

How useful to prospective undergraduate applicants are references to league table rankings and surveys in university prospectuses?

(1) Background

During the last 25 years, with the development of computerised databases, there has been a proliferation of surveys and ratings for health and education, which have been used to produce league table rankings. The results have been claimed to be indicators of the standard of delivery and, as such, valuable tools for potential users of these services, managers and funders.

In Higher Education, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was instituted in 1986 as an exercise undertaken every few years on behalf of the four UK Higher Education funding councils (HEFCE, SHEFC, HEFCW, DELNI) to evaluate the quality of research undertaken by UK Higher Education institutions. RAE submissions from each subject area have been given a grade by a subject-specialist peer review panel. The grades have been used to inform the allocation of "quality-weighted research funding" each Higher Education institution has received from its national funding council. Other RAEs took place in 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008.¹ There is ample evidence both that many university administrators have put great emphasis on attempting to rise up the "RAE rankings" and that many academic staff involved in these have found them very stressful.²

The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), compiled by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University to rank universities globally, was started in 2003 as the first published global ranking of universities. In the UK, from 2004 to 2009 Times Higher Education (THE) published the annual Times Higher Education–QS World University Rankings in association with Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). In 2009, THE broke with QS and joined Thomson Reuters to provide a new set of world university rankings, called Times Higher Education World University Rankings. Since 2010 the QS rankings have been published independently by US News & World Report as the "World's Best Universities."

UK national newspapers have published league tables based on secondary schools' A Level results as well as university rankings since the early 1990s. The first Good University Guide was published by The Times in 1993. Three HE rankings are now produced: one jointly by The Times and Sunday Times, and others by The Guardian and The Complete University Guide (associated with The Independent from 2008 to 2011).

The major source of quantitative data for the UK rankings is the annual statistical return that universities are obliged to send to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

A major source of qualitative data is The National Student Survey of all final year degree students at publicly funded HE institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which was launched in 2005. NSS is conducted by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The survey is designed to assess students' opinions of the quality of their degree programmes, with seven different scores published, including an "overall satisfaction" mark. The Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey is also conducted annually.

Universities are increasingly using quantitative and qualitative data and rankings thereby established, especially from the sources mentioned above, in undergraduate prospectuses. This is partly a reflection of the "ranking culture" that has evolved in government, the media and society at large during the last three decades. There are now more results to parade. Moreover, the increase in student fees and the more intense competition among HE institutions since the recent lifting of the cap on student numbers have clearly led to a more aggressive marketing style in some universities: statistics are one way by which prospective applicants are encouraged to feel confidence in a particular institution. It is noticeable that, as

¹ The results of the successor of the RAE, the Research Excellence Framework, will be published in December 2014.

² See, e.g., the THE's inaugural "Best University Workplace Survey", THE 30.i.14, from which it emerged that 35% of academics "believe that their institution's response to the REF has had a negative impact on their work".

fees have risen, there has been much more emphasis in prospectuses on how each university is contributing to students' employability, and statistics are often used to support this message.

In this context, and with the development of university websites, there has been an increasingly large range of size and style of hard-copy university prospectuses in the last few years.³

Concern has recently been expressed that "universities are misleading prospective students by deploying selective data, flattering comparisons and even outright falsehoods in their undergraduate prospectuses".⁴ However, the Advertising Standards' Authority seems to have had very few complaints about universities' marketing.⁵

There is no doubt that a high score or rank can have a positive impact on the morale of those working in an institution, but, given the context set out above, it seems reasonable to consider how useful these references in prospectuses to league table rankings and surveys might be to prospective undergraduate applicants.

(2) The scope of this article

I have looked at the hard-copy undergraduate prospectuses for 2015 entry of the most selective UK universities. I have defined these as the 24 members of the Russell Group and the 14 remaining members of the 1994 Group in 2012 that admit undergraduate students.⁶

I have confined the examination to the general sections of each prospectus: i.e., those which do not give subject-specific programme details.

I have examined over 400 references in prospectuses to the results of surveys, rankings and national data submission and references to awards (e.g., Nobel Prizes) gained. I have excluded references to Russell Group membership, which I examined in a recent article.⁷

The article is structured under several headings: general statements of rank; employment; student satisfaction; teaching; research; accommodation; Student Union; sport; miscellaneous statements.

Under each category, I consider the limitations of the data and the way in which university prospectuses present that data.

(3) General statements of rank

These selective universities are keen to stress that they are part of an élite: that they are in the "top" or "best" group. It seems that only LSE and Warwick among these 38 refrain from doing this.

³ Of the prospectuses here examined, Essex (small) and St Andrews (large) are at opposite ends of the spectrum in both size and style.

⁴ THE 16.i.14, referring to John Bradley's paper "Integrity in higher education marketing? A typology of misleading data-based claims in the university prospectus" (International Journal for Educational Integrity), which looked at 8 prospectuses for 2013 entry.

⁵ THE 23.i.14 gives details of 13 cases informally resolved and only 1 ruling made by ASA (complaint not upheld) in 2010-3.

⁶ The 1994 Group was dissolved in 2013. 4 members joined the Russell Group in 2012 and several others subsequently left the 1994 Group. The universities included in the survey are: Bath, Birkbeck, Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, East Anglia, Edinburgh, Essex, Exeter, Glasgow, Goldsmiths, Imperial, KCL, Lancaster, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, LSE, Loughborough, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Queen Mary, Queen's Belfast, Reading, Royal Holloway, St Andrews, Sheffield, SOAS, Southampton, Surrey, Sussex, UCL, Warwick, York.

⁷ "How far and in what ways is Russell Group membership used in undergraduate prospectuses?" (May 2014)

In the vast majority of cases the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THEWUR) or the QS World University Rankings (QSWUR) are the sources quoted for global ranking. The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), compiled by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, is quoted much less frequently. For UK ranking, The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide features far more often than either the Complete University Guide or the Guardian University Guide.

