



# GLOBAL OPINION SURVEY

## NEW OUTLOOKS ON INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES

FEBRUARY 2010

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# THE HISTORY BEHIND UNIVERSITIES, LEAGUE TABLES AND THE BRAND

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Although we associate ranked tables with ideas about a global higher education ‘industry’, the idea of universities comparing themselves has a much longer history. ‘Governments and scholars had been publishing quality or research rankings for over 100 years’ according to Ruth Pagell, University Librarian at Singapore Management University.<sup>1</sup>

The medieval university was no stranger to competition and hierarchy. The Oxford scholars who founded the University of Northampton in 1261 did such a good promotional job that the Bishops persuaded Henry III to suppress the institution in 1265. By the 19th century there was much to count, classify and rank amidst the explosion of interest in education and qualification. In the 20th century universities were still seen as collections of individual organizations, but interest in a higher education ‘system,’ linked to policy for science and society, was increasing. As infrastructure expanded on the back of increased public funding, so the scene was set for an emerging battle.

For states and their governments, knowing what goes on inside the university and what comes out of it has been a fundamental driver of the desire to classify.<sup>2</sup> The league table becomes an instrument of governance as well as a measure of comparison. It is the multi-faceted uses that make tables such an object of desire, or of revulsion!

On one side – the faculty and the disciplines – is a desire to set goals and drive learning. On the other side – the state and the funders – is a desire to steer universities and to drive ‘impact.’ The competing forces of autonomy and accountability drive the rise of contemporary university league tables while, paradoxically, the internationalization of higher education and the need to secure competitive advantage through global positioning unites these interests.

National league tables, largely about student choice within a ‘consumer’ market, form one part of the landscape. The Berlin Principles of UNESCO-CEPES and IREG reflect a movement to bring international standards to bear on national teaching and student learning outcomes. International league tables are driven largely by the desire to measure research. Despite being restricted to a relatively small number of global players, the desire to compete is intense and potentially so significant that it gains national policy attention.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘brand’ of the institution unites academic, national and international interest. This is not based on the strength of the various disciplines, but on values associated with the institution as a whole. Some declare ‘foul’ at perverse consequences of league positions yet the allure of jostling for position is a potent force. Promoting the brand is served by the very notion of a public league table position.

There is a global twist to all this. The European and even the American age that gave birth to mass higher education and modern conceptions of academic research and innovation is, if not over, at least challenged. If the 20th was the American century, does 2010 signal the start of the Asia-Pacific century? Opinion leaders like Rick Levin, President of Yale University, suggest we take this seriously.<sup>4</sup> The changing numbers in university league tables reflect this shift and remind us of the continuing global reach of the university as a key knowledge institution.

# OPINION SURVEY

Thomson Reuters is in little doubt that league tables matter when it comes to ranking universities and colleges. If well-developed, they can be informative to students and their mentors,<sup>5</sup> and they matter hugely to those who run universities.<sup>6</sup> But league tables can hide as much as they show, because universities complex organizations span cultural boundaries and support multiple missions. No single indicator can capture that.

Thomson Reuters is committed to providing high quality, well-informed analyses that help people make decisions. We do not produce league tables. Other companies use our data to create rankings and we want to enable them to get the best data for their publications. We aim to gather data and create products and services that go the next step and reveal the more complex management information behind those tables.

To create a database useful to purpose, we need to compile the most relevant indicators of organizational competence and quality. We understand and acknowledge the Berlin Principles formulated by UNESCO-CEPES and IREG.<sup>7</sup> We also need to know which indicators people consider important and what they think is wrong with previous methods.

Thomson Reuters worked with Ipsos Insight Corporation, a global market research firm to develop and implement an online opinion survey to find out what the global academic community thinks about these issues. This report contains the results of that survey conducted during year-end 2009.

