

# Close-up examination of discourses associated with global university rankings: counter-narratives in UK policy context

## Abstract

In little over a decade since their introduction, [global rankings](#) are perceived as having significant and problematic effects. The dominant ‘normative’ research orientation applied to the research domain of rankings is identified as a contributory factor to the sustained interest in rankings. The paper argues for a ‘close-up’ research orientation at this juncture to open up the debate and draw attention to alternative narratives of excellence in higher education through a discourse-analytic approach. The paper draws on an analysis of the use of global rankings by higher education sector ‘mission groups’ to influence national policy in UK, [with particular focus on lobbying texts produced by these groups in the period surrounding the UK general election](#). [The analysis demonstrates the strategic struggle for positioning in relation to higher education policy and reflects the different narratives of self-identification of the mission groups](#). The study draws attention to ways global university rankings mediate discourse and activity and illuminates alternative discourses which respond to rankings.

Keywords: usability practices, research impact, user engagement

## Introduction

This paper relates to the theme of [educational research](#) ‘[making a difference](#)’ in two key ways. First, in its theoretical and methodological focus, it addresses issues of user engagement and research usability. Second, due to its substantive focus on global university rankings it highlights a tension between new forms of international third-party evaluation constituted by particular research metrics that can differ in emphasis from those advocated

through domestic research policy, thus having significant implications on contemporary conceptions of research impact.

In little over a decade since their introduction, [global rankings](#) are perceived as having significant and problematic effects. Criticised for being atheoretical due to their reliance on readily available, globally comparable research metrics, nevertheless they are perceived to be precipitating a new global model of the [research university](#) (Hazelkorn, 2011). Critics have identified a western bias inherent in the research metrics that constitute global rankings and a potentially negative impact on institutional diversity created by rankings tools that operate on a [deficit model](#), effectively seeking to quantify the degree of inferiority to the top-ranked institution ([Little & Locke, 2011](#)). Consequently, rankings are perceived to be influencing research practices and strategies through greater research funding concentration, increasing tendency, internationally, to publish in English language journals and in publications included in citation databases favoured by global rankings.

From early in their inception, a growing divergence was identifiable between the stated purpose of rankings systems and their actual uses. Research by Hazelkorn (2007) demonstrated a disparity between 'target' and 'user' groups of rankings with a greater uptake and use of rankings by higher education institutions than was originally envisaged (Locke, 2008; Hazelkorn, 2007). Certainly, rankings feature strongly in public discourse within the higher education community and are rarely out of the education press; an unsurprising fact given that media organisations such as *Times Higher Education* are one of the producers of global rankings. Despite the public media [attention](#) associated with rankings and the proliferation of rankings statements in university marketing materials and strategy documents, there is a gap in empirical data to demonstrate that a strong rankings position confers financial gain or influences student decision making to a significant degree. Counter evidence exists to challenge claims of institutional isomorphism, influence on student

decision-making and the effectiveness of research strategies deployed by top ranked higher education institutions (De Jager, 2011; Bastedo and Bowman, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2011; HEFCE, 2010). As discussed in the next section, the dominant research orientation applied to the research domain of rankings is identified as a contributory factor to the sustained interest in rankings. The paper goes on to apply a novel theoretical perspective and methodological approach that draws attention to the complex dynamics at play.

### **Research on rankings**

The assertion that ‘rankings are here to stay’ appears to be gaining a largely uncritical acceptance among the academic and research communities. It is represented as a ‘[proven fact](#)’ rather than a ‘[political position](#)’ (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012, p289) and locates those in the higher education community in a passive relationship in relation to this new form of artefact. Academic research has highlighted several problematic aspects of rankings [including](#) methodological flaws and conceptual weaknesses. Notwithstanding the considerable body of critical research, the [appetite](#) for rankings within the higher education community (and higher education stakeholders) persists and national and institutional reforms are in evidence that are associated with the aim of improving [rankings position](#) (Hazelkorn, 2011).