In global terms, universities that appear high up the THEWUR, QS or ARWU league tables are keen to proclaim this:

Bristol	world top 30 (QSWUR 2013) ⁸
Cambridge	3 rd in world (QSWUR 2013) ⁹
Durham	80 th in world + top 30 in Arts and Humanities (THEWUR 2013); 90 th in world (QSWUR 2013) ¹⁰
Edinburgh	consistently top 50 in world – 17 th in 2013-4 (QSWUR 2013) ¹¹
Exeter	world top 150 (THEWUR – undated) ¹²
Glasgow	51 st (QSWUR 2013) ¹³
Imperial	3 rd in Europe, 10 th in world (THEWUR 2013-4) ¹⁴
KCL	world top 20 (QSWUR 2013); 6 th (from 8 th) (THEWUR) ¹⁵
Leeds	world top 100 (QSWUR 2013) ¹⁶
Liverpool	12 th = in UK (ARWU – undated) ¹⁷
Manchester	5 th in UK, 41 st in world (ARWU 2013) ¹⁸
Newcastle	world top 200 (THEWUR 2012-3) ¹⁹
Oxford	1 st in Europe, 2 nd in world (THEWUR 2013-4) ²⁰
Queen Mary	world top 115 (THEWUR 2012-3 + QSWUR 2012-3) ²¹
Queen’s Belfast	world top 200 (QSWUR 2012-3) ²²
Royal Holloway	12 th in UK, 36 th in Europe, 102 nd in world (THEWUR 2013-4) ²³
St Andrews	world top 100 (QSWUR – undated) ²⁴
Sheffield	world top 100 (QSWUR 2013) ²⁵
SOAS	6 th in UK for academic reputation (THEWUR 2013) ²⁶
Sussex	UK top 20, Europe top 50, world top 125 (THEWUR 2013-4) ²⁷
York	world top 100, 1 st in UK, 7 th in world of universities under 50 years old (THEWUR - undated) ²⁸

⁸ Bristol 4

⁹ Cambridge 10

¹⁰ Durham 4, 7, 9; “a top 100 university in the world” 10.

¹¹ Edinburgh 3

¹² Exeter 4

¹³ Glasgow 1

¹⁴ Imperial InsideCover, 2

¹⁵ KCL 1, 2, 3, BackCover

¹⁶ Leeds 11 (bis)

¹⁷ Liverpool 8

¹⁸ Manchester 52

¹⁹ Newcastle 21

²⁰ Oxford InsideCover

²¹ Queen Mary 7

²² Queen’s Belfast 7, 41

²³ Royal Holloway 3

²⁴ St Andrews 1

²⁵ Sheffield 5

²⁶ SOAS 2 – so derived from the Academic Reputation Survey results, part of the data used to draw up THEWUR: see <http://thomsonreuters.com/press-releases/022014/2014-Academic-Reputation-Survey> .

²⁷ Sussex FrontCover, 3, 5, 25

²⁸ York 3, 5, 19. The data quoted are from 2013. The ranking of universities under 50 years old was first published in 2012. Essex 1 also claims to be in the world top 30 of these universities, but does not mention the source: it is actually 29th in the table for 2013.

A recent development is to state that the university is in “the top 1% in the world”²⁹ or “the top 2% in the world”³⁰. However, only half of the universities quoting this statistic give a full reference to the source and survey year.³¹

Similarly, in the UK context, universities are keen to mention ranking or awards given by The Complete University Guide (CUG), The Guardian University Guide (GUG) and The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide (T+STGUG):

Bath	Best Campus University (T+STGUG 2014) ³² always top 20 in Times or Sunday Times league tables – 3 rd last year (T+STGUG 2014) ³³
Birmingham	University of the Year 2013-4 (T+STGUG 2014) ³⁴
Cardiff	“the acknowledged leader of higher education in Wales”. 2014 Best Welsh University (T+STGUG 2014) ³⁵
East Anglia	top 20 (GUG 2014) ³⁶
Exeter	8 th (T+STGUG 2014) ³⁷ ; top 10 for last 3 years (TimesGUG) ³⁸
Glasgow	21 st (GUG 2014); 25 th (TimesGUG 2014); 23 rd (CUG 2014) ³⁹
Imperial	5 th (T+STGUG 2014) ⁴⁰
Leicester	THE Awards Winner 2007-2013 inclusive ⁴¹ top 20 of “major national league tables”: 13 th GUG, 14 th T+STGUG, 16 th CUG; Top East Midlands Uni. + Runner-Up University of the Year (T+STGUG 2014) ⁴²
Loughborough	top 20 for 11 yrs. running (TimesGUG) ⁴³
Newcastle	top 20 (T+STGUG 2014) ⁴⁴
Queen Mary	7 subjects in top 10 (including Drama 1 st) (GUG) ⁴⁵
Queen’s Belfast	12 subjects in top 20 (GUG) ⁴⁶ 29 th ; 2 nd in University of the Year 2013; 21 subjects in top 20 (T+STGUG) ⁴⁷
Reading	10 subjects in top 10 (CUG) ⁴⁸
Southampton	“top 20 UK research university with consistently high scores for teaching and learning activities” (CUG) ⁴⁹
Surrey	8 th – 10 subjects in top 10 (GUG 2013); 12 th & in final 5 for University of the Year (T+STGUG – 2013?); 13 th (CUG – 2013?); 11 th THE Table of Tables (2013?) ⁵⁰

In this general category of “top” university, Glasgow quotes, alongside the statements above, the International Student Barometer survey of 2013, a student satisfaction survey limited to international

²⁹ Birkbeck 1, 5, 17, 26; East Anglia 3; Exeter 3; Glasgow 1; Lancaster 1, 4, 14; Liverpool 9; Nottingham 2; Queen Mary 2, 4; Queen’s Belfast 7; Reading 6; Southampton 2, 3, 6.

³⁰ Essex 8; Leicester 6.

³¹ Birkbeck, Leicester, Nottingham, Queen Mary, Queen’s Belfast, Reading, Southampton

³² Bath 2

³³ Bath 2

³⁴ Birmingham 1 (FrontCover), 2, 5, 78, 217, 218 (BackCover)

³⁵ Cardiff 13; quotation from “Times Good University Guide” (*sic*).

³⁶ East Anglia 3

³⁷ Exeter 3

³⁸ Exeter 4

³⁹ Glasgow 1

⁴⁰ Imperial 4

⁴¹ Leicester FrontCover

⁴² Leicester 0

⁴³ Loughborough 30

⁴⁴ Newcastle InsideCover, 4, 226

⁴⁵ Queen Mary 7

⁴⁶ Queen’s Belfast 7

⁴⁷ Queen’s Belfast 6, 7, 49

⁴⁸ Reading 6

⁴⁹ Southampton 4

⁵⁰ Surrey 1

students⁵¹, while Goldsmiths' sole claim of this type is that it is one of the top 10 creative universities as voted by students (Which? University 2013)⁵².

