

**An examination of global university rankings as a new mechanism
influencing mission differentiation: the UK context**

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Abstract

Since their emergence a decade ago, global university rankings have become a powerful force in higher education internationally. The majority of research studies on global rankings have examined the effects at institutional and national level. This study offers a valuable perspective on ways rankings (and other international benchmarks) are deployed at the intra-sector level, by UK HE 'mission groups', to support different policy positions. The concept of object in activity theory is used to problematize the analysis. Critical discourse analysis is used as a methodological orientation to study the ways global rankings mediate the object in this context. The findings contribute to current debate on whether rankings are promoting isomorphism in national higher education sectors nationally; illustrating a differentiated engagement with rankings in the UK context. The relevance of the findings for policy makers and institutional managers are discussed.

Introduction

Since their emergence a decade ago, global university rankings have become a powerful force in higher education internationally. Rankings have been identified both as a symptom and accelerator for the intensification of global competition in higher education (Hazelkorn 2011), emphasising the difficulty of establishing a cause and effect relationship. Nevertheless there is a wide acknowledgement that rankings are shaping practice to a considerable degree (for example, Locke, 2008; Hazelkorn, 2009) and the present study adopts a research perspective which examines the interplay between rankings and policy positioning in a particular national context.

Many of the perceived effects of rankings are manifested in the discourse, through the language practices of higher education practitioners and policy makers internationally. References to global university rankings are highly visible in university strategic plans, organisational publicity materials and in national policy reforms. Recent studies which have explored the discourse of mission statements of UK universities identify a convergence around common concepts, terms and discursive styles (Kuenssberg, 2011). The increasing ubiquity of global rankings targets in university strategic planning statements has been identified as a form of abdication of managerial responsibility to external proxies (Locke, 2011). Though it has been acknowledged that reframing the discourse is one of the responses available to practitioners to counter the effects of ranking (Cuthbert, 2011) the research literature has not taken this focus in methodological terms. The present study addresses this research opportunity by drawing attention to the way global rankings are shaping the discourse and illustrating counter-narratives which respond to rankings in the UK higher education policy context.

The concept of 'object' in activity theory is used to problematize the analysis. Within this framework, critical discourse analysis is used as a methodological orientation to study the ways in which global rankings mediate the object in this context and how they are connected with different policy orientations.

The prevailing analysis in the research literature is that global rankings are promoting isomorphism in higher education sectors internationally by creating narrower constructs of excellence and causing policy ‘copying’ at national and institutional level to emulate the characteristics of highly ranked institutions (Deem, Lucas, & Mok, 2011; Shin, Toutkoushian, & Teichler, 2011; Little & Locke, 2011). De Jager (2011) presents a counter-analysis suggesting that, during the period contemporaneous with global rankings, university missions have become more distinctive in the UK and US higher education contexts. The findings from the current study contribute to the debate by illustrating the differentiated engagement with rankings among UK higher education ‘mission groups’ and the alternative narratives of excellence being deployed in response to rankings.

The paper begins by making the argument for a discourse-centred analysis. The second part introduces and contextualises the policy-oriented texts which are examined in the study. The third section presents a two-fold analysis of the different object orientations constituted by the texts and examines the way rankings (and other international benchmarks) mediate the object, in terms of the particular policy positions that are formulated. The concluding section draws out the relevance of the findings for policy makers and institutional managers.

Discourse and Activity

Activity systems theory, as formulated by Engeström (2005), is predicated on ‘activity’ as the driving force and basis of action. Activities are conceptualised as social practices oriented at ‘*objects*’ (Engeström, 2005, p319) and the analytical orientation is towards identifying the object and motive driving the activity. The analytical framework maintains a dialectic between the object and outcome of an activity and highlights other points of relation between the community in which the activity is located, its rules and division of labour.

The explicit modelling of the activity system within the triangular formation represented in figure 1 provides an analysable inner structure through which to examine these dialectically-related elements and to locate sources of tension and (historically accumulating) contradictions which make change possible, or perhaps inevitable. As such, the perspective emphasises the potential for change and transformation and expansive learning.

