

# Chapter 10

## Using the Classification for Institutional Profiling: The University of Strathclyde

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### 10.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the experiences and aspirations of one European university, Strathclyde in Glasgow, are examined to see what practical value a European classification of higher education institutions would provide. Institutional rankings have developed more rapidly in the United Kingdom than elsewhere in the European Union and British universities such as Strathclyde have amassed many years of experience in dealing with the managerial consequences of league tables. For them, classification holds out the alluring prospect of being compared with like institutions within the rich diversity of European higher education.

The pressure to perform well in the institutional rankings is rising inexorably. Rankings have become so closely linked with both external reputation and institutional self-image that they can no longer be ignored. Yet they can easily pull an institution away from its unique mission, often aligned with the particular needs of the local community, towards the orthodoxy that secures league table success. Thus league tables are the enemy of diversity.

In 1993, Clark Kerr, President of the University of California and godfather of the American Carnegie Classification wrote this:

For the first time, a really international world of learning, highly competitive, is emerging....  
If you want to get onto that orbit, you have to do so on merit.... You cannot rely on politics or anything else. (Clark 1998, p. 136)

Sadly, league tables do not support this meritocratic vision. As has been argued in Chapter 5 of this volume, there is an in-built bias in the Shanghai Jiao Tong table in favour of large, English-speaking universities with strength in Science – in other words, those with an established reputation. In the United Kingdom, there are three sets of league tables based on entirely different data sets and weighting and designed for different audiences by three of the most respected newspapers in the UK – *The Times*, *Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*. Yet over many years, six universities have always appeared in the top 10 of every table published (HEFCE 2008). In 2008, the latest data showed that Strathclyde's entry standard, in terms of the qualification of new entrants, was the third highest in the United Kingdom. The league table compiler challenged this on the grounds that it was counter-intuitive.

The figures were checked and validated, but the compiler simply decided not to use that measure. There is, without doubt, a significant measure of intuition, driven by established reputation, behind some of these tables. Indeed *The Times* and *The Guardian* explicitly say that final league table positions cannot be derived from the supporting data published.

The data underlying the two international league tables, *THE* and Shanghai Jiao Tong, is more robust, though even the latter has been challenged on the grounds that it is irreproducible (Florian 2007). A recent analysis carried out for the Higher Education Funding Council for England has demonstrated that these two tables have only a single source of data, numbers of citations, in common (HEFCE 2008). Yet they come to a broadly similar conclusion. Even citations are open to challenge since, as has been argued in Chapter 5, they favour American institutions, which tend to cite others' work to the exclusion of research in other continents.

The impact on institutional morale for a university such as Strathclyde, which does not perform as well in the league tables as it believes it should, is considerable. The impact can and does extend to whole systems.

European Commissioner Ján Figel (2008) commented at a conference in Brussels in February 2008 that Europe was not achieving the same global dominance in higher education as it was in football. Other European Commission reports have pronounced that European higher education is not globally competitive, this conclusion being clearly based on the international league tables. Implicit in these comments is the assumption that if institutions conformed more closely to the norms of the compilers, they would be more successful.

In other parts of the European Commission, it is increasingly recognised that universities have a key role to play in regional economic development and addressing social problems such as low participation rates in higher education by disadvantaged citizens. Metrics of successful economic impact such as spin-out companies and patents gain no credit in league tables, however, and measures such as flexibility over entry standards to widen access has actually cost universities places in some rankings.

If it is accepted that there is only one definition of an "excellent" university, it follows that all should aspire to it. New universities assume that in due course, if they get their strategies right, their profiles will grow and their reputations evolve until they achieve parity with the most ancient institutions of higher education. There are, however, important distinctions between being research-based and teaching-based and between higher education and skills-based training. The differences should be safeguarded. As Lord Krebs, Master of Jesus College, Oxford, put it in a debate in the British House of Lords in June 2008.

If my daughters came home from school and told me they had been to sex education classes, I would be comfortable; if they said they had been to sex training and skills classes, I would not (THE 2008).

Diversity should be encouraged – for the strength of the sector overall and the institutions and for the benefit of their constituencies. As Professor John Hood (2006), Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, stated in a conference speech

in 2006: “Every University needs to identify its unique mission and then be the best in the world at that.”