An empirical examination of research perspectives applied in this research domain demonstrated that the prevailing research orientation was normative, evaluating [global rankings](#) against established theories of knowledge (O’Connell, 2013). These normative studies demonstrated a tendency towards systemic, policy-oriented recommendations and were published in journals and publications addressed towards policy communities. A smaller vein of research examined the roles and meanings attached to rankings and emphasised the situated nature of rankings-related practices. These studies tended towards recommendations

that were practice-based and disseminated in publications directed towards practitioner communities.

The research domain associated with rankings is perceived to have created an epistemological and ontological trap: conducting research on rankings further elevates and legitimises rankings and closes down alternative discourses relating to quality in higher education (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012). Whilst a considerable number of studies have been critical of rankings methodologies, the theoretical orientation has been towards how to improve rankings tools rather than examining alternatives. Given this situation, a ‘close up’ research orientation, through a discourse-analytic approach, is proposed at this juncture to open up the debate and draw attention to alternative narratives of excellence in higher education.

## **Theoretical resources**

Recent studies adopting critical theoretical perspectives have considered the sociological and political implications of rankings, how they reflect relations of power within and between nation states and how rankings have been naturalised in political and discursive terms (Pusser and Marginson, 2013; Kauppi and Erkkila, 2011; Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012). Such studies help to explain why rankings have gained traction in the higher education environment but leave open the interesting question of how the particular rankings artefact shapes practice.

Activity systems theory (Engeström, 2005) provides a useful theoretical perspective given the global reach of this new form of benchmarking and evaluation tool and locates [global rankings](#) in a wider social and historical context. Analytical focus is drawn to how this new tool mediates [activity](#). Activity is driven by its motive, and the object of the activity is its true motive (Leont'ev, 1978). The object is mediated both by artefacts as well as by motives and goals (Engeström, 2005). The concept of ‘object’ is therefore a useful way to problematise the effects of [rankings](#), emphasising both material and conceptual constraints on activity.

Within this framework of analysis, critical discourse analysis offers complementary theoretical resources in the form of fine-grain tools to examine the representational practices associated with rankings. The approach taken in this study has been to examine how different groups appropriate rankings in the UK policy context and to engage a broader inquiry community in this process. [The methodology is detailed in the next section \(for a fuller account, see O'Connell 2015\)](#). This close-up perspective enables examination of how rankings are deployed in policy discourse, how it connects with particular strategies of social change and helps identify points of resistance. This perspective recognises the operation of power, rather than group against group, as the 'suppression of parts of the human being' and processes of domination as 'embedded in the micro-practices of the work site itself' (Deetz, 1996, p. 197).

Both perspectives centre on emancipatory agendas. Activity systems theory is predicated on a 'situated interventionist' approach, whereby the researcher collaborates with research participants to identify contradictions and tensions underlying activity as opportunities for 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2005). Critical discourse analysis illuminates the way language perspectivises and constructs social reality and creates resources for people to change things (Fairclough, 2001). As such, this approach is amenable to practice-based responses and emancipatory in intent by illuminating strategic struggles within discourses, tensions and contradictions and identifying potential for transformation.

## **Overview of Research**

The study examined policy-oriented texts produced by four United Kingdom (UK) higher education 'mission groups' in the period surrounding the UK general election of 2010: 'Advice for an incoming government' (1994 Group, 2010); 'Staying on Top: the challenge of sustaining world class higher education in the UK' (Russell Group, 2010); 'So Just What is a

University?’ (Million+, 2010); ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Universities: Engines of an Innovation Driven Economy’ (University Alliance, 2010).

These texts were identified as being of research interest as mission groups are a key way in which UK universities engage with government on areas of policy concern and promote distinct policy positions which reflect their constituent memberships (Filappakou and Tapper, 2015). The selected texts were located in a similar point in time within a series of events impacting on the sector as a whole and, therefore, provided an empirical resource to study the range of issues and representations selected by these four groups as relevant in the context of communicating with a new government. A brief account of the missions groups follows and the subsequent demise of one of groups (the 1994 Group) in 2013 is discussed later in this paper (Baker, 2013).