[Figure 1 near here]

In practical actions, objects are stabilised, temporarily ‘closed’ by means of auxiliary artefacts (Engeström, 2005 p. 94). Artefacts can have different forms and functions: to identify and describe objects, to guide and direct processes and procedures on, within or between objects; to diagnose and explain the properties and behaviour of objects; and to envision the future state of objects (Engeström, 1990).

Within this framework, critical discourse analysis is used as a methodological orientation to extend the analysis. In the formulation developed by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) critical discourse analysis offers fine-grain analytical tools to examine how rankings are used discursively to support particular strategies of social

change. The tools of critical discourse analysis enable study of the social constructions formulated within texts which constitute the policy orientation through an analytical focus on representations of social actors, forms of logic and argument, lexical choices and semantic relations. From this perspective, analysis can trace the process of social change through the initial projection of new ideas in texts as ‘imaginaries’ and, subsequently, describing the degree of incorporation into practice, through ‘rhetorical deployment’ or (in a greater degree of internalisation) ‘inculcation’ (Fairclough, 2005).

Fairclough (2009) distinguishes between ideological and rhetorical critique (two forms of critique more commonly associated with CDA) and defines ‘strategic critique’ as a distinct orientation which takes a more dynamic focus:

[...] of how discourse figures in the development, promotion and dissemination of strategies for social change of particular groups of social agents, and in hegemonic struggle between strategies and, and in the implementation of successful strategies. (Fairclough, 2009, p.18)

CDA’s analytical focus is to locate discourse in the wider network of social practices through deployment of analytical concepts including genre and intertextuality. Genre is characterized as ‘a socially ratified way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity’ (Fairclough, 1995). From this perspective, genres are seen as reflective of different anticipated practices (Fairclough, 2003) and are constituted in the practices of text production and dissemination as well as in the characteristics of the text itself. Historicity is emphasised through a focus on intertextuality which can be represented in a retrospective (responding to previous texts) or prospective sense (anticipating or seeking to influence future texts) (Kristeva, 1986; Fairclough, 2003).

This approach to analysis (drawing on both activity systems theory and critical discourse analysis) helps to extend the research scope by looking beyond the discourse to the surrounding context of activity and looking in more detail within the discourse at the nature and dynamics of contested objects, tensions and contradictions. This approach takes account of the ways discourses are not sealed off from each other but are ‘materially grounded and materially promoted’ (Fairclough, 2005) and shaped by artefacts which place conditions and parameters on representation.

Contextual analysis

A dominant discourse within the research literature characterises rankings as an inevitable and relentless force and portrays high levels of ‘compliance’ within the higher education sector toward this new form of third party evaluation (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). Many governments are perceived to be increasing inequality within their higher education systems, through increased research funding concentration, to push the strong universities up the rankings as fast as possible (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2012; Yang, 2012). An increasing number of developing countries express aspirations to have a university in the top 100 as a means of entry to the global knowledge economy (Hazelkorn, 2011 p.164).

The higher education context in England is taken as an interesting case for examination as the deployment of rankings appears to have been more vigorous at the intra-sector

level than at national policy level. The ‘Higher Ambitions’ Government White Paper (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2009) referred to rankings only once and did so to vindicate a pre-existing government policy rather than to direct a new policy. Government policy and programme activity during this time period can be seen largely as seeking to mediate the effects of global rankings. For example, a government-funded research study (Locke, 2008) examining university responses to rankings advocated better information to encourage more informed use of such sources by students and proposed higher education sector participation in inter-governmental projects aimed at mediating the effects of rankings. A study commissioned by the Higher Education Statistics Agency in 2011 was concerned with identifying broad, balanced and ‘mission-relevant’ global benchmarks (HESA 2011). Via the UK Higher Education International Unit, the editorial line expressed in *International Focus* (a fortnightly newsletter for the higher education sector) cautions against over-reliance on global rankings. By contrast, within the higher education sector there has been a proactive response to rankings to support both sector-wide interests and greater differentiation of sector groupings.