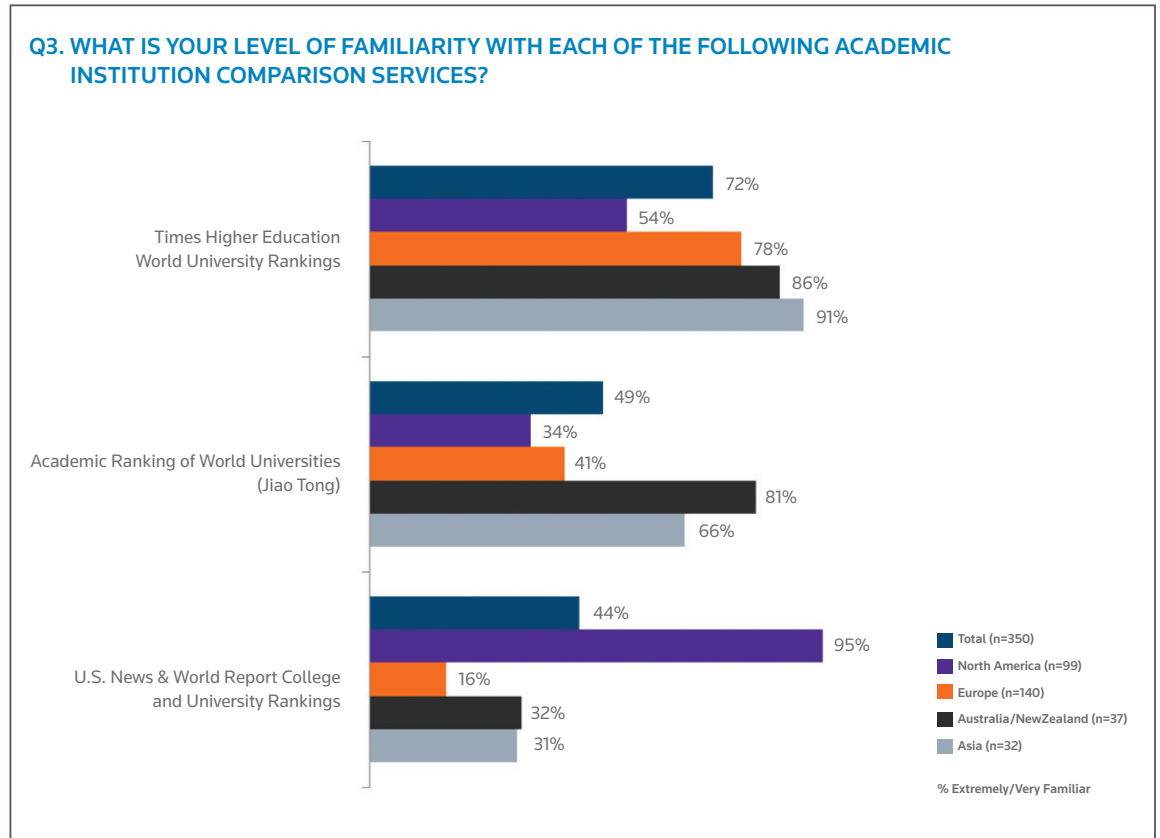
The sample includes 350 respondents making it larger and more diverse than any previous survey. The composition of that sample includes:

- Employees and students of academic institutions, and other informants who were aware of academic institution comparisons
- Responses from over 30 countries with the majority from the United Kingdom (n=107), United States (n=90) and Australia (n=30)

Respondents came from many different roles. A high proportion of those from North America classed themselves as 'administration' but in that region this includes senior managers. The most frequent category elsewhere was 'academic,' which included staff and students. Many different kinds of institutions were represented, most having between 6,000 and 25,000 students, but a significant proportion of responding institutions in North America and Australia/New Zealand were much larger (35,000+). About one-half of the respondents' institutions were identified as having a relatively high level of research activity.

What did people think about current league-table publications? The best known and most familiar ranking systems around the world are the Times Higher Education 'World University Rankings' and Shanghai Jiao Tong's 'Academic Ranking of World Universities,' which enjoys a strong reputation in Asia, Australia and Europe. The U.S. News & World Report 'College and University Rankings' is well-known and recognized most frequently in North America.