Only a few such claims are made without offering any evidence:

Birmingham	"consistently ranked in the top 15 universities in the UK" ⁵³
Manchester	"We're on the way to becoming one of the world's top 25 universities" ⁵⁴
St Andrews	"Top 5 UK University" ⁵⁵
UCL	"consistently placed in the global top 20 in a wide range of world rankings" ⁵⁶

A few universities claim progress, in terms of a rise in league table rankings, but progress is double-edged: a current higher standing is the concomitant of a previous lower standing:

Birmingham	"Our league table trajectory has been consistently positive. We have moved up the rankings in each of: <i>The Complete University Guide</i> , <i>The Guardian</i> , <i>QS World Rankings</i> and <i>The Times</i> and <i>The Sunday Times</i> league tables." ⁵⁷
East Anglia	"UEA has reached its highest ever position in 20 years of our league tables, thanks mainly to consistently high levels of student satisfaction and good staffing levels." (quotation from TimesGUG 2014) ⁵⁸
Surrey	"entered <i>The Guardian's</i> top ten UK University rankings for the first time" ⁵⁹

It is good to see that virtually all of the statements above are referenced by source and date. As the use of these statistics has increased, I think that there has been an improvement in the referencing.⁶⁰

However, these prospectus entries fail to tell potential applicants that the criteria used in constructing the global league tables (THEWUR, QS or ARWU) are primarily research orientated, while those that form the basis of the UK league tables (CUG, GUG, T+STGUG) have a wider range and research accounts for a maximum of only 20% of the weighting. Moreover, these are not independent of each other: they often use the same material, but in different ways, to achieve an overall rank order.

⁵¹ Glasgow 1, 35. On this survey, see note 119 below.

⁵² Goldsmiths 4

⁵³ Birmingham 2, repeated at 5 in the Vice-Chancellor's welcome.

⁵⁴ Manchester 4, without any indication of the length of that road or anticipated arrival time.

⁵⁵ St Andrews InsideCover

⁵⁶ UCL 4

⁵⁷ Birmingham 217. As it is now T+STGUG "University of the Year", we are left to assume that this is one improvement that cannot now continue.

⁵⁸ East Anglia 15, 34

⁵⁹ Surrey 1

⁶⁰ It is likely that the attempt to achieve uniform standards by HELOA (HE Liaison Officers' Association) and QAA has had an effect. See HELOA "Good Practice Guidelines" (2013) <http://www.heloa.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/HELOA-Good-Practice-Guidelines.pdf> and "UK Quality Code for Higher Education" (2013) Ch.B2 "Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education" <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/quality-code-B2.pdf>

The compilers of these league tables provide quite clear guidelines about the methodology used.⁶¹ I am not competent to analyse the finer statistical details, but it is worth considering the “performance indicators” used to construct them.

The THE World University Rankings use 13 performance indicators across 5 broad categories, with the following weighting⁶²:

- Teaching (30%) : reputation survey (15%); staff-to-student ratio (4.5%); doctorate-to-bachelor’s ratio (2.25%); doctorates awarded to academic staff ratio (6%); institutional income (2.25%)
- Research (30%) : reputation survey (18%); research income (6%); research productivity (6%)
- Citations (research influence) (30%)
- International Outlook (7.5%) : international to domestic student ratio (2.5%); international to domestic staff ratio (2.5%); research (international co-authorship) (2.5%)
- Industry Income (2.5%)

The focus on research here is clear, and it is reasonable to wonder how many of these categories are relevant to a prospective undergraduate. As a rule, the more research intensive the university, the more might undergraduates be expected to learn through research-based study. But prospective undergraduates might more effectively discover the UK’s most research intensive universities by looking at RAE 2008, where 67 subject disciplines are presented separately.⁶³

Moreover, the Academic Reputation Survey, which is a core element in THEWUR, is that conducted by Ipsos MediaCT for Thomson Reuters. The 2014 survey received 10,536 responses from academics in 133 countries, but the prospective arts subject undergraduate might wish to consider that 69% of these were from engineering and science disciplines. The respondents were asked to name up to 15 universities they “believe to be the best”: e.g., “Which university would you send your most talented graduates to for the best postgraduate supervision?”⁶⁴ Given that respondents had on average been working as academic staff for 18 years, their responses are likely to have been skewed by their assessment of research output rather than skills in supervision. This is reminiscent of the questionable category that “The Sunday Times” used to use in compiling its league table: “best university” in the judgment of head teachers.

The QS World University Rankings have a similar methodology: academic reputation (40%), employer reputation (10%), staff:student ratio (20%), citations (20%), proportion of international students (5%), proportion of international staff (5%).⁶⁵ Here “expert opinion” is given even more prominence, and it is worth quoting from a trenchant article on global university rankings:

“Expert opinions’ suffer from three major flaws. First, the halo-effect: one department’s reputation that the expert is familiar with may indiscriminately influence the rating of the whole institution. Second, so-called experts may be uninformed about all the institutions they are rating. Third, there is a question over the

⁶¹ QS World University Rankings: <http://www.iu.qs.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/>
THE World University Rankings: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2013-14/world-ranking/methodology>

Complete University Guide:

<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/methodology/>

<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/key/>

<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/guardian-league-tables/>

<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/times-university-guide-and-league-tables/>

Guardian University Guide

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jun/03/methodology-of-the-guardian-university-guide-2015>

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jun/03/how-to-use-guardian-university-guide>

Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide

http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/University_Guide/

⁶² THE Supplement, “THE World University Rankings 2013-4”, (3.x.13) 30-31

⁶³ These are most clearly presented in the THE’s “tables of excellence”:

http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/Journals/THE/THE/18_December_2008/attachments/RAE2008_THE_RESULTS.pdf

⁶⁴ See THE supplement, “THE World Reputation Rankings 2014”, (6.iii.14) 18-19

⁶⁵ <http://www.iu.qs.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/>

seriousness with which respondents are likely to treat an opinion poll. This all makes the reliability, validity and objectivity of reliance on expert opinion (not professional judgement) highly questionable.”⁶⁶

One of the major criticisms of global league tables such as THEWUR and QSWUR is that the vast number of research publications in engineering and science gives an undue weighting in favour of these disciplines. THEWUR draws data from 12,000 academic journals indexed by Thomson Reuters’ Web of Science database for its “citation” criterion. In spite of its title, this does include databases for arts, humanities and social sciences, but these are very much overshadowed by STEM disciplines.⁶⁷ QSWUR uses the Scopus database, which includes more non-English language and smaller-circulation journals.⁶⁸

The potential undergraduate applicant might conclude that “The rankings do not take into account the important qualities of an educational institution that cannot be measured with weightings and numbers”.⁶⁹ These might include: the delivery of the programme, especially the size and frequency of groups in which students might discuss topics with an academic member of staff (seminars, classes, tutorials); the availability of individual academic support;⁷⁰ graduate destinations for the full cohort of the programme being considered.⁷¹ The basic academic concern is “Is it worth the £9,000 fees per year?” Being at or near the top in global rankings has little bearing on this.