Since 1992, UK government policy has not marked any specific differentiation among Higher Education institutions (Tight, 2009) and the development of sector mission groups can be seen as a response to this lack of differentiation. Whilst the UK higher education sector has two ‘recognised’ representative bodies (Universities UK and GuildHE), four specialist groups have been established over the past two decades to represent particular interests of self-selected groupings of universities. The Russell Group was formed in 1994 as a self-selecting membership organisation representing ‘research intensive’ UK universities. Contemporaneously, a group of ‘research-intensive, teaching-focused’ universities formed the ‘1994 group’. The Million Plus group, representing 26 ‘modern universities’ (former polytechnics) was formed in 1997. The University Alliance, representing 23 ‘business engaged’ universities formed in 2006. These groups are constituted as voluntary membership organisations, some are ‘by invitation’ only (eg. Russell Group) and represent nearly two thirds of UK universities collectively. The subsequent disintegration of the 1994 Group (and movement of some former members to the Russell Group) is discussed later in this paper (Baker, 2013). Whilst student numbers represented by each of the mission groups are broadly similar, their student profiles differ considerably: University Alliance and Million Plus have much more diverse student profiles and earn more than 70% of the widening participation funds provided by central government. Conversely, the Russell Group receives the largest share of government funding for research (62.3%) with Million Plus and University Alliance earning only 2.9% and 5.1% (De Jager, 2011).

The lobbying documents produced by these groups in the time period leading up to and shortly after the 2010 general election form the focus of analysis: ‘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 Plus, 2010); ‘21st Century Universities: Engines of an Innovation Driven Economy’ (University Alliance, 2010).

These texts are conceptualised as performative acts with the common aim of capturing government attention and promoting distinct policy strategies. As analysis of intertextuality will show, they centre on common concerns which are contextualised in different ways and support different strategies of social change.

Analytical outcomes

The perspectives of activity systems theory and critical discourse analysis provide complementary modes of analysis at each stage of the research process (see table 1). The input of a practitioner panel, informed and knowledgeable about the higher education sector, was incorporated at stages 1 and 4 of the process in order to maintain reflexivity and to examine how the texts relate to practice in terms of response, effect and impact. This aspect of the research is discussed more fully in a related paper (forthcoming).

[table 1 near here]

In the initial phase, analysis focussed on the practices surrounding the production and dissemination of the texts. Desk research and input from panel members helped to elaborate the contexts surrounding the texts. Stage 2 of the analysis examined object-orientation in terms of how the texts were positioned within broader policy discourses. The analytical focus was on the texts' external relations to other texts (specifically, UK government texts) as reflected through intertextual references and genre choices. At stage 3, CDA's analytical tools focus on object-orientation through examination of the texts' internal relations. The analysis focused on the prominence of discourse topics, the representation of social actors in clausal structures, structure and logic of argumentation, propositions of value and relations of equivalence, as well as grammatical features and strategies which served to foreground or obscure social actors.

Within this framework of analysis, the deployment of benchmarks, specifically global university rankings, was considered. These 'artefacts' were identified through an analytical focus on the way such benchmarks were used (eg. to assess or explain or to envision or direct). (Engeström 1990, op cit) and the texts were interrogated by looking at instances of the use of these artefacts and the semantic relations created; for example, by examining words and phrases co-located with rankings. These forms of analysis enabled consideration of how international benchmarks were connected to the object formulated by each mission group.

