

League Table Formulation

A note by the Union President - Paul Beaumont

Background

Imperial has been badly affected in recent league table results. Although this is partly due to the increased weighting of student satisfaction – which is a powerful lobbying tool when dealing with College – it has the detrimental effect of undervaluing our degrees.

Reversing these changes will be particularly difficult to propose without appearing whiny, which is why I propose seeking the help of as many influential (and sometimes similarly badly affected) groups.

I wish to argue that these changes are disadvantageous to all school leavers considering applying to a top university. Many school students will – understandably – rely on the league tables without taking into consideration the ‘science’ or ‘algorithm’ behind the table: they expect the institution running the league table to be acting in their best interests. In my opinion, the reality is they’re not.

Newspapers with a large amount of influence owe a duty to school leavers to fairly represent what students want (not to autocratically “move the goalposts¹” as was stated on twitter on launch of last guardian league table by its Editor).

The whole concept of a **Value Added Score** is flawed. This does not take into account how challenging a course is to students. Top Universities – to protect their reputation and the reputation of their graduates – will not confer top honours on their ‘average’ student. This in itself could be seen as the Guardian supporting the ‘watering down’ of standards that has proven to cause so many problems with A-Levels – eventually culminating with the introduction of the A* because so many students achieved an A grade.

“The value-added score compares students’ individual degree results with their entry qualifications, to show how effective the teaching is. It is given as a rating out of 10²”. This is wholly untrue: a top institution that takes students with top A-Level grades, will still confer a range of degrees due to comparisons of exam scripts relative to their peers and is not representative of how effective teaching is in the slightest.

My other major concern is the **weighting of student satisfaction versus traditional indicators**. To determine the weighting of factors in a league table, we must first consider “*why do students go to university?*” Job prospects³.

“The survey is a measure of student opinion, not a direct measure of quality. It may therefore be influenced by a variety of biases, such as the effect of prior expectations. A top-notch university expected to deliver really excellent teaching could score lower than a less good university which, while offering lower quality teaching, nonetheless does better than students expect from it⁴”.

Indeed, the Guardian even themselves state that the most important reason is prospects:

“Pollsters asked 130,000 UK students, who had applied to university in the summer of 2006, but had not yet started their courses, why they wanted to go on to higher education and why they had

¹ Source: <https://twitter.com/#!/judyfriedberg>

² Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/may/22/key-to-university-guide>

³ Source: <http://www.futuretrack.ac.uk/public/2006resultscareer.php>

⁴ Source: <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/key/>

chosen their particular course. The main reason most of them (35.1%) gave for going on to university was that it was part of their long-term career plan.⁵

Resolves

1. To agree with the above arguments.
2. To seek support of national bodies.
3. To lobby for changes to league tables to be reversed
4. To form a working group to help the President achieve the resolves

⁵ Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/mortarboard/2008/mar/17/dostudentschoosesubjectsfo>