Whilst the higher education sector in the UK has two recognised bodies (Universities UK and GuildHE), four specialist mission groups have been established over the past two decades to represent specific interests and engage with government on these issues: the Russell Group (representing ‘UK’s research intensive universities’); the 1994 Group (representing, at the time of the study, 19 ‘research intensive, teaching focused’ institutions); the Million+ group represents 26 ‘modern universities’; and the University Alliance (representing 23 ‘business engaged’ universities). These groups are self-selecting and composition can be affected by issues that polarise the member institutions. For example, an issue related to student access policy was associated with a move by four universities from the 1994 group to the Russell Group (Morgan, 2012).

A two-fold analytical process was applied to the texts (Table 1). The initial analytical focus was on the text’s external relations to other texts (specifically, UK government texts) and on

genre: 'a type of language used in the performance of a particular social practice' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999 p.56). These genre choices are taken as indicative of the practices in which the text producers were seeking to engage. This part of the analysis enabled consideration of the object-orientation represented in the texts with specific focus on how they were located within broader policy discourses. In the second stage of analysis, the analytical tools described in table 1 enabled examination of object orientation through examination of the specific lexical choices, grammatical structures, logic and argumentation and semantic representations. In specific terms, the analysis considered how social actors were represented, how semantic relations were constructed through discursive strategies and through logic and argument; and how the texts represented social relations within the sector and with government.

### **Table 1. Overview of method**

Within this broad framework of analysis, the ways in which international benchmarks were deployed, specifically global university rankings, were considered to examine how they related to different strategies of social change.

### **Maintaining Reflexivity**

The involvement of a 'practitioner panel' of eleven members, informed and knowledgeable about international higher education developments, formed a key part of the research design to maintain reflexivity and to situate the texts in surrounding practices. The panel included sector-level policy makers, academic leaders and international directors from different parts of the sector.

The involvement of the panel influenced the whole research process. The initial research question centred on whether rankings were influencing UK higher education policy. However, panel input at the contextual analysis phase challenged the initial research orientation, highlighting potential interest in exploring how rankings were deployed by the UK higher education mission groups to influence policy and subsequently influenced the texts selected for analysis:

Aren't mission groups really a product ordering/rankings long before rankings became public? Universities and other actors are using rankings to influence government policy. It isn't simply one direction. (Director International, RG institution, South West England)

Later in the research process panel members were contacted again by email and provided with a synthesis of the research outcomes and the analyst's provisional interpretation. A brief summary of research outcomes now follows although the main focus of this paper is to illustrate the ways the panel contributed valuable perspectives on the analysis.

### **Research outcomes**

All of the texts aligned with broad, interrelated themes of public funding of higher education, research funding policy and student fees but these discourse topics were re-contextualised in different ways. Through their inter-textual references, the texts displayed orientations towards different government policy areas that were reflective of differing object orientations, which fore-grounded either national policy interests or reflected a broader international orientation.

Through these orientations to different government texts, the mission group texts could be located in quite differing spheres of activity and related to different strategies of social change as reflected in the government policy areas the text producers sought to influence.

The texts constructed different objects to be addressed (Figure 1). The 1994 Group text oriented to maintaining sector strength and quality. The Million+ text oriented to enhancing

social mobility. The University Alliance text oriented outwardly to national policy and economic concerns, matching the graduate supply to global economic demand. The Russell Group text oriented to maintaining international research standing through concentration of funding in leading universities. [The close-up analysis enabled by the tools of critical discourse analysis, provides further insight into the ways in which these object orientations express distinct strategies of social change, differing degrees of alignment with domestic policy and represent the international context in ways which emphasise either opportunity or competitive threat.](#)