Object orientation: intertextuality

Analysis of intertextual references of government policy texts illustrated the differing areas of government action the groups sought to respond to and to influence (see figure 2). The intertextual references show that all texts refer to research funding policy, review of students fees (the 'Browne Review') and anticipated higher education funding cuts. However, there are different areas of concern about broader policy activity and engagement with government. In referencing the 'EU Bologna Declaration' the Million Plus text emphasises European consensus on the value of institutional autonomy and highlights recent government policies which have de-privileged this part of the sector. The 1994 Group emphasises government's role in creating a flexible and diverse system, regulating quality thresholds, and advocates an overarching government strategy for HE. The University Alliance text relates to government's economic growth strategy and seeks to influence government prioritisation of 'business-engaged' universities in the forthcoming 'spending review'. By contrast, the Russell Group text makes limited reference to UK government texts and makes greater reference to international, inter-governmental texts (eg. EU strategy documents, OECD reports).

[figure 2 near here]

Three of the texts display genre characteristics which align with an anticipated practice of engagement with government. The 1994 text is addressed explicitly to ‘an incoming government’ and provides a series of explicit policy recommendations. The Million Plus text is directed to an audience of newly elected members of parliament and constructed in the genre of an information-giving booklet about the UK higher education sector. The University Alliance text is framed as a response to an economic challenge set out in government reports and invokes the structure of a management report. The ‘solutions’ proposed in the University Alliance document imply a cross departmental government approach (eg. ‘reprioritise high level skills in next comprehensive spending review’). By contrast, the Russell Group text is framed as a research report aimed at a broader audience of stakeholders with an interest in the quality and excellence of UK higher education and identifies its purpose as ‘making a case’ for increased investment in ‘leading research universities’. There is sparse reference to ‘government’ or alignment with specific government policies. Whereas the other three texts identify clear points of relationship with government concerns and identify new forms of policy engagement, the Russell Group text depicts a relationship which is primarily ‘one-way’. In this text, the UK government is depicted as a beneficiary of the HE sector rather than an active partner.

The analysis shows that, whilst the texts express some commonality of concerns (in relation to research funding policy, higher education funding models and student fees), these are contextualised in different ways and express different strategies for social change. In their intertextual references the texts displayed orientations towards different government policy areas which foregrounded either national policy interest (Million Plus, University Alliance, 1994 Group) or a broader international orientation (Russell Group). The genre choices and intertextual references construct different social relations and propose different strategies of engagement with government. Though in part these genre choices can be read as reflective of social positions in the sector¹, they can be seen as strongly reflective of the constitution of the object and the proposed strategy for social change.

Object orientation: logic and argumentation

This section examines the role of logic and argumentation in constituting the object. The key elements of the arguments put forward in the texts in terms of grounds, warrants and claims (Fairclough, 2003) are identified in table 2. Fairclough (2003) depicts argument as being genre and discourse-relative, thus highlighting the material connections to surrounding social practices. In this way, the genres deployed in the text place constraints on the mode of argumentation deployed. The advice booklet of the Million Plus text and the policy advice leaflet produced by the 1994 Group both preclude lengthy causal expositions and consequently draw upon fewer warrants than the other texts. However, while acknowledging that some aspects of argumentation are

¹ In terms of different funding profiles and student profiles.

genre-related the analysis demonstrates several ways in which the forms of logic and argumentation are object-related to a significant degree.

[table 2 near here]

The 1994 text is focused on the attainment of quality and standards. The central argument rests on a relation of dependency between quality of higher education and prosperity. The text is internally referential to sector constructs of quality. Content is organised thematically and in 'list format' (ie. the ordering of text could be changed without affecting the logic). Discourse topics such as 'academic freedom' and 'institutional autonomy' are presented as presuppositions, in the form of section headings, without recourse to warrants or claims to support such concepts. The Million Plus text refers to cross-party political consensus on social mobility as a policy goal. The text is predicated primarily on a moral argument for social mobility with a rationalisation of this objective for its positive outcomes in economic as well as societal terms. As such, these two texts are predicated on a conviction-based form of argumentation.