The challenge posed by Professor Hood creates its own issues for universities. Without a reliable system of classification to validate its pursuit of diversity, how does an institution:

- Identify and engage in its unique mission?
- Establish to the satisfaction of governments and the public that it has a distinct mission from others?
- Measure its progress against comparable institutions elsewhere?
- Decide what would indeed be a world-beating performance?

The University of Strathclyde in Glasgow is one of the five particularly innovative European Universities chosen as case studies by Professor R. Burton Clark for his influential book *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities* (1998). Strathclyde has particular strength in engineering, sciences and applied sciences. Since its formation in 1796, it has had the same mission, highly unorthodox in its day, to be “a place of useful learning”.

In 1993, the University of Strathclyde merged with Scotland’s largest teacher-training college, Jordanhill, believing that this was fully consistent with its traditional mission of adding value and serving society. Sadly, teacher training is one of those subjects which do not achieve high recognition in the league tables. The immediate impact of the merger was to reduce the University’s position in British league tables by about 10 places. At the time, this seemed a price worth paying but in 2006, the growing influence of league tables meant this effect could no longer be ignored. The Faculty of Education is being transferred to a new building alongside the rest of the University, new leadership has been brought in and research is being strengthened.

That programme forms part of a wider “Agenda for Excellence”, which aims to address areas of weakness and consolidate areas of strength so that Strathclyde will become a place where “only the best are good enough to work and study”. A place in the league tables which reflects Strathclyde’s own view of its relative strength is one of the key outcomes that is expected to follow, but it will not be allowed to interfere with the University’s unorthodox, particular mission of “useful learning”.

## 10.2 Why Classify?

For the reasons outlined above, i.e. the global reputation race and the increasing pre-dominance of league tables favouring traditional research universities, it has been part of the regular environmental scanning work undertaken by the University’s Planning Team to identify developments that could lead to new opportunities for meaningful benchmarking or more systematic comparisons with other universities

both in the UK and in the larger European Higher Education Area. While the league tables provide some measures for benchmarking, the rankings themselves do not reveal much information about the underlying differences or similarities between the institutions included. The project to design a European higher education classification was consequently well-aligned with an institutional interest in exploring and supporting alternative approaches to structuring the diverse higher education landscape outwith the realm of traditional rankings. Therefore, the University of Strathclyde was happy to join the project.

While scepticism was expressed about the project from some stakeholders across Europe, the University of Strathclyde welcomed this opportunity to engage in the project and to influence the development of the classification tool in a direction that was felt to be appropriate and suitable from a strategic institutional point of view. Similarly, through Strathclyde's membership of the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU), there was an opportunity to also feed back input from other ECIU institutions to the classification project team and to get a feel for how other countries in Europe perceived the usefulness of such an instrument.

### **10.3 Contributing to the Design of the European Higher Education Classification**

As an outgrowth of its institutional interest in developing the European higher education classification, and following initial discussions about how best to gauge institutional needs, requirements and data availability, Strathclyde volunteered to become a case study institution. This involved organising a site visit that would give the project team insight into the University's potential use of the classification and would identify possible difficulties in producing the required data.

To give the project team a comprehensive understanding of the situation at Strathclyde and the external drivers with the greatest impact on the University's development, and in turn on its perception of the usefulness of the classification, meetings were organised with a broad spectrum of colleagues across the University, including the:

- Director of Marketing & Communications
- Research Assessment Exercise Project Manager
- International Office
- Communications Office
- Planning Team
- University Secretary
- Deputy Secretary

The initial discussions at these meetings, on the dimensions of and indicators used for the classification, provided a framework for comprehensive and in-depth reflection on what institutions that were to become active users of the classification

might see as concerns in terms of data collection and analysis, and in terms of the indicators used to capture the diversity of higher education across Europe.

The main points captured in the case visit were:

- **Survey fatigue**

When the site visit took place, the University was in the final phase of preparing its submission to the government's Research Assessment Exercise 2008. This had involved substantial human resource across the University, and several members of staff working full-time on a database to prepare and organise the research data. As a result, there was comprehensive information on research income, publications and citations, indicators of external esteem and research student numbers – a wealth of research information that could be utilised for other purposes as well.