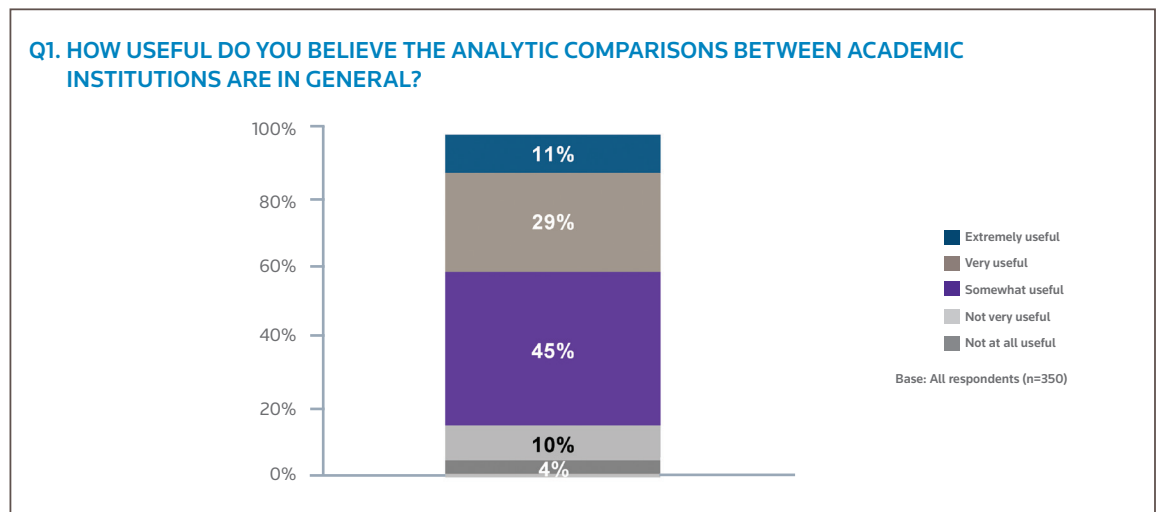
**CHART 1**  
Familiarity of Comparison Systems by Region



**How useful are current league and rankings tables?**

Respondents generally felt that the current analytic comparison systems had recognizable utility. About 40% globally said they were ‘extremely/very useful’ and a further 45% said they were ‘somewhat useful’. The strongest positive response came from students. Respondent feedback showed that there is an opportunity to increase the usefulness of the published ranking tables in North America and Europe to match what was seen as having greater utility in Asia and Australia.

**CHART 2**  
Usefulness of Academic Comparisons



However, the overriding feeling was that a need existed to use more information, not only on research, but also on broader institutional characteristics. The data indicators and methodology currently utilized were perceived unfavorably by many and there was widespread concern about data quality in North America and Europe. In particular, many felt that data enquiries were too often directed to the wrong offices within institutions.