By contrast, the Russell Group text is oriented to the outcome of achieving further concentration of research funding within research-intensive universities. Contrastive relations are set up in the portrayal of competitors. Warrants are based both on what competitor countries are doing and also on how 'leading universities' internationally are performing. These warrants rest mainly on sector-specific data (eg. academic salaries in other countries, global university rankings positions). The text creates relations of dependence between excellence and research standing. Polemic strategies are used in the argument with extensive use of contrastive relations (eg. Russell Group compared against rest of sector and with competitor countries) and in the use of military metaphors (eg. battle, cadre). The University Alliance text, by contrast, is more outwardly referential to national economic policy concerns of matching graduate supply to demand. This text displays a discursive strategy of 'making a space' in the government discourse. It shows a high degree of alignment with government's strategic emphasis on skills, but translates this into a 'high level skills' issue.

As such, these object formulations are mediated by different positions in the higher education sector and this can be reflected in the different strategies of legitimation in each text. The University Alliance text positions its contribution as being a key provider of graduates and aligns lexically with the wording of a government speech with the concept of being an 'engine' of the economy. The Million Plus text provides a narrative on the attributes of 'modern universities' and presents a nuanced depiction of student groups in terms of policy-related profiles (e.g. widening participation, part-time, mature students) reflecting the advocacy role encapsulated in this text in mitigating barriers to social mobility for these groups of students. For the Russell Group, the research-intensive part of the higher education sector is represented in terms of research excellence and international standing and in providing the 'researchers of tomorrow'.

Each text contains different relations of dependence. Russell Group equates world-leading institutions with global rankings position; University Alliance creates synonymy between research excellence and research application (eg. University Alliance institutions produce the same number of research patents as Russell Group institutions). The Million Plus text presents data to show that several Million Plus institutions

educate as many part-time students as the Open University. The 1994 text creates a relation between higher education quality and standards and national prosperity.

Unlike the other texts, Russell Group institutions are positioned as the central actors in achieving the object of activity. They are thematically foregrounded in the text in clausal structures, both as subject and theme of the sentence throughout the text (in 46 of the 89 sentences in the introductory section). The 1994 mission group are thematically foregrounded in only one out of 57 sentences in the Advice leaflet; 14 out of 103 sentences foreground Million Plus in its information booklet; 6 out of 164 sentences foreground University Alliance institutions in its report.

The Russell Group text marginalises the role of government, with this role being only to prioritise funding for ‘leading institutions’. International students feature more prominently than ‘domestic students’ and metrics of student satisfaction are those which are associated with global university rankings (e.g., data from the ‘International Student Barometer survey’, staff-student ratios).

The analysis demonstrates the different strategies of social change which are connected with the object formulations. The University Alliance text is oriented to growth and transformation of the higher education sector. The Million Plus text seeks a ‘level playing field’ for universities with diverse student profiles. The 1994 text makes policy proposals concerned with strengthening the sector and emphasises interdependency. The Russell Group text makes policy proposals centred on the interests of ‘leading research institutions’ and advocates strategies of change which foster separation for wider sectoral interests. As such, the University Alliance text seeks to ‘expand’ the object through removal of caps on student numbers and deregulation aspects of the system. The Million Plus and 1994 texts focus policy proposals which will resolve contradictions internal to the UK HE activity system. The Russell Group text constructs an object of responding to tensions created which are external to the activity system in terms of heightened international competition. The analysis shows the Russell Group has constituted the greatest distance from other parts of the sector in terms of the strategy of social change proposed, which entails concentrating research funding in ‘leading institutions’ and through the portrayal of Russell Group institutions as the central social actors oriented to the object of activity.

Object orientation: mediation by artefacts

This analysis highlights both the significant role of language in defining the object but also the role of artefacts. As shown in table 3 global university rankings are referred to explicitly only in the Russell Group text. The University Alliance text uses broader international benchmarks related to assessment of the UK’s economic performance and uses economic constructs such as the ‘graduate premium’. The Million Plus draws on OECD data to combat criticism of the sector being too big and dropout rates too high. International references are deployed in the formation of a descriptive narrative associated with ‘modern universities’ and in characterising the value and importance of Million Plus universities in facilitating social mobility. The 1994 texts makes limited reference to benchmarks and these are domestic rather than international in provenance.