The University makes submissions to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Scottish Funding Council on, for example, student numbers, student progression and student loads, graduate employability and staff numbers by category, and submits financial data on income streams and cost centres. Again, a substantial amount of work goes into data gathering and organising and filing these submissions. A strong recommendation, therefore, was that data used for the classification and data submitted to national agencies should be as closely aligned as possible. This would limit the burden on participating institutions and would significantly enhance the quality of the data used to populate the classification.

- **Reputation and competition**

The site visit included substantial discussion about the nature of UK league tables. Though the University remains sceptical about these league tables and the way they favour traditional, research-intensive universities, it has acknowledged that many students, particularly overseas students contemplating study in the UK, find them a valuable guide when deciding on the institution they believe will provide the best degree and student experience. League tables, whether the sector likes it or not, are consequently a force to be reckoned with and considerable time and effort is spent maximising every opportunity to improve a university's perceived performance. Ultimately, league table standings are linked with actual performance as measured through selected indicators such as retention and employability. Due to the weightings and indicators used in producing the UK league tables, however, an improvement in real-life performance might not always have a direct effect on league table performance, as Strathclyde has experienced over the years.

In 2008, the University of Strathclyde had the third highest Entry Standard in the UK, as HESA allowed the inclusion of additional qualifications in the submission, but *The Times* League Table would not accept this as a plausible outcome and therefore chose to not publish the data.

League table compilers are commercial providers and define the indicators and weightings used to rank educational institutions. While there may be an opportunity to influence the shape and form of the indicators through dialogue with league table editors, ultimately the higher education sector has no choice but to accept whatever the league table compilers come up with. To opt out of the league tables is simply not possible.

The University's International & Graduate Office and Alumni & Development Office are particularly aware of the knock-on effect of performance in league tables. Alumni in the Far East have at times questioned the University's strategic alliances with some partner institutions which do not show to advantage in the Shanghai Jiao Tong University China International League table. Strathclyde, however, had not chosen these collaborative partners on the basis of traditional research performance, but for their strengths in applied research, outreach and innovation; dimensions not captured in the typical league table. These alumni may not have picked up on the nuances and may have judged these institutions on the basis of league table performance only.

From this perspective, the European classification would be interesting as a more balanced measure that would better capture the diversity of higher education valued by the University of Strathclyde and others, while still providing a structure and a framework for comparing different universities that could be helpful to prospective students and alumni.

#### • **Strategic planning and horizon scanning**

The University had just approved its Strategic Plan 2007–2011 when the site visit took place, and discussions consequently touched on the crucial importance of environmental scanning, benchmarking and analysis of comparator institutions.

While Strathclyde had taken part in benchmarking and comparative analysis of technology transfer activity, entrepreneurship programmes, and administrative structures with other member institutions of ECIU, the Planning Team was aware of the lack of data in the broader European landscape that could be valuable in broader benchmarking exercises and for the identification of good practice.

A desired outcome of the classification therefore would be measures that could lead to cross-institutional European benchmarking.

#### • **Questionnaires**

As part of the early stage project work, Strathclyde had the opportunity to provide input to the pre-pilot questionnaires on dimensions and indicators (see Chapter 6).

As a recognised innovative institution branded “The Place of Useful Learning”, Strathclyde appreciated the fact that the classification allowed for dimensions beyond the mere traditional, such as innovation intensiveness.

However, the Strathclyde Planning Team's involvement in responding to the pre-pilot questionnaires uncovered flaws in the questions:

- Two questions were at times combined in a single query (e.g. “percentage of programmes offered as distance learning or mixed learning”), with the response restricted to a single answer. This led to a lack of clarity in responses. Furthermore, it was not clear whether a 3-year degree programme with just one module offered via distance learning would qualify as mixed learning.
- Another question requesting “the number of extra-curricular courses offered for the regional labour market” did not define “extra-curricular”, which could be

open to different interpretations in different institutions, and similarly did not specify what was indicated by “regional”. The regional labour market for the University of Strathclyde could be Scotland in a broader European context, or the immediate West of Scotland area around Glasgow.