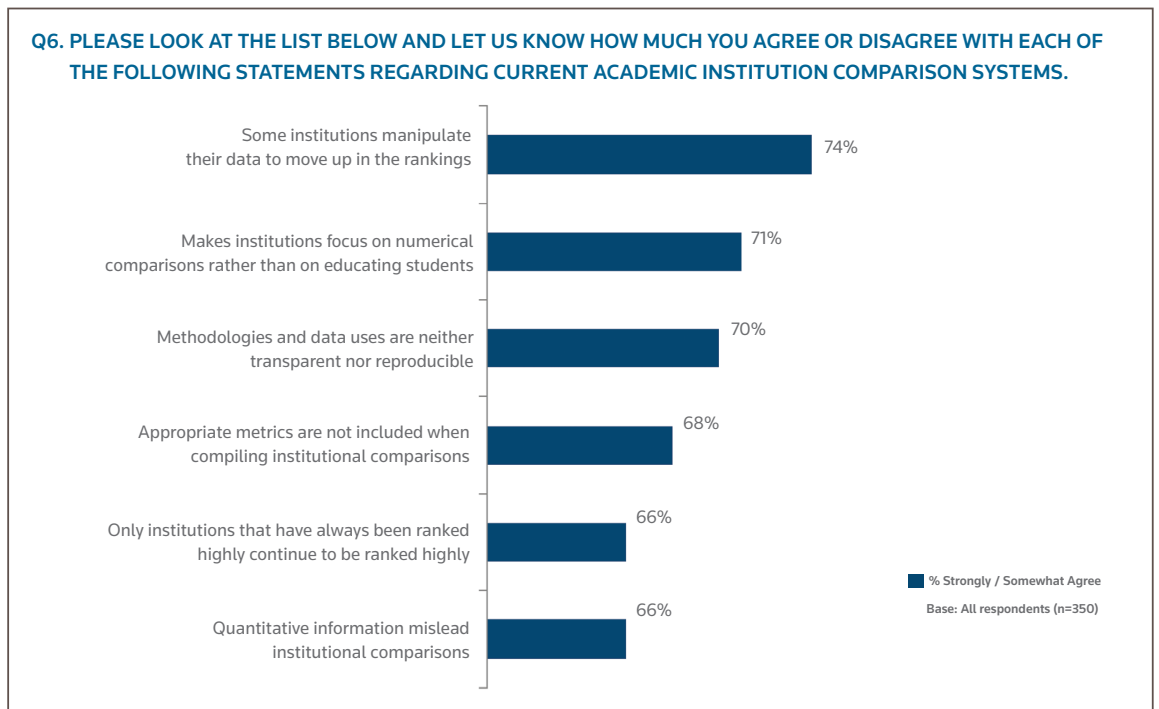
**TABLE 1**  
Primary Weakness (Open-End Results)

**Q5. NOW WHAT DO YOU VIEW AS THE PRIMARY WEAKNESSES OF THE CURRENT ACADEMIC INSTITUTION COMPARISON SYSTEMS? PLEASE BE AS SPECIFIC AS POSSIBLE.**

Primary Weaknesses of Comparison Systems (Open End Responses)	
% of Respondents	PRIMARY (N=350)
Data Metrics/Methodology Issues (Net)	36%
Improper methodology	10%
Some factors are inappropriately weighted	10%
Data metrics not consistent	9%
Doesn't consider all/most of the parameters	9%
Data metrics used not appropriate/ the best	7%
Complexity (Net)	19%
Difficult to compare	17%
Data Quality Issues (Net)	17%
Improper/Lack of information	11%
Unreliable	4%
Too biased	13%
Too subjective/ based on opinions	12%
Not result oriented	7%
Only Quantitative based, does not include qualitative	6%
Considers other factors than data	5%
Don't know/Not sure	10%