[table 3 near here]

The Russell Group text is the most internationally-oriented in terms of the artefacts used to support claims, frame the analysis and direct future direction. The text deploys a World Bank definition of the attributes of a ‘world class university’ to support the contention that greater investment is needed in leading research institutions and deploys international indices which are related specifically to higher education research performance. Overt references to global rankings in the Russell Group text are sparse (the word ‘ranking’ appears once in the main body text, and ‘rankings’ twice). The first reference is quite strong in modality:

No country other than the US can count more of its higher education institutions among the world’s top 100 universities. (p.6)

In the second case, however, a hedging device is deployed in making the positioning assertion:

*The UK punches above its weight in the international sphere – a fact which international league tables, **for all their faults [my emphasis]**, make very apparent. (p.18)*

Indirect reference to rankings is made a further three times via footnotes, to support claims that are made in the main body of the text. A further form of deployment of rankings suggests a significant degree of inculcation (Fairclough, 2005). ‘Figure 1’, in Section 1 of the report, provides analysis of Russell Group performance in the form of a ‘global leaders index’. This is used to segment aspects of provision where Russell Group universities perform above their competitors and to identify where they are being outperformed (and therefore where investment is needed). A footnote identifies that the analysis compared Russell Group data against 13 other institutions, chosen on the basis that they also appeared in the top 100 institutions in the THE World University Rankings.

As a useful comparator in this analysis, the policy-oriented text produced by Universities UK (the sector body for UK higher education) during the same time period was analysed for its use and appropriation of international benchmarks (Universities UK, 2010). Benchmarks used in this text to support the claim of world class status of UK HE were framed in terms of: productivity (‘the percentage of research papers produced is second only to the US’); in efficiency (‘*the most efficient research system of all G8 countries*’); in research exploitation (e.g. number of research patents, spin out companies); in quality and standards of teaching (e.g. *only country in the world with an external examiner system at undergraduate level*’). This text is oriented to ‘securing position as a leading knowledge economy in the world’. Global university rankings are not used in supporting claims, explanations or setting directions. It references OECD benchmarks of national spending on HE as a proportion of gross domestic product and proposes a level of public investment on a par with US, Canada and Australia in order to maintain the quality of the sector.

The analysis demonstrates that global rankings discourse, which is used only in the Russell Group text, is connected with policy strategies advocating separation from sectoral interests, low levels of alignment with domestic policy goals and a discourse of ‘preservation’. In other texts, the international context is represented both as a resource for graduate jobs and an opportunity for economic growth. In this way, global rankings

can be seen to have entered the national policy discourse in an uneven way and is associated with ‘narrow’, sector-specific constructs of excellence. Alternative narratives in the other texts portray distinct contributions and emphasise opportunities for growth, change and transformation of the higher education sector as a whole.

Perspectives on the analysis

Analysis of subsequent government ‘texts’ gives an indication of which discourses have been picked up and which recommendations have been acted upon. Three government texts have been selected as being instructive: the Minister for Higher Education’s speech to Universities UK in September 2010; and two government White Papers relating to HE (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011a, 2011b).

The *Students at the Heart of the System* Paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011a) draws upon the student-centred discourse present in the 1994 text (using the same phrase ‘students at the heart’), reflects concerns to improve social mobility (foregrounded in the Million Plus text) and the intention to open up new forms of provision and partnership as advocated in the University Alliance text. The speech by David Willetts (government minister of State for Universities and Science 2010-14) to Universities UK highlights an underlying intention to restore the balance between teaching and research:

The balance between teaching and research has gone wrong. This is not because universities have suddenly made some terrible mistake. There is a rational response to incentives created by successive governments. We have strengthened the incentives for everyone to carry out research with no change in the regime for teaching. It should be a source of pride for an institution to be an excellent teaching university. That is what most students rightly see as the backbone of their university experience. (Willetts, 2010)

Willetts also goes on to touch on issues of more central concern to the Russell Group:

In a more constrained funding environment with international competition (and collaboration) growing, it is clear that we will need to focus on sustaining the national capability for the very best research. [...] This may well mean higher concentration of public funding for research than we have had to date, albeit confirming the direction of travel over recent years. Greater selectivity means that not every academic, department or institution can necessarily continue to expect public funding for research. (Willetts, 2010 op cit.)