At first sight the UK rankings, being less research-orientated and more focused on student feedback and data more closely related to undergraduate experience, might be more fruitful. The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide uses the following 8 criteria, weighted 1.5 for the first 2, 1 for the rest: ⁷²

	<u>Source</u>
- Student Satisfaction	National Student Survey 2013
- Research Quality	RAE 2008
- Entry Standards	HESA
- Graduate Prospects	HESA
- Firsts and 2:1 degrees	HESA
- Completion Rates	HESA
- Student : Staff Ratio	HESA
- Services and Facilities Spend	HESA

The Complete University Guide and The Guardian University Guide use virtually identical criteria and sources, the most notable difference being that The Guardian does not include Research Quality and gives greater weight to the NSS. Those universities that boast high rankings in more than one of these lists are being disingenuous in leading potential applicants to believe that high ranking in one offers confirmation of high ranking in another.

CUG is particularly good at giving potential applicants caveats in using its tables: e.g., “A low student–staff ratio, i.e., a small number of students for each member of staff, does not guarantee good quality of teaching or good access to staff.”

⁶⁶ David Woodhouse “University Rankings Meaningless” (University World News 7.ix.08). He states that “the use of complex formulae with weights and indicators only helps to project a pseudo-scientific image to outcomes that may be statistically irrelevant.” He suggests that universities be required to show how each undergraduate programme is designed to produce generic and subject-specific graduate attributes and how different institutions offer different characteristics within programmes of the same title.

⁶⁷ http://thomsonreuters.com/products/ip-science/04_062/wos-next-gen-brochure.pdf

⁶⁸ <http://www.iu.qs.com/university-rankings/rankings-indicators/methodology-citations-per-faculty/> Note the defensive statement: “Whilst it has its critics, the Academic Reputation Survey places equal emphasis on Arts and Social Sciences as it does on Natural and Life Sciences.”

⁶⁹ Woodhouse op. cit.

⁷⁰ A former colleague once encountered a group of 2nd year undergraduate students of Mechanical Engineering at a highly selective and globally highly ranked university who did not understand major elements of their programme and did not feel that they could find appropriate help from research-focused academic staff.

⁷¹ Highly selective use in marketing material of star performers is of little value.

⁷² http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/University_Guide/

“Some universities are the location for major national facilities, such as the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the national computing facilities in Bath and Manchester. The local and national expenditure is very difficult to separate and so these universities will tend to score more highly on this measure.”

“Degree classifications are controlled by the universities themselves, though with some moderation by the external examiner system. It can be argued, therefore, that they are not a very objective measure of quality.”

“This measure of completion is a projection based upon a snapshot of data. It is therefore vulnerable to statistical fluctuations.”⁷³

A league table that rewards big spenders might be merely rewarding inefficiency; or highlighting those universities that have science and engineering departments, whose facilities are more expensive; or reflecting the uneven distribution of spending in institutional development.⁷⁴

The caveat about degree classification is a major concern to me. According to recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics, Mathematics students are twice as likely to gain First Class Honours as History students.⁷⁵ From time to time examples of less than objective practice, with decisions made by external or internal examiners altered, reach the public domain.⁷⁶ I fear that there might often be a too cosy system at work, with an external examiner rubber-stamping an institutional decision made with one eye on rising up the rankings.⁷⁷ My concerns about Graduate Prospects and Student Satisfaction are dealt with in sections (4) and (5) below.

I fear, however, that, as a general rule, such caveats are not observed in the presentation of statistical results. Universities might claim that there is no space to include this extra information, but it would be good practice to give a general warning and a link to the CUG website. After all, both 6th Form students and undergraduates are required to express their conclusions cautiously and reference their essays carefully.

It is worth considering the objections to these league tables made by two former Vice-Chancellors. Alan Wilson, when Vice-Chancellor of Leeds, stated that “one of the problems is that by attempting to rank institutions by a combination of many different factors, from library expenditure to numbers of firsts, the final figures have little real significance, like trying to ‘combine apples and oranges.’”⁷⁸ Roger Brown, when Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent, concluded his article entitled “The Information Fallacy” (2007) by stating: “What I am doubting is the point of trying to create sound and impartial information about comparative quality when there is simply no basis for it in the kind of system we now have.”⁷⁹

(4) Employment

⁷³ <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/key/>

⁷⁴ These pertinent points were made by Garrick Fincham in a presentation on league tables at the UEA Teachers’ Conference in June 2014.

⁷⁵ THE 31.vii.14, based on 2012-3 figures. See also THE 17.iv.14 “‘Good’ degree awards not always in line with intake”, based on the HEFCE report “Differences in Degree Outcomes: Key Findings” (March 2014) <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201403/#d.en.86821>

⁷⁶ e.g., Kingston (external examiners): <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7470125.stm> ; Bournemouth (internal examiner) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/dorset/8537706.stm> , THE 31.vii.14 and “Sunday Telegraph” 28.ii.10, which also mentions staff concerns about “upgrading” at 4 other universities.

⁷⁷ See the concern expressed by Geoffrey Alderman (Guardian 24.iv.07) about a “league-table culture” in which “standards are inevitably sacrificed on the alter (*sic*) of public image - as reflected in newspaper rankings”. Moreover, “the role of the external examiner has been transformed - and reduced - from gatekeeper of standards to compliance manager, trying to ensure that university assessment schemes are uniformly enforced, rather than passing judgment on their fitness for purpose”.

⁷⁸ <http://reporter.leeds.ac.uk/485/s7.htm> “The Reporter: The University of Leeds newsletter” (28.x.02). The whole article is worth reading, as it contains objections from, among others, the President of the Secondary Heads’ Association that the tables “do not give the information that schools need”.

⁷⁹ <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/TheInformationFallacy-RogerBrown.pdf> He includes a pertinent hypothetical example of 6 students who embark on a History degree course for different reasons, which deserves serious attention from all HE advisers.

Since the advent of university fees, and especially since the advent of a £9,000 p.a. fee for most UK entrants from 2012 onwards, there has been a noticeable increase in the emphasis in prospectuses on university study as a solid base for employment. There has been more focus on the expanded provision offered by university careers' departments (e.g., more formalised programmes of skills' development, greater access to internships) but also a greater use of statistics to convince prospective undergraduates that a degree is worth undertaking as a route to employment opportunities.