Figure 1: Differing object-orientations reflected in the texts

Different object-related arguments were therefore made by each mission group text. The Russell Group constructed relations of equivalence between world-leading institutions and having a good position in global rankings. This was drawn on to situate Russell Group institutions at a greater distance from non-world-leading institutions, in order to call for a strategy of concentrating funding in these kinds of institutions. In contrast, the University Alliance argument constructed a relation of equivalence between research excellence and research application, highlighting the contribution of research in more applied terms. The [Million+](#) document constructed an argument around widening access through mitigation of barriers for part-time students, thus contributing to policy goals of social mobility. The central argument of the 1994 text rested on a relation of dependency between the quality of higher education and prosperity. The text was internally referential to sector constructs of quality and was declarative and predictive in approach with frequent statements of what would happen as a result of government action in line with policy recommendations.

The types of benchmarks used in the text were analysed [to identify](#) their [provenance](#) (UK or international) and the ways they were used. [Global university rankings](#) were referred to

explicitly only in the Russell Group text. They were used in a range of causal semantic relations: of consequence (for example, China's ascent in the rankings was attributed to increased investment in leading research institutions); of conditionality (of international research standing being reliant on supporting a small cadre of leading research institutions); in relations of contrast (supporting the statement that Russell Group graduates are the most highly sought after in the world, based on Times Higher Education rankings); and relations of purpose (for example, the object of 'staying on top' of the rankings). Global rankings were used to direct strategy and decisions of where universities must invest in order to compete with global competitors (through the formulation of a composite index that encapsulates global rankings, the 'Global leaders index'). The three other texts did not refer to global university rankings but engaged in an associated discourse in their utilisation of the commonly associated concept of 'world class': re-contextualised as 'world class skills' (University Alliance), 'world class efficiency in delivering social mobility' (Million+) and a 'world class sector', defined by the 1994 Group as adherence high quality standards. Texts were interrogated by looking at instances of use of the term 'international' and its synonyms ('world', 'global') and the semantic relations that were set up. Two very different constructions of international were constructed within the texts. One formulation is broad and economic. The University Alliance text invoked a concept of international materially connected to the economy and reflected in phrases such as, 'international economic performance', 'global jobs market' and 'international market share'. This text advocated developing the UK's high-level skills and benchmarks against Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development averages. As such, the international context was represented both as a resource for graduate jobs and an opportunity for economic growth. The other formulation is narrower and sector focused. The Russell Group references to international were more abstract, co-located with words such as 'sphere', 'arena', 'standing' and were

constituted by sector-specific metrics (eg. Staff-student ratios, student satisfaction data, research output measures). By contrast with the University Alliance formulation, the ‘international’ orientation is defined in competitive terms and expressed through military metaphors such as ‘battle’ and ‘cadre’.

The analysis demonstrated qualitative differences in how the object was constructed and how different strategies of social change were connected with the object formulations of each text. These formulations constituted different social relations within the sector, different orientations to the UK government and towards national and sectoral policy concerns. Where the discourse of rankings was deployed, this was connected with policy strategies that advocated separation from broader sectoral interests, low levels of alignment with domestic policy goals and a discourse of ‘preservation’. Alternative discourses, evident in the three other texts, portrayed different contributions, sought different outcomes from government policy; and emphasised opportunities for growth, change and transformation of the higher education sector as a whole. The provisional interpretation made by the analyst was that rankings had entered the national policy discourse in an uneven way and were having a narrowing effect in defining the constructs of excellence deployed by research intensive universities but that strong and distinctive narratives were evident in other parts of the sector.

### **Perspectives on the Analysis**

Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) advocated an analytical focus on text reception in order to be able to more fully evaluate the effectiveness of texts in contributing to the achievement of the strategies of social change they represent. The current analysis therefore considered subsequent government policy texts to examine alignment with different policy positions proposed by mission groups.