The subsequent government White Paper *Innovation and Research* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011b) gives some further indication of the likelihood of research concentration:

We have a strong base of research-active universities, with 4 of the top 20 universities in the world, and 32 universities in the top 200. The UK research base is the most productive in the G8, generating more papers and citations per pound spent than any other large country. (p7)

It goes on to state that:

[t]he central elements of this new approach will be: [...] continued support for blue skies, curiosity-driven research across a broad range of disciplines, with a focus on supporting excellent research and excellent universities. (p 99)

Another important audience for the mission group texts is the higher education sector and each text, in different ways, provides a new narrative and constructs distinct identities of those institutions represented by each group. The recent demise of the 1994 Group (Baker, 2013) and move by four former members to join the Russell Group reflects the strength of association with the object-orientation reflected in the discourse of this group.

The analysis of these texts supports other studies which point to a narrowing of the discourse resulting from global rankings and a loss of distinctiveness in institutional identities in parts of the sector which are self-designated as 'research intensive'. However, there appear to be constraints upon the fuller spread of the discourse. Panel members who contributed to this study (discussed more fully in a forthcoming paper) identified counterforces which are perceived as becoming salient in challenging the current perceived dominance of rankings. These include domestic concerns (the need to review areas of programme provision in response to changes in the funding model) and the growth in private providers who, it is perceived, will compete on different terms. Universities that are not favoured by the ranking formulae and in parts of the sector that are not competitive in global rankings terms, universities are engaging in alternative discourses and recontextualisations of world class – and creating new relations of equivalence as reflected by a panel member from a University Alliance university:

Interestingly at this [University Alliance] institution, 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 University Alliance text. The public presentation of this change will focus on employability (national and international) based around industry engagement/partnership. 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 Russell Group institutions or aspire to become 'like' them - - we really do have to do something else. Quite a positive move really.

(Policy Office to Vice Chancellor, University Alliance institution)

Conclusion

The analysis challenges those research perspectives which portray global university rankings as having a single set of consequences and highlights the value of a discourse-analytic perspective in formulating research questions which examine the roles of rankings in specific contexts. The integration of activity systems theory and critical discourse analysis helps to illustrate that the use of global rankings is not simply as a

tool to pursue a single object, but the effect of rankings seems to be to generate different objects among the groups. The discursive effect of the rankings discourse seems to be a crystallisation of positions of the different groups.

The study illustrates ways in which global university rankings are shaping management and policy discourse amongst research-intensive universities and are creating material effects. This resonates, in part, with other studies which have observed an increasing stratification within the higher education sector in England (Filippakou, Sallter, & Tapper, 2012). However the analysis shows that in other parts of the sector distinctive narratives are developing which reflect horizontal differentiation around different missions. As such, the analysis provides further nuance to the debate on whether global university rankings are promoting isomorphism in the higher education sector.

In national policy contexts such as England, where there has been ‘persistent government support for a diverse model’ (Filippakou et al op cit), global rankings appear to be operating as a new mechanism which is influencing mission differentiation in the sector. For national policy makers in similar contexts, where there is avoidance of formal system differentiation, the study raises questions about how to maintain diversity in the research-intensive part of the sector. For senior managers in higher education, this study poses questions in terms of the level of compliance and engagement with this new form of third-party evaluation, the extent to which rankings are used as a management tool and highlights where there is scope to create different narratives and deploy alternative forms of benchmarking which are more aligned with institutional missions.

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