28 of these 38 universities adduce statistics and/or survey results in relation to employability. The most commonly quoted source is the annual Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, which institutions are obliged to submit to HESA. The survey "asks leavers from higher education what they are doing six months after graduation. About three quarters of leavers complete the survey."⁸⁰

Many university prospectuses mention HESA as the source of statistics quoted, usually giving a date.⁸¹ In other cases, the mention of "within six months" suggests to those familiar with the DLHE survey that this is the source.⁸² Sometimes there is particular emphasis on the percentage of students gaining professional or managerial posts.⁸³ Occasionally there is sloppiness in expression. Does Exeter's statement that, according to the latest HESA data "we are placed eighth out of all UK universities for achievement"⁸⁴ refer to the achievement of employment or something else? When York claims that "latest figures show that nearly 94 per cent of our students go into work or further study"⁸⁵, there is no indication of how long it takes them.

In the competitive market for undergraduates some universities are keen to stress their employment credentials over others'. Cardiff, for instance, produces a rank order of the 24 Russell Group universities from HESA data showing the percentage of graduates in work or further study 6 months after graduating. The percentage range is not great (8%), but, with Cardiff highlighted in 6th place, I wonder about the reaction at, say, Queen Mary (24th).⁸⁶ Newcastle - whose prospectus compilers offer far more statistical references than any other of these universities - claims that it is in the top 5 (or 5th) for graduate employment "among comparator universities". This statistic, with the same cryptic phrase, is put before us 3 times.⁸⁷ It is ironical that the Cardiff table, based on the same HESA data, actually puts Newcastle top.

However, the main issue about the DLHE survey is that it is conducted only 6 months after graduation. Many students, for instance, take a "gap year" immediately after graduation or undertake temporary jobs near the university. A much better indication would be a survey conducted 3 years after graduation, when many of those who have completed a Master's degree would also be in the job market. It will be argued that graduates are far harder to track down by that stage, but I would counter this by stating that this would not be insuperable for a university keen to develop alumni relations and whose careers' department has served them well. If universities are reluctant to face up to this challenge, I think that they should follow the lead of Surrey and Bath in producing annually graduate destinations by subject cohort : the inclusion of the categories "Unknown" and "Unemployed" suggests that these results are comprehensive rather than selective. As such they are the best information currently available for potential applicants trying to answer the questions "What can this degree lead to?" and "Is it worth it?"⁸⁸

The results of the annual "Graduate Market" survey conducted by High Fliers Research Limited are increasingly quoted in prospectuses.⁸⁹ Universities are keen to show that they appear in the table of the top

⁸⁰ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats-dlhe> ; <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/intros/dlheiro1213>

⁸¹ T+STGUG, GUG and CUG tables rely on the DLHE survey information and should not be seen as giving evidence of employability independently of each other.

⁸² e.g., Bristol 18, Durham 21, Nottingham 44, Warwick 15.

⁸³ e.g., Bath 2, 19; Loughborough 11; Newcastle 48; Reading 21; Warwick 15

⁸⁴ Exeter 4

⁸⁵ York 23

⁸⁶ Cardiff 5

⁸⁷ Newcastle 5, 46, 226

⁸⁸ Surrey <http://www2.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/surreygraduates/> ;

Bath <http://www.bath.ac.uk/students/careers/choose-a-career/what-our-graduates-do/index.html>

⁸⁹ <http://www.highfliers.co.uk/download/GMReport14.pdf>

25 “universities targeted by the largest number of top employers”.⁹⁰ However, the “top” employers were chosen not by their employees but by those companies that achieved the most votes, from over 1,000 submitted by final year undergraduates “from 30 leading universities” responding to the question: “Which employer do you think offers the best opportunities for graduates?”. There is a danger of circularity here: that the results indicate which companies receive most prominence in those university careers’ departments and that the “top 25 universities” are among those “30 leading universities” involved in the survey.

A few universities quote a high position in the QSWUR for “employer reputation”,⁹¹ but this type of “expert opinion” has already been called into question above.

(5) Student satisfaction

The National Student Survey (NSS) of student satisfaction is in its tenth year and is an established part of the rankings’ landscape. The 22 statements about academic course delivery put to final year students require responses ranging from “definitely agree” to “definitely disagree”.⁹² One might quibble that some of the statements could be phrased more precisely: e.g., “Staff are good at explaining things” (in lectures? when problems are encountered?); “I have received detailed comments on my work” (oral or written? throughout the years of study?). However, there are several problems for the potential applicant trying to interpret responses either in UNISTATS or in information put before them by individual universities. If, say, 95% of students mostly or definitely agree that they are “satisfied with the quality of the course”, how far is this a reflection of the quality of the provision; or of how easily those students are satisfied; or the extent of their loyalty to an institution after several years; or their feeling after their final rather than their earlier years; or the lack of seriousness with which the survey has been answered? A recent HEFCE report has shown that 1% of NSS respondents in 2005 gave the same answer to every question (a phenomenon termed “acquiescence bias” or “yea-saying”), but by 2013 this had increased to 5.4%; and that in the vast majority these cases the most positive (“definitely agree”) column was chosen.⁹³

Just under half of these universities use statistics from the NSS in their prospectuses. The 40 or so references, which usually give both source and date, are almost equally divided between those given as a percentage score and those given as a rank order. As noted in Section (3) above, references to improvement are double-edged: e.g., “the third successive year in which the satisfaction level of Surrey students has increased”; “increasing satisfaction levels at a faster rate than most other universities”⁹⁴. The latter statement is indicative of the fact that here, too, a more aggressive marketing tone is sometimes evident: e.g., Queen Mary joined the Russell Group as recently as 2012, but, keen to make a point against higher profile West End rivals (KCL, LSE, UCL), states that “89 per cent of students were satisfied overall with their experience at QML, the best among Russell Group universities in London.”⁹⁵

There is occasional sloppiness in expression and referencing,⁹⁶ but my main concern is that too few of these statements stress that this is a survey that focuses on the academic side of university. Durham, for instance, states that “90% of our students are satisfied with their experience at Durham”,⁹⁷ quoting NSS 2013 as evidence, but this is probably an imprecise depiction of students’ responses to Statement 22 of NSS: “Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course”.

⁹⁰ Bristol 4, Cambridge 1, Cardiff 3, 5, Durham 21, Exeter 9, Manchester 4, Newcastle 5, 49, 52, 226, Nottingham 3, 44

⁹¹ Cambridge 30, Durham 4, 10, 21, Imperial 5, Warwick 4, 14. Durham claims to be in the top 25 at 4 and 21 but in the top 20 at 10. Perhaps this discrepancy resulted from a failure to correct what was in the 2014 entry prospectus on page 21.

⁹² http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/content/nss2012_questionnaire_english.pdf

⁹³ “UK review of the provision of information about Higher Education: National Student Survey results and trends analysis 2005-2013” (July 2014) <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/>

⁹⁴ Surrey 1, Royal Holloway 8.

