That a Rank Exerts

A position in a table influences the decisions of an institution without a vote, a paper or a meeting, and the influence is the more effective for being informal.

A rector who knows the position of her institution in three tables will weigh every proposal by its effect on the position, and the weighing is invisible in the minutes. The consequence is a governance in which a private metric occupies the place that a strategy should hold.

The instrument is a standing item of the council: the position in the tables that the institution monitors, the investment that has been made to influence it, and the effect on the fields that do not count. An item of that kind makes the influence visible and a visible influence can be debated.

7. The Data

An institution can measure the cost of its own position with four figures, and the four are available to its planning office.

The first is the expenditure that is attributable to the indicators: the recruitment, the communication, the international offices, the scholarships. The second is the number of the students per member of staff, which is the indicator that the institution manipulates most directly. The third is the number of the programmes closed in five years and the reason recorded. The fourth is the position in the tables over five years, with the method of each.

The four are the basis of an honest conversation about the strategy, and the third is the one that no report of a ranking contains.

Indicator	Bought with	Taken from
Citations	Recruitment and released time	The teaching budget
International share	Offices and scholarships	The domestic places
Staff ratio	Fewer students or more staff	The access
Reputation	Visibility	The fields without an audience

Table 1 Four indicators and what each is bought with

8. The Discipline That Cannot Compete

A discipline whose output is a book, a protocol or a clinical guideline cannot compete in a table weighted by citations, and the institution that hosts it carries a score that is not a measure of its quality.

The consequence is a pressure on the department to publish in the forms that the indicator counts, and a loss of the forms that the field requires. The instrument is a submission in which the form is declared and assessed by peers of the field, which is the practice of the systems that have reformed their assessment and the exception in the tables.

9. The Small System

A national system of ten institutions cannot place any of them in the first hundred of a table that is dominated by systems of a hundred, and the attempt costs the system more than the failure.

The concentration of the resources in one institution to produce a visible position leaves the others without the capacity to do the work that the region needs. The consequence is a system with one ranked institution and nine that are not funded to be good at anything in particular.

The instrument is a differentiated mission: the institution that competes internationally, the institutions that serve their regions, each with the funding and the indicators that its mission requires. A differentiation of that kind is the only rational response of a small system to a global table.

10. The Sequence of a Policy

An institution that decides to take its position seriously can do so in a sequence, and the sequence begins with the statement.

The first step is the statement of the indicators that the institution uses and the fields in which it declines to compete. The second is the business case for every appointment made to influence the position. The third is the accounting of the fee of the international student and a floor for the share that is spent on her programme. The fourth is the standing item of the council with the four figures.

A sequence of that kind takes three years and the first step is a page. An institution that begins with a target position produces a plan that closes departments and calls it focus.

11. Conclusions

A ranking measures a research reputation that is produced by concentration, and an institution which buys a rank has bought a strategy that it did not choose and cannot afford to maintain.

Three conclusions follow. The strategy must be stated: the indicators that the institution uses, the fields in which it declines to compete, and the portfolio that it maintains for the needs of its territory. The investment must be accounted: a business case for every appointment made to influence a position, an accounting of the fee of the international student by programme, and the programmes closed with the reason recorded. And the influence must be visible: a standing item of the council with the position, the expenditure and the effect on the fields that do not count.

An institution that has done the three uses the tables. An institution that has done none of them is used by them, and the use is called excellence.

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Biography:

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