- The question “annual turnover in EU Structural Funds” is more relevant to certain institutions than to others. Eligibility for such funds is restricted to institutions in particular European regions only, which would lead to inaccurate capture of information, since it would not be clear whether an institution was, in fact, not based in a region eligible for funding or whether it was eligible but simply ineffective at making successful bids.

There were also some technical issues with the web-based user interface: a question and its response options could not be seen in its entirety on the screen, but required a respondent to scroll down; and there was no means of printing out responses, or indeed saving a response to return to it later.

These issues were duly addressed and the questionnaires circulated for the actual pilot test were substantially better than the pre-pilot questionnaires and web-based user interface.

- **Lessons learned**

From this early involvement in the project, Strathclyde formulated some key lessons learned and forwarded these to the project team.

### ***10.3.1 Communications***

Communication with key internal stakeholders at various stages is of critical importance. Because of the staff time involved in responding to the questionnaire, the Planning Team (or its equivalent) must fully understand the strategic importance of the task to their institution (assuming that participation is based on a senior management decision that the European higher education classification is relevant to their institutional objectives).

If the classification subsequently becomes a tool used by institutions and their stakeholders, promotion of the classification to staff and students at large should be clear and concise, explaining its purpose and how it differs from rankings.

### ***10.3.2 Robust Questions and User-Friendly Interface***

Again, as the credibility of the tool will depend on the integrity of the underlying data, the questions used should be straightforward, leaving no room for misinterpretation regarding the information being requested.

### **10.3.3 National Data Sources**

Finally, the likelihood of institutions participating in the classification would increase substantially if the data requested were aligned with national data requirements. In the UK, this would mean that data submitted to HESA could be re-used for the classification tool.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) provides a wealth of data about the UK Higher education sector. HESA is the official agency for collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about UK higher education.

HESA was set up in 1993, following the White Paper “Higher Education: a new framework”, which called for more coherence in HE statistics, and the 1992 Higher and Further Education Acts, which established an integrated higher education system throughout the United Kingdom.

A key recommendation arising from Strathclyde’s experience in the European higher education classification would be to align data requirements and collection with data already collected and made available in national repositories such as the UK’s HESA.

## **10.4 Moving Forward: Future Uses of the Classification**

Within the context of Strathclyde’s “Agenda for Excellence” and its aspirations for future development, the European higher education classification is seen as a tool that could underpin some of the strategies being deployed in pursuit of our objectives.

In particular, there are opportunities for use of the tool in the following four areas: analysis and horizon scanning; improving student mobility; matchmaking; and relations with employers.

- **Analysis and horizon scanning**

Awareness of the external environment is critical in terms of developing an institutional ability to anticipate and respond to developments. Strathclyde has regularly used systematic benchmarking to identify opportunities for performance improvement. Annual performance monitoring reports are produced and presented to the University’s governing body, the University Court. However, these analyses have been restricted by the fact that data is only readily available for the UK sector, not for higher education institutions further afield. As competition for the best students and staff is global, it would be desirable to have better and more numerous sources of data on higher education in other parts of the world. The classification would allow for increased access to quality data and information about other institutions, which would further support Strathclyde’s horizon scanning work.

If more institutions support this type of use of the classification, it would influence the way in which the tool is set up in terms of providing access to underlying data. Institutions providing data for the classification could be asked to share their



data with other institutions. This would give added value to the classification for those institutions permitting access to their raw data and allowing them access to the data of other institutions.

Further consideration would have to be given to how this type of sharing of data could be encouraged and organised, but this potential use of the classification would be of particular strategic interest to Strathclyde.

- **Improving student mobility**

One of the key strategic objectives at Strathclyde is to increase the number of students incorporating study or internships abroad into their programme of study at Strathclyde. Higher education institutions across the UK struggle with the same challenge, as statistics reveal that proportionally fewer UK students study abroad than other continental European university students. If students do go abroad, there is a tendency to favour English-speaking countries such as Australia and the United States.