Panel feedback supported the analyst's conclusion that there had been little discernible reference to the need to pursue rankings position within subsequent government policy texts:

The UK conversation is more sophisticated; partly because we have domestic rankings which include a focus on student satisfaction and teaching quality. [...] The policy angle, if you listen to Willetts [former government minister for higher education], is that 'market reforms drive quality'; and that there is an information asymmetry (which is being dealt with by Key Information Sets). (Policy Adviser, UK higher education International Unit; a national organisation to support the sector's international activities)

However, input from practitioners created a broader understanding of 'text reception'. The effectiveness of texts in taking a position and achieving a particular strategy of social change could be seen as being reflected in the higher education community response. Panel feedback suggested the audience for these texts within the higher education sector was small but influential and largely comprising senior managers. As such, the production of the texts could be seen partly as a reflexive exercise in clarifying shared positions among different groupings of higher education institutions.

One thing I would say is that my sense is that a 'typical' academic and (probably) administrator in most universities has not (traditionally) had much of an eye on sector/intra-sector 'goings on'.... Of course the senior leadership do and our Vice Chancellor is very active in UA [University Alliance] and involved in the development of mission group perspective etc. (Policy Officer to VC, UA institution)

Panel response to the analysis identified some of the material effects of the discourse associated with global rankings. Rankings were perceived to be influencing the nature of higher education partnerships.

I come from the kind of comprehensive university that might tend to be favoured by global university rankings.... We have always tried not to see league table position as an end in itself but rather as an indicator of progress to broader goals around research excellence. And in that sense we have tried to keep them at 'arms-length'. Where I get particularly interested is in the area of partnerships and the risks that may arise from the reification of league table position. Sometimes this is because it's used as an internal heuristic (and that can be managed) but sometimes it's used by policy makers to define parameters for engagement (e.g., India) and that risks denying institutions the benefits of

diversity in partnerships. (Pro-Vice-Chancellor International, RG institution, Midlands)

Furthermore, it was suggested that the subsequent disintegration of the 1994 Group reflected that the policy orientation proposed by this group did not prove to be attractive to a significant number of institutions.

For the '94 Group, the situation is worse, with a number of highly ranked universities leaving, and one in particular (Bath) preferring to be non-aligned [...] worth looking at its statement when it left the '94 Group. It said that its ranking/reputation meant it should not stay in the '94 Group. (International Director, RG Institution, South West England)

Other relevant 'texts' were identified that could be seen as shaping and influencing those examined in this study. These included the government's change to points-based immigration system (as mentioned by a panel member from a higher education institution with a specialist focus on education and social science), which placed greater restriction on higher education international recruitment activities and represented a curtailment to this income stream for many institutions. Constraints on the discourse of rankings were highlighted. Niche institutions, not favoured by the ranking formulae (as mentioned by a panel member from a specialist institute in the South West of England) were engaging in alternative discourses and re-contextualisations of the 'world-class' concept. Panel members identified counter-forces challenging the perceived dominance of rankings. These include domestic concerns (the need to review areas of programme provision in response to changes in the higher education funding model) and the growth in private providers who would compete on different terms.

Institutional level rankings will probably continue to be used as a 'shorthand' at the highest policy levels and for soundbites—but not for the practicalities of business management and developments (e.g., recruitment and research bidding). .... Our 'old' strategic plan explicitly identified an ambition to achieve top quartile status for teaching and research in domestic rankings by 2017 and top 500 status (THE and QS) by the same deadline. The refreshment of the strategy that is currently underway is quite likely to downplay both domestic and international rankings positions and make much more of the new forms of provision and partnership that you have picked up from the UA [University Alliance] text.... So I'd agree that at this institution at least there is evidence of the development of a new narrative which is less 'tied' to global rankings and

more about differentiation from institutions that are likely to continue to be **favoured** by the **global ranking** tools. Recognition of our new context has resulted in a realization that we can't 'compete' with RG institutions or aspire to become 'like' them—we really do have to do something else. Quite a positive move really. (Policy Adviser to Vice-Chancellor, UA institution)

These contributions illustrate the valuable role of panel members in contextualising the texts, providing different perspectives on the analysis and identifying potential implications. These perspectives shaped how the **four documents** were conceptualised, identified additional ways of evaluating the effectiveness of the texts and highlighted forces that run in opposition to the prominence of rankings.

