

We'll support you ever more!

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Feisty raconteur and journalistic scourge of politicians left and right, Mungo McCallum, recently described Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard as a frame waiting for a picture. A similar observation was once made of the former British Prime Minister, the dour John Major, who was so bereft of personality that a Polaroid photograph of him failed to produce an image. This sort of representational vacuity reminds me of the reaction generated by the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings.

To be sure, there was some level-headed commentary from the likes of commentators such as Steven Swartz, Simon Marginson and the Australian newspaper's Julie Hare, but on the whole, the tenor of debate has been dismal, bordering on the banal. And why wouldn't it, given that most public comment has come from university mandarins and academic apologists who believe that the ranking system has some empirical validity. I was heartened though to learn that many (perhaps most?) Australian academics consider ranking mania as, at best, a bad joke, and that some institutions in Canada have refused to participate in this farcical exercise. Hope springs eternal!

It's not simply that the methodologies adopted by the main rankers (rhyming slang, surely!) – Times Higher Education (THE), QS and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University – are diverse and open to the usual interpretation, but there appears to be a significant leaning towards the Anglo-American scene with no fewer than 18 American and British universities figuring in the

top twenty of the THE ranking, with the exceptions being the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (Roger Federer must surely have something to do with this) and the unassuming but almost Anglo-American University of Toronto. The first Asian university, Hong Kong University, squeaks in at 21 followed by six other Asian institutions in the top 50 (and remember, Asia is a very big place!). The only other universities in Europe outside of the UK are the Ecole Polytechnique, (39) and Ecole Normale Superieure in France (42), the University of Göttingen, Germany (=43), and the Karolinska Institute (Sweden) (=43). Over half of the universities in the top fifty are American with the same country holding 72 spots in the world's top 200. In short, no African, Middle Eastern, or Latin American universities are among the top 100 THE universities.

Now, if I were a Vice Chancellor at one of the leading universities in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Kenya, Morocco, India, Peru, Mexico, Costa Rica, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam or New Zealand I would want to know what is going on here. I would certainly be looking very closely at (and well beyond) the measures used to rank universities (namely; teaching, research, citations, industry income and international mix). I would also want to check out how Harvard got a near perfect score for its teaching (no one gets near perfect student feedback!) and who cites the published work of Harvard academics – the US has got hundreds of higher education institutions and a lorry load of journals which means, does it not, that self referential US aca-

demics have more scope to get their work published and cited than, say, scholars in Bangladesh or Finland. And then there's the small matter of Harvard's world's largest \$27.4 billion financial endowment, which is always handy when it comes to buying up high achieving scholars.

But hey, cashed up institutions, cultural preferences, linguistic imperialism (the English language) and the North-South divide aside, if you're going to have a ranking system then make sure it works for you. The fact is that in the competitive marketplace that is international higher education, these things matter. When you're trying to flog your wares to prospective students, reputation and image is everything. This is why universities go to extraordinary lengths to clamber up the greasy pole. It's also why there is such panic when an institution falls short of expectations. The pathetic performance of Australian universities in the latest THE ranking headed by the University of Melbourne (36), Australian National University (43) (17 last year) and the University of Sydney (71) (36 last year), has for now at least, put the skids under the tertiary 'education revolution'.

Perhaps a clue as to how our despondent universities can improve their standing on the global stage is to be found in the goings on at the predatory University of Technology, Sydney. Not satisfied with languishing in exile, the school of finance and economics has embarked on a mission to crank up its previously modest reputation. Ranked as the top economics outfit by a US ranking system, the school has successfully recruited a number of leading academics from; guess where, the US of A. How so? Well, first, so it is reputed, by beefing up the salaries as compared with other Aussie universities and then granting them almost total autonomy in an island-institute. It's not the first time of course that a university has gone on the prowl in search of reputable scholars. But the way things are going this sort of tribal head-hunting is likely to increase, especially among those universities aspiring to be king-pins.

But in order to have a more open and competitive system that truly reflects the new culture of public transparency that is the 'My University' website, I suggest that Australia develops a more innovative approach

to its own internal system of rankings by adopting the league table system of the English Football Association. I suggest a Foster's Universities Premier League comprised of eight universities, and the rest placed in Austar Champion's League, Coles-Myer Division One, and BHP Division Two. Each year two universities will be promoted and two relegated and the university topping the Foster's Premier League will be declared champions and the respective vice-chancellors ensconced in Sudan chairs and paraded before an assembled House of Representatives. Points will be allocated on the basis of citations in respected journals, student evaluations and research grants. The system also allows for transfers of academics from one university to another, although a strict salary cap will have to be imposed to avoid the grossly inflated salaries offered by overly ambitious universities. Just think of the income generating possibilities! For instance, Universities Australia could establish an online gaming facility whereby bets could be placed on university performance and the proceeds used to pay for all those senior managers.

Yes, this is the way to go. I can already hear the chants on the terraces: 'there's only one JCU', 'oh Ballarat, we love you, 'Ade, Ade Adelaide', 'we are the champions', 'old MacQuarie had a farm'... etc.

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