⁹⁵ Queen Mary 6

⁹⁶ e.g., Essex 1 “Ranked 2nd for student satisfaction among mainstream UK universities”. There is no reference to NSS or any other survey and we are left wondering about the definition of “mainstream”.

⁹⁷ Durham 4

The Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey (THESES), which receives prominence from Cambridge and Newcastle, is otherwise only mentioned by East Anglia, Loughborough and Sheffield, but East Anglia gives great emphasis to its first position in THESES 2013 in a band across its front cover, while Loughborough highlights on page 1 that it has been “voted England’s Best Student Experience for six consecutive years (2006/7-2011/12)” in THESES⁹⁸. THESES is much wider in scope than NSS, with only a minority of its categories relating to academic life: high quality staff/lectures; helpful/interested staff; well structured courses; good social life; good community atmosphere; good extracurricular activities/societies; good environment on campus/around the university; high quality facilities; personal requirements catered for; good students’ union; good support/welfare; good personal relationships with teaching staff; centralised/convenient facilities; good industry connections; good accommodation; good security; cheap shop/bar/amenities; tuition in small groups; good library and library opening hours; fair workload; good sports facilities; I would recommend my university to a friend.⁹⁹

While there are similar caveats to be observed as with NSS above, the relative scores for the THESES headings are potentially useful information for prospective applicants, as many of the criteria are less susceptible to departmental variation.

It would be more useful, if, instead of giving a percentage score or ranking for “overall student satisfaction”, universities were to account for their high score or position with reference to more specific criteria: e.g., “We believe that the score of 90% for overall satisfaction with the quality of the course reflects the fact that we have a maximum tutorial size of 15 and that assessed work has to be returned within 2 weeks”.

(6) Teaching

This is the key area on which applicants want to feel reassured, but it is also the area on which universities and league table compilers find it hardest to produce meaningful statistics. The early UK league tables were able to use the results from HEFCE’s Teaching Quality Assessments (1995-7) and the QAA Subject Review Results (1997-2001), which used a 4 point scale across 6 categories, one of which was “Teaching, Learning and Assessment”¹⁰⁰. However, this was no longer possible after this system was abandoned in 2001.

Bruce Charlton, writing in 2004, stated:

“Although the national “teaching inspectorate”, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), examines a great deal of paper work, and indirectly generates vastly more, it neglects the single most important measure of teaching quality”;

“I work at one of the top 20 UK universities (Newcastle), with a reputation for good teaching. Yet in eight years my final-year class size has quadrupled from 16 to sixty-something. Is this typical? Anecdotally, yes.”;

“When the public becomes able to choose between universities on the basis of class sizes, those institutions that teach their students in small groups for most of the time will become known and acknowledged. Such genuinely “high teaching quality” universities can expect to be rewarded by greater student demand.”¹⁰¹

York’s claim that “We...achieve particular success in external assessments of teaching quality”¹⁰² does nothing to enlighten the potential applicant about the nature, frequency or extent of these assessments. It is reasonable to think that a student familiar with school inspectors observing lessons would assume that the same was happening in teaching groups at this and other universities. But that assumption would be incorrect.

⁹⁸ Cambridge 1, 10, 14, 20, 30; Newcastle 3, 4, 5, 28, 226 (bis); East Anglia FrontCover, 2, 23; Loughborough 1, 30; Sheffield 25

⁹⁹ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/times-higher-education-student-experience-survey-2014/20133333.article>

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., Bristol’s results at <http://www.bris.ac.uk/esu/audit/subjectreview/qaareresults.html>

¹⁰¹ “The Independent” 7.x.04

¹⁰² York 11

Other than references to NSS responses to the statement “the teaching on my course”,¹⁰³ a few university prospectuses highlight an academic member of staff who has received the THE “Most Innovative Teacher of the Year Award”¹⁰⁴ or the number of National Teaching Fellowships¹⁰⁵. Leeds’ statement that “Our staff have been awarded 20 National Teaching Fellowships, more than any other English university, demonstrating the high quality of our teaching” should be modified in its last phrase to “the high quality of some of our teaching”.

In a recent article about these same prospectuses¹⁰⁶ I wrote that, although there are some examples of better practice, “many universities do not give adequate information about the transition from school to university learning and teaching”. However, “Reading shows 2 examples of a student weekly timetable.”¹⁰⁷ St Andrews offers a summary of modes of study, gives 2 examples of a student’s weekly timetable and for each subject gives the class sizes for each of the main types of teaching delivery in each year of study.¹⁰⁸ This level of detail is new and revolutionary, and I hope that others will follow.” As Bruce Charlton suggested 10 years ago, these are the kinds of statistics on teaching that potential applicants are likely to find most useful.

(7) Research

At these research-intensive universities the results of the latest Research Assessment Exercise (RAE 2008)¹⁰⁹ are given considerable prominence in most prospectuses. This is presented as either a percentage of world leading or internationally recognised research (the top 2 categories) or a rank order. Most is clearly referenced. Only occasionally are we left to assume that RAE 2008 is being referred to.¹¹⁰

As RAE 2008 was conducted by subject specialists across 67 subject areas, potential applicants might benefit from looking at individual subject results, inasmuch as they will be expected largely to teach themselves using research methods at the most research-intensive universities and research informs - but does not necessarily guarantee the quality of - the teaching of academic staff. The THE subject tables are a convenient reference point¹¹¹, as they not only establish a research rank order (although differences in position might reflect only a marginal difference in the grade point average used) but also indicate the number of staff whose research contributed to the outcome. It should be borne in mind that departments did not have to put forward the work of all their research staff. I would go so far as to say that these league tables are the only ones worth consulting on academic issues. The significant difference is that, whatever the imperfections of the system, subject specialists were judging here the work of their peers.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of the overall statements of research “power” or “standing” under consideration here is to cause us to question stereotypes. Essex, for instance, states that “we rank 9th out of 159 institutions in the UK for the quality of our research”.¹¹²

As with teaching, so with regard to research, universities are keen to parade award winners. This includes Nobel Prize winners (former students and former and current faculty staff)¹¹³. Manchester claims that it has “more Nobel laureates on our staff than any other UK university”¹¹⁴, but it would be interesting to know, for instance, how much of each year is spent by Joseph Stiglitz in Manchester. Imperial and UCL boast large

¹⁰³ e.g., Exeter 3: “5th for teaching quality” in NSS 2013

¹⁰⁴ Queen’s Belfast 50

¹⁰⁵ Leeds 11, Newcastle 10, Queen Mary 6, Warwick 7

¹⁰⁶ “How will I learn at university and what is meant by a Personal Tutor?” (June 2014)

¹⁰⁷ Reading 11

¹⁰⁸ St Andrews 11, 22-23, 62-161

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.rae.ac.uk/results/>

¹¹⁰ e.g., Reading 6: “90% of research rated of international standing”

¹¹¹ http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/Journals/THE/THE/18_December_2008/attachments/RAE2008_THE_RESULTS.pdf

¹¹² Essex 33. The THE “Table of Excellence” (loc. cit.) puts them 11th of 132, but 2 of those above them are very small specialist institutes.