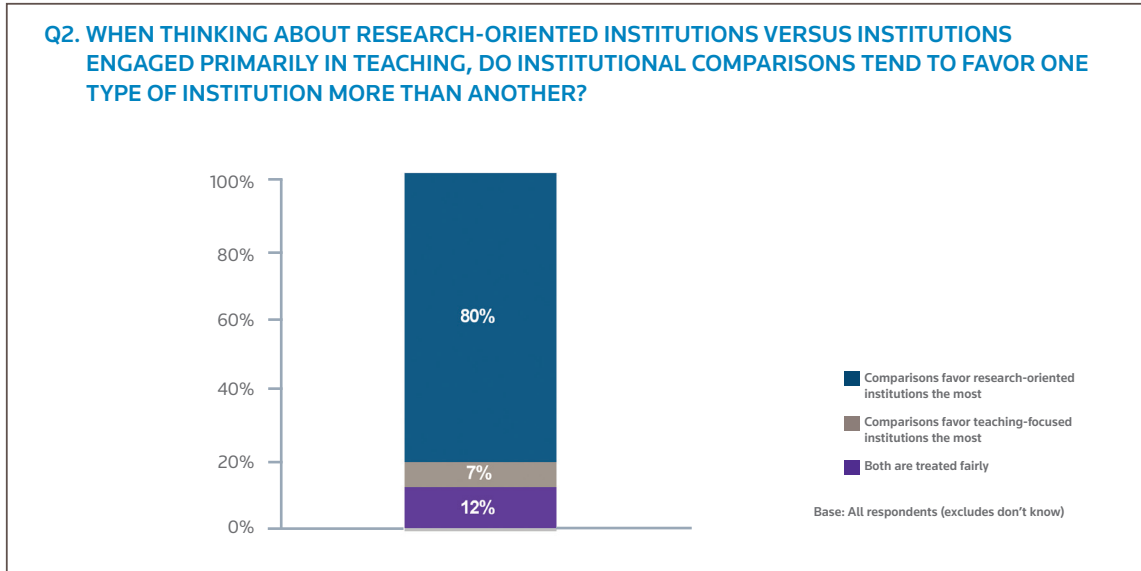
A concern found in the survey, and echoed in discussions with representative groups, was that published ranking tables could have more insidious effects. They changed the behavior, even the strategy, of institutions, not to become more effective, but to perform well against arbitrary ranking criteria. Some would even manipulate their data to move up in the rankings. This is of great concern and warns against any reliance on indicators that could be manipulated without creating a real underlying improvement. Of particular interest was that, across all regions, the same concern was often expressed with about the same degree of frequency. This gave us some confidence in the outcomes but also highlighted a specific concern from Asia: that all the current analyses tend to favor English speaking nations. This is an important reminder that while English remains the international language for academic discourse its pervasiveness may obscure the changing geography of academic activity.

**CHART 3**  
Evaluation Of Academic Comparison Systems



Across all regions, four out of five respondents said that league tables favored research-oriented institutions. This could again be due to the commonality of English as a research language, the public attention given to research and the ease of acquiring research-linked data.

**CHART 4**  
Research vs. Teaching Bias





### What should be collected to inform profiles and rankings?

Respondents who expressed a preference wanted the data collection from HEIs to be more reliable and better validated. Clarity and transparency from the outset about the data to be collected, methodology to be used and disciplines to be included were important in ensuring the results are valid and reliable. One way to ensure validation and quality, it was suggested, would be to develop a process to share data among neighboring institutions as a validation cross-check, but willingness to participate in such evaluation was not indicated.

While the majority of respondents said that league tables favored research-oriented institutions, they also indicated that research metrics and institutional characteristics were the more important measures to use in comparison systems. In particular, over 90% rated faculty output and impact as ‘nice to have’ or ‘must have’ – the highest ratings for any indicators – clearly showing how much people value the information that comes from data on research publications and citations. Research awards (grants and contracts) are also important but need to be scaled against staff numbers to get a useful indicator such as a faculty activity ratio. Patents, on the other hand, are less valued. Finally, respondents were not as positive as expected about possible new indicators on demographics – perhaps because HEIs are seen as naturally diverse and inclusive.

**TABLE 2**  
Essential metrics for comparisons: research and institutional characteristics

**Q7. FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF INFORMATION, PLEASE IDENTIFY WHETHER THE DATA ELEMENT IS MUST HAVE, NICE TO HAVE, NOT ESSENTIAL, OR NOT RELEVANT, IN THINKING ABOUT THEIR USE IN THE CREATION OF VALID INSTITUTIONAL COMPARISONS.**

Essential metrics for Comparisons	% Must Have / Nice to Have
<b>Research</b>	
Faculty output: research publications	92%
Faculty impact: citations and major scholarly	91%
Research Awards received	85%
Patents	76%
<b>Institutional characteristics</b>	
Faculty/Student ratios	86%
Faculty activity ratios (teaching income/research grants/publications per staff)	85%
Number of faculty	79%
Demographics of faculty and student population (international, gender, race/ethnicity)	75%

Base: All respondents (n=350)

Respondents indicated that the range and number of graduate programs and degrees are important, as is the size of the student body, though not the number of courses or classes taught.