Strathclyde is aiming to increase the number of students taking a semester of their studies in Europe, and over the last couple of years the University has organised events and campaigns encouraging more students to considering studying abroad. However, surveys of our students, intended to identify the reasons behind low study abroad participation rates, consistently raise “lack of information about the opportunities” as a factor. Despite the range of information events, and materials in print and online about study abroad opportunities, it is clear that more or different information would be desirable from a student perspective.

Consequently, the University believes the classification may help in providing the type of additional information that students are seeking. It is clear that anything that can help boost student confidence in considering study at other European institutions and the prospect of encountering different languages and university cultures would be helpful.

The European higher education classification could be incorporated into the cycle of early-stage broad-brush information sought by students when screening Europe to see which universities might be of interest to them. The classification would not replace advice provided by academic supervisors, but could supply an interesting, complementary layer of information, allowing students greater insight into what characterises different institutions.

- **Matchmaking**

Strathclyde is well known in Scotland for its close links with business and industry as illustrated by a recent agreement with Rolls-Royce and other major industry players to establish an Advanced Forming Research Centre with significant industry investment. Strathclyde’s Strategic Plan 2007–2011 outlines its aspiration to enter into two or more such strategic collaborations every year.

However, the University of Strathclyde also engages in various types of support to small- and medium-sized companies. Smaller-scale businesses often do not have the same R&D facilities as the major players and may at times approach the University for advice and input regarding potential European collaborators. With several European funding programmes requiring such collaboration with companies and higher education institutions elsewhere in Europe, any resource

that can provide early-stage input to companies about possible collaborators could prove extremely useful.

Strathclyde has not tested in any systematic way the classification's potential direct use to smaller enterprises, but the tool could prove to be of practical value to the University's Research & Innovation Office as it supports the development of applied research projects between smaller industrial players and consortia of higher education institutions.

Clearly, more analytical work is required to identify the information requirements of this stakeholder group and their potential uses of the European higher education classification, but from a Strathclyde perspective it appears the classification could be relevant in these types of industrial matchmaking activities.

- **Employer relations**

Strathclyde's award-winning Careers Services and many of the academic departments have close links with the major employers in the West of Scotland. Some are represented on Advisory Boards and support curriculum development activities, and employers are considered important strategic stakeholders in that the University aims to produce high-quality, employable graduates.

However, in a global marketplace, more students may wish to go abroad for employment, or local employers may recruit graduates from other European countries. As with the industrial matchmaking idea, there are opportunities for employers to utilise the findings of the European higher education classification when considering job applicants from other countries. The Diploma Supplement (DS) has provided much-needed transparency and clarity on what different degrees mean in terms of abilities and skills, but does not provide much information on the institutions issuing the degrees. The classification may give a broader supplementary perspective to the DS by making available high-level institutional information.

Similarly, Strathclyde may be able to use the classification in its marketing materials. The University has a strategic interest in ensuring that its graduates find employment, and some of the material published about the University could utilise descriptors from the classification. Similarly, the statistical "spider webs" that can be developed on the basis of the information contained in the classification database (see Chapter 4) are useful visual illustrations of how the University scores on the different dimensions of the instrument (such as whether we are more or less innovative on average than other institutions included in the classification). Again, such illustrations could be used in the University's portfolio of marketing materials and may ultimately be helpful to prospective students when they consider whether or not to study at Strathclyde.

## 10.5 Conclusion

As the discussion surrounding league tables illustrates, these are challenging times for higher education institutions in Europe. The competition for students and staff is growing, and existing league tables and global rankings create an indirect push

for uniformity: improvement in performance against a limited set of indicators is required in order to move up in the league tables. The values of diversity in institutional cultures and traditions are accordingly under threat.

A new European higher education classification would provide opportunities for better recognition of the diversity and differences in higher education institutions across Europe. It would permit universities such as Strathclyde to establish their position in the landscape of European higher education.

Action and reaction, we are taught in physics, are equal and opposite. Across Europe we see the pressure for financial and regulatory integration provoking an equal and opposite pressure for disintegration in terms of strengthening local cultural identities and of regions asserting their right to be heard. The debate on the future shape of higher education is following the same track. The diversity of institutions and even systems of higher education across the European Union should be nurtured against the tide of globalised orthodoxy based on the present league tables. The European higher education classification is a key part of this process for Strathclyde, as for every European university.

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