¹¹³ Bristol 5, Cardiff 13, East Anglia 50, Edinburgh 5, Essex 36-37 (both Peace Prize winners), Imperial 4, KCL 12, 18, Liverpool 8, LSE 28, Manchester 4, 8, 14, Nottingham 9, Sussex 5, 7, UCL 5

¹¹⁴ Manchester 4

numbers of Fellows of the Royal Society, the British Academy and other similar institutions¹¹⁵, while others mention the award of Queen's Anniversary Prizes.¹¹⁶

(8) Accommodation

Only 8 universities use survey results or awards in the context of accommodation: Cambridge, East Anglia, Edinburgh, Essex, Lancaster, Loughborough, Newcastle, Sheffield. They tend to be universities that have been particularly active in improving accommodation in recent years.

As we saw above, The Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey has "good accommodation" as one criterion and two universities quote these results.¹¹⁷ Two others mention their prominence in the National Student Housing Survey Accommodation Awards¹¹⁸ conducted by Red Brick Research.

These examples highlight top quality, but two universities stress the relative cheapness of their provision.¹¹⁹

(9) Students' Union

A third of these university prospectuses highlight ratings achieved and particularly awards won by their Students' Union. There are a few references to NSS¹²⁰ and THESES¹²¹. Otherwise, there is a parade of awards: Bath's Students' Union is 1 of only 4 to achieve the NUS Student Union Evaluation Initiative Gold Award, while Leeds is the only one to have achieved 2¹²²; East Anglia has been voted best student venue by the music industry's "Live!" magazine¹²³; by NUS, in 2012 Essex was judged 1st in UK for international student representation, Leeds has been given Green Impact Union of the Year Award and "a bunch of" NUS Best Bar None awards, and Leicester was judged HE Students' Union of the Year in 2013¹²⁴; Glasgow has been UK Student Union of the Year in Club Mirror Awards 2011, 2012 and 2013¹²⁵; Nottingham has won 4 gold awards for Best Student Radio Station between 2010 and 2013¹²⁶.

These examples also highlight top quality, sometimes in very specific areas.

(10) Sport

11 of these prospectuses refer to rankings and survey results¹²⁷ and, in the case of Leeds, HESA data.¹²⁸

¹¹⁵ Imperial 19, UCL 5

¹¹⁶ Loughborough 26 (the 7 received are "second only to Oxford"), Queen's Belfast 6, 7

¹¹⁷ Cambridge 20 ("no.1 for good accommodation" 2013), Sheffield 25 ("best in the UK" 2011)

¹¹⁸ <http://www.nshs.co.uk/the-awards/> referred to by Essex 31, Lancaster 4, 32

¹¹⁹ Loughborough 14 ("In 2012 we were ranked 1st by Unistats for providing the least expensive institution accommodation option in England"); Newcastle 24 ("We ranked 8th out of 60 participating universities in the UK for our accommodation costs") usefully adds that the source, The International Student Barometer, is "an independent survey of over 100,000 international students from 188 universities and colleges worldwide". See <http://www.i-graduate.org/assets/Uploads/ISB-2014-15.pdf>

¹²⁰ Bath 6, Leeds 11, Loughborough 22

¹²¹ Sheffield 21 ("The UK's best Students' Union" THESES 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013)

¹²² Bath 6, Leeds 11, 35. See <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/charity/suei/>

¹²³ East Anglia 26. For Live Music Business Awards see <http://www.livemusicawards.co.uk/categories/>

¹²⁴ Essex 9, Leeds 35, Leicester 0, 29. On NUS Awards see <http://www.nusawards.org.uk/about/the-shortlist-2014/>

¹²⁵ Glasgow 24. On Club Mirror Awards see <http://www.awards.clubmirror.com/categories/>

¹²⁶ Nottingham 17. On Student Radio Awards see <http://www.studentradioawards.co.uk/awardscategories>

¹²⁷ East Anglia 23 ("our sports facilities were ranked joint second" in THESES 2013)

¹²⁸ Leeds 37: "the most playing field space at a university in the UK".

It is not surprising that most references are made directly (or through the T+STGUG) to the British Universities' and Colleges' Sport (BUCS) rankings.¹²⁹ Evidence is adduced to show the prominence of the university: Loughborough states that "We are extremely proud of our sporting prowess having won the BUCS championship for over 30 consecutive years"¹³⁰; while Imperial is keener to establish more local credentials as "1st in London"¹³¹. A prospective undergraduate with ambitions to compete at the highest level in university sport would do well to consider the BUCS website, which gives comprehensive information of the points scored, by institution and sport, in inter-university competition across several seasons. Sport is definitely one area where league table rankings are a good indication of relative achievement over an extended period.

(11) Miscellaneous statements

Under this heading are included constituent elements of surveys considered in previous sections, where prospective applicants need to bear in mind the caveats:

- HESA DLHE survey: completion rates, staff:student ratio¹³²
- THESES: extra-curricular activities, community atmosphere¹³³

Other qualitative surveys are also adduced: Durham, for instance, quotes the Lloyds Bank University Quality of Life Rankings, Haart Estate Agents and The Student Value for Money Report.¹³⁴

One survey that has become more prominent in these prospectuses in the last couple of years is the International Student Barometer.¹³⁵ In its section for international students Oxford gives its high satisfaction scores (90-96%) under several headings: expert lecturers, online library, research, course content, good place to be in; and Newcastle refers to it several times.¹³⁶ This probably reflects awareness of the financial importance of the international student market, as well as the importance of a "ranking culture" in some prospective markets.¹³⁷

Success in the THE Awards, which are, according to Southampton, "considered the Oscars of higher education", is increasingly being quoted in prospectuses.¹³⁸

For many potential applicants this information is likely to be of subsidiary importance.