## **Conclusion**

Empirically, the study examined the deployment of rankings in policy-oriented discourse by UK higher education mission groups. The analysis illustrated that where the discourse of global rankings was deployed, this was connected with policy strategies that advocated separation from broader sectoral interests and reflected low levels of alignment with domestic policy goals. The perspectives on the analysis provided by the practitioner panel suggested that the rankings-discourse was having significant effects in the higher education context in England, influencing practices in parts of the sector. The analysis illustrates how rankings are shaping management and policy discourse amongst research-intensive higher education institutions and creating material effects (reflected in the volatility in membership of some mission groups and the subsequent demise of the 1994 Group). However, the analysis also suggests that the discourse is not totalising and, in response to this discourse, new and effective narratives are developing that portray different contributions and seek different outcomes **from** government policy. This analysis rejects deterministic conceptions of discourse in constituting reality but proposes the discourse of rankings is shaping practices in the UK higher education sector, which frame the object in ways which **emphasise competition between universities**.

In contrast to macro-sociological analyses, which account for the appeal of rankings for 'élite' groups of higher education, this study provides a micro-analysis of the operation of the discourse associated with [global rankings](#). The theoretical resources of activity systems theory and critical discourse analysis provide a framework to better understand the complex dynamics which sustain attention to rankings. [This study](#) encourages consideration of the effectiveness of the discourse, its material effects and the surrounding contextual factors that can be seen as shaping practices in the national higher education context. The analytical tools of critical discourse analysis enable close scrutiny of ways mission groups represent collective interests and strategic aims. The activity systems theoretical framework addresses the surrounding context in which these texts are being used. The combined perspective of activity systems theory and critical discourse analysis illustrates how the dominant effect of this discourse is achieved routinely in discursive practices in specific contexts.

[As proposed by Filappakou and Tapper \(2015\), mission groups differ primarily on matters relating to the implementation of key government policy areas rather than on principles of policy per se. The present study provides a complementary perspective and draws attention to the manner in which policy positions are conveyed, the degree to which sectoral interdependence or separation is portrayed; and the distinct orientations expressed towards the international environment as mediated by the use of different international benchmarks.](#)

This analysis demonstrates the strategic struggle for positioning in relation to higher education policy and reflects the different narratives of self-identification of the mission groups. Illuminating the language practices associated with rankings in this way draws attention to the ways groups who are disadvantaged by the rankings discourse create alternative narratives of value and illuminate strategies to reclaim the space in the policy sphere.

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**Table 1: Overview of Method**

<b>Stage 1 - Methodological focus:</b> constitution of 'object' through analysis of texts' <u>external</u> relations	<b>Stage 2 - Methodological focus:</b> Constitution of 'object' through analysis of texts' <u>internal</u> relations:
Locating of texts in surrounding network of	Examination of the semantic relations

practices - events, activities and other 'texts' (policies, proposals, reports etc).

Analytical tools:

Analysis of interdiscursivity/intertextuality: does the text refer overtly to government texts (existing or anticipated)?

Genre – analysis of the overall structure of the text and practices surrounding the production and dissemination of the text (eg. Press launch, press release).

Dialogicality: Are there different positions and viewpoints reflected in the text or is there a unified voice?

And,

Practitioner panel of UK HE representatives consulted to situate and contextualise the texts.

constructed within the texts and forms of logic and argument deployed:

**Representation of social actors:**

lexicalisation, predication, transitivity, nominalisation, grammatical metaphor

**Semantics relations:** relations of equivalence, lexicalisation, hyponyms, metaphor

**Logic and argumentation:** What forms of legitimation are deployed in the text: analysis of grounds, warrants and claims; and forms of argument deployed eg. relations of dependency, conditionality

**Mediation by artefacts:** examination of artefacts deployed in the texts (including global rankings) and how these are appropriated in different ways – to support claims, to diagnose/explain, to direct future action)