Of the financial measures asked about in the survey, research income is the most important financial measure to respondents, but the analysis of income and expenditure is also an indicator valued as 'nice to have' by many. However, teaching income is not seen as being so important, perhaps because of variations in government funds and individual fee levels.

Collaboration was identified as a key indicator in comparison systems by 82% of respondents, as this is seen as a significant marker of quality by peers. Community engagement is seen as a less valuable indicator, perhaps because its significance is less obvious.

External perception is a tricky indicator, because it is about 'seeming' rather than doing. It is also true that reputation can linger after performance has changed. However, peer researcher perception was seen as a key indicator by a good number of respondents, with the value of employer, alumni and community perceptions all being slightly lower.

**TABLE 3**  
Essential Metrics for Comparisons: Teaching and Financial, External Engagement and Reputation

**Q7. FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF INFORMATION, PLEASE IDENTIFY WHETHER THE DATA ELEMENT IS MUST HAVE, NICE TO HAVE, NOT ESSENTIAL, OR NOT RELEVANT, IN THINKING ABOUT THEIR USE IN THE CREATION OF VALID INSTITUTIONAL COMPARISONS.**

Essential Metrics for Comparisons	% Must Have / Nice to Have
<b>Teaching</b>	
Graduate degree offered	85%
Graduate programs offered	83%
Number of students enrolled	79%
Number of classes taught	64%
<b>Financial</b>	
Income from research grants and awards	84%
Analysis of income sources	75%
Analysis of expenditures	73%
Total expenditures	72%
Income from teaching	61%
<b>External engagement</b>	
Collaborations – industry, international, multidisciplinary	82%
Community engagement	69%
<b>Reputation</b>	
External perception among peer researchers	79%
External perception among employers	71%
External perception among alumni and the community	69%
External perception among administrators	52%

Base: All respondents (n=350)

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Ruth A Pagell. (2009) University Research Rankings: From Page Counting to Academic Accountability 3:1:33-63
- <sup>2</sup> Hood, Christopher (2009) Foreword, in Jeroen Huisman (ed.) *International Perspectives on the Governance of Higher Education. Alternative Frameworks for Coordination*. New York & Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge; Scott, P. (1990) *Knowledge and Nation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England (2008). Counting what is measured or measuring what counts? League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England. Issues paper no 14. (April 2008). This report surveys ninety respondents across English universities, and six case studies. It was commissioned by HEFCE to investigate league tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England. It presents findings from an analysis of five league tables, and an investigation of how higher education institutions respond to league tables generally and the extent to which they influence institutional decision-making and actions. [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08\\_14/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_14/)
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Bastedo and Nicholas Bowman (2010). U.S. News & World Report College Rankings: modelling institutional effects on organizational reputation. *American Journal of Education*, 116, (published electronically, Dec 18, 2009).
- <sup>5</sup> Philippe Van Parijs (2009). European higher education under the spell of university rankings. *Ethical Perspectives*, 16, 189-206.
- <sup>6</sup> Institute for Higher Education Policy, Washington (2007). *College and University Ranking Systems: global perspectives and American challenges*. IHEP, Washington DC, [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org). This edited report includes chapters on, among other things, a global survey of rankings and their impact on student access.
- <sup>7</sup> The Berlin principles were formulated by the UNESCO's European Centre for Higher Education in Bucharest, Romania and the International Rankings Expert Group [http://www.che.de/downloads/Berlin\\_Principles\\_IREG\\_534.pdf](http://www.che.de/downloads/Berlin_Principles_IREG_534.pdf). IREG has met in Warsaw (2002), Washington (2004), Berlin (2006), Shanghai (2007) and Astana (2009), and will meet again in Berlin in 2010. <http://www.ireg-observatory.org/>

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