(12) Conclusion

As I stated in a recent article, "There is a sense that many universities are trying to boost their image with prospective customers, by stressing how wonderful they are and how their students' enjoyable stay will be the means to achieving a decent job."¹³⁹ Statistics, like photographs of beaming students on sunny days, are

¹²⁹ Birmingham 50, Cardiff 29, Exeter 21, Edinburgh 19, Imperial 51, Loughborough 1, 24, 25, Newcastle 4, 41, 226, Nottingham 20. <http://www.bucs.org.uk/homepage.asp>

¹³⁰ Loughborough 25

¹³¹ Imperial 51

¹³² Bath 2, UCL 7

¹³³ Cambridge 1, 14

¹³⁴ Durham 27

¹³⁵ See note 119 above.

¹³⁶ Oxford 178, Newcastle 4, 24, 48, 226

¹³⁷ The Liverpool prospectus has an early and lengthy section on "Our international community" (8-13), where the bulk of this prospectus's statistical references are paraded on the first 2 pages.

¹³⁸ Essex 1, 5; Leicester 22; Loughborough 20, 30; Queen's Belfast 7, Southampton 13, Sussex 19. On THE Awards see <http://www.the-awards.co.uk/the2014/awards>

¹³⁹ See note 106. The phrase "college amenities arms race" has gained currency in USA (see Cara Newlon's recent article with that title on the Forbes website <http://www.forbes.com/sites/caranewlon/2014/07/31/the-college-amenities-arms-race/> 31.vii.14). Roger Brown, in his 2011 response to proposed government reform of Higher Education, has suggested that a similar situation might happen in the UK: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmbis/885/885vw07.htm> . If so, the

used to encourage a “feel-good factor” about an institution and, increasingly, about this institution as opposed to others. The aim of the prospectus is, after all, to attract interest and gain customers, and it is understandable that universities wish to use as much “evidence” as possible in achieving those ends.

Although prospective undergraduates might be aware that claiming to be a “top” university is to some extent merely a marketing ploy, they should expect universities to be as diligent in their referencing and avoidance of unsupported generalization as they are required to be in their essays. This is to a large extent the case.

They need, however, to be aware of the reservations mentioned above in dealing with the statistical information put before them:

- different global and UK rankings are not independent of each other;
- global rankings are constructed very differently from UK rankings;
- the criteria used in constructing global rankings are largely research-focused, overall figures are skewed by the predominance of science and engineering research, and the use of “expert opinion” is questionable;
- the use of the different data sets from which UK rankings are constructed needs to be hedged with so many caveats that the rankings ultimately produced have little value;
- university prospectuses present the rankings without mentioning the caveats;
- global and UK rankings do not address some aspects of individual programmes that are particularly relevant to potential undergraduate applicants: e.g., size and frequency of tutorial groups, graduate destinations;
- the HESA DLHE survey on employment is of limited value, as it is based on data submitted only 6 months after graduation;
- the value of the “Graduate Market” survey is diminished by its being based on undergraduate (rather than employee) verdicts on “top employers” from relatively few universities;
- quality of provision might be only one of several factors behind high scores achieved in student satisfaction surveys;
- there is no satisfactory measure of teaching provision, a key issue for prospective applicants;
- the main value of university-wide statistics on “research power” is to cause us to question stereotypes.

In short, reliance on league table rankings is likely to be as perilous a route to achieving a satisfactory application as blind reliance on brand-name prejudice.

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. Prospective applicants can find more useful information beyond what is presented in the prospectuses:

- scores in student satisfaction surveys might be of some value in giving a sense of relative strengths and weaknesses at a particular university, especially in non-academic areas;
- the most reliable evidence for the student academic experience is likely to be conversation, preferably with several current students of the programme under consideration, on an Open Day.¹⁴⁰
- the research profile of a particular university department might be more easily seen from THE’s 67 subject “tables of excellence”, which rank by grade point average;
- statistics used in specialist areas, such as accommodation, students’ union and sport, highlight areas of top quality;
- the BUCS website gives very useful information on the strengths of individual sports at particular institutions.

Universities might improve the presentation of information in prospectuses:

- it would be much more useful for potential applicants to see employment figures for 3 years rather than 6 months after graduation;
- other universities should follow the good practice of Bath and Surrey by presenting full and detailed information from the HESA DLHE survey by subject cohort on their websites and referring to this in their

proliferation of en suite accommodation from the mid 1990s onwards will have been the thin end of this wedge.

¹⁴⁰ Beware of “The Student Room”! We cannot be sure who is composing judgments. My confidence was shaken when I saw someone claiming to be an Oxford undergraduate at All Souls.

prospectus, as the prospective applicant is wondering “What jobs do graduates achieve from this specific degree programme?”;

- university prospectuses should include better information on teaching methods at research-intensive universities and should follow the lead of St Andrews in giving detailed information about teaching group sizes.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with information, including statistics, and claims to fame.¹⁴¹ We need to be sympathetic towards those in Higher Education who live within a ranking-obsessed environment and who are trying to recruit undergraduates in a very competitive market. Even institutions that have remained more aloof from the marshalling of these statistics are being drawn into this culture. Under the heading “Welcome to Cambridge” on page 1 of the Cambridge prospectus, the reader is told (with a hint of both embarrassment and understated pride?): “You’re probably aware that Cambridge is one of the best universities in the world in terms of its academic reputation, but did you also know:”, and then 6 statistics fill most of the rest of the page. Nor should we assume that this practice is confined to the 38 universities in this survey.¹⁴²

However, it is good to see that some institutions are resisting this culture of “*everybody* has won, and *all* must have prizes”¹⁴³. Shortlisted for my Prospectus of the Year Award on the criterion of clarity and usefulness to the potential applicant are LSE and SOAS. However, the outstanding winner of this new award is St Andrews, for its ground-breaking decision to include details of the size of teaching groups for each subject and year, its overall clarity and its almost total avoidance of misleading statistics and hyperbolic claims.

Philip Rogerson
August 2014

¹⁴¹ Michael Blastland and Andrew Dilnot in “The Tiger That Isn’t” (London, 2007) make many cogent points about the (ab)use of statistics. They conclude their discussion of school league tables by stating: “Ministers often said that league tables should not be the only source of information about a school, but it is not clear in what sense they contributed *anything* to a fair comparison of school performance or teaching quality. Make a comparison blithely, too certain of its legitimacy, and we turn information into a lottery.” (189)

¹⁴² e.g., Queen Margaret’s prospectus quotes a 93.8% employment rate (from HESA data) twice in its first 2 pages of text; Kent’s mentions its high ranking in NSS twice in the first 10 pages; Southampton Solent’s quotes NSS results twice on an early page (4) of statistics, including the strange “4/5 for teaching” (i.e., 80% ?).

¹⁴³ Is it significant that this statement in “Alice in Wonderland” comes from the Dodo?