

Failing the challenge of institutional evaluation: how and why managerialism flourishes

Governments spending billions and individuals spending thousands of pounds on higher education (HE) rightly expect accountability for how the money is used. But pressure for accountability has accelerated the spread of managerialism, jeopardising rather than improving quality and posing dilemmas for managers trying to reconcile internal and external pressures. In the managerialist dialectic, unthinking resistance meets unthinking control, an unwinnable battle between the stereotypes of 'academic populism' and 'new managerialism' (Watson, 2009:77). Managers and staff could respond more effectively to the challenge of evaluation by thinking differently about managing, to find social practices embodying the values needed to transcend managerialist pressures. In this chapter I use the case of league tables and draw on theory and practice (including my own experience as Pro and Deputy Vice-Chancellor in a large 'mid-table' university) to sketch an alternative approach.

Managerialism is a set of constituted and constitutive social practices involving actors inside and outside the institution, especially senior managers. It is associated with new public management, emphasising specification of outputs and targets, performance measurement as a means to its management, and business-inspired practices such as contracts for service, increased competition between HE providers, and a quasi-market framing students as customers (Dill 1998). Such practices risk creating a managerialist ideology purporting to elevate managers above the managed, misrepresenting management as something more than a necessary means to making HE work properly (Cuthbert, 2007). Management can thus come to alienate the managed rather than be their natural support.

Resistance to managerialism rarely goes beyond simple opposition. El Khawas (1998:319) argues: "Resistance to a government policy is usually informal rather than formal, but it nevertheless has a systematic, not individual or idiosyncratic character." Many HE staff resist league table evaluations which they believe present a reductionist, inaccurate view of HE (Eccles, 2002). This presents an institutional challenge faced by senior managers and their advisers in planning and institutional research offices, who occupy crucial positions on the 'implementation staircase' (Trowler 1998:55). Managerialism is a consequence of failure to interpret external demands for accountability in ways which make them constructively meaningful for internal staff and student audiences. But there is scope to develop alternative narratives for institutional evaluation, which satisfy external pressures for simple measurement **and** internal pressures for appreciation of operational complexity.

As the opening chapter of this book suggests, evaluation is a "social practice bounded by the purpose, intention or function of attributing value or worth to individual, group, institutional or sectoral activity" (Chapter 1: pp). Constructing and using league tables are evaluative practices. Reid's (2009) study of quality assurance in Australian HE showed how social practice can be shaped by discursive practice, itself derived from texts issued by a central agency which thereby became a central authority 'disciplining' universities to follow a particular approach. But in this process of establishing a discourse there is scope for senior managers to reconstruct policy in the way that Trowler (1998:114 *et seq*) describes as the most creative option for academics responding to change. I will use RUFDATA concepts to develop the argument, suggesting interpretations and practices which might transcend rather than merely resist managerialism.

The use and construction of what have been termed 'League tables' involves public attempts to rank universities or parts of universities according to their performance on various dimensions. These strongly classified, strongly framed evaluative practices (Chapter 13: pp)

apparently allow little institutional discretion: “Institutions do not feel they have sufficient influence on the compilers and the methodologies used in the rankings.” (Locke et al, 2008: 14). The best-known league tables are perhaps the Times Good University Guide (UK), the US News and World Report rankings (US), and the global Times Higher Education and Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings. The Funding Council’s league table based on the National Student Survey is also very influential in the UK¹. League table proliferation has prompted rankings of rankings, notably by Yorke (1997) and Dill and Soo (2005).

League tables “... are being used for a broader range of purposes than originally intended ...” (Locke et al, 2008:15) but the **reasons and purposes** can perhaps be reduced to two. For the media, they generate sales and readership; for institutions, governments, staff, students and potential students they offer a simple overall assessment, a proxy for reputation (Tapper and Filippakou, 2009) and a guide for policy and individual choices. Locke et al (2008) showed how institutions deliberately use league tables “as a short cut to reputation” (p 36). League table evaluations first command attention: “The Board has set an institutional key performance indicator of improving the position in the league tables.”; then shape other practices: “The aim of improving league table position ... is encouraging moves to stronger central and corporate management for some functions.” (p 38). As Reid’s (2009) analysis suggests, the league table ‘text’ can lead to a dominant discourse within the institution which shapes managerial and other social practices. Managers may be in denial: “... although a whole list of key performance indicators have been devised that are aligned with performance-related rankings, there is reluctance to accept the description “league table-driven” (p36). Staff, who like managers are usually critically aware of methodological flaws (Mroz, 2009), are nevertheless subject to league-table-conscious supervision. If they cannot reconcile discrepancies between their own and the league table judgements’: “... morale drops, and sometimes they blame senior management, other departments or those responsible for the data returns.” (Locke et al, 2008:39-40).

Problems arise from the variety of **audiences** and the corresponding variety of **uses** for league table evaluations. Politicians, journalists and potential students are glad to find an apparently simple and comprehensible guide for their own purposes, making league table evaluation extremely important for institutions and their reputations. “Evaluation, however, takes on different meanings at an institution and system level.” (Minelli et al, 2008:170) - within institutions for improving practice, at system level for quality assurance, for disciplining the recalcitrant, and so on. Responding to external pressure can lead to internal **uses** in target-setting which overvalue or are perceived as overvaluing the league table. The **agency** producing such evaluations is usually a newspaper. Managers usually regard league tables, externally produced using official statistics, as beyond their individual influence, and aim simply to use rankings selectively for public relations.

A league-table-dominated managerial(ist) discourse alienates staff because it jars with their own experience, judgements, and values. Locke et al (2008:61) say: “... there is an onus on policy makers and HE institutions to promote greater public understanding of league tables and alternative sources of information about HE institutions. “But managers might make **more** difference if, instead of internalising league table measurements, they developed alternative approaches to evaluation which were a better fit with institutional mission and academic values. Such alternatives would improve morale and pride in the institution – effective weapons against inaccurate external evaluations. Managers have a choice: to accept and thereby to amplify league table evaluations, or to try to educate students, staff and lay governors about the work of the institution by developing a different discourse, using explicitly different terms, and ensuring alternatives are used internally.

This is familiar territory. “Internalist evaluation is at the heart of HE. It is an essential component in the advancement of scientific knowledge ... but also in the determination of academic reputation and rewards.” (Henkel 1998:291) Systematic resistance to league table

narratives should to a greater extent be reinforced through collaboration with other institutions, for example by building on benchmarking 'clubs'. It calls for different support from institutional research and planning officers, who in a managerialist regime focus on analysing league table positions rather than developing and supporting systematic alternatives.

Such an approach might also involve changing the **foci** of evaluation. Sponsler's (2009) US analysis called for policymakers to refocus rewards on institutions that promote equity, but this was simply a request for **others** to change. League tables encourage a focus on institutional reputation by reducing many complex activities to a single number or ranking. But reputation is the accretion of many achievements over time, and it can be rebuilt through alternative stories about successes in research, teaching and public service. The marketing offices to tell those stories already exist, and recognise the need for a strong institutional narrative or 'brand', to compete with the story told by a league table which places the university, 82nd, say, in a field of 150. But unless the brand narrative fits staff perceptions it too may become an alienating symbol of managerialism.

Reputation, which might once have been left to evolve, must now be managed: so must **data and evidence**. "Data collection and verification is felt to be improving all the time and this is seen as the major consequence of the league tables..." (Locke et al, 2008:41). Mismanaging data can damage reputations: London Metropolitan University's long-running dispute with HEFCE over student enrolment data came to a head in, 2009, doing major financial and reputational harm to the University (Newman, 2009). The University had been one of the few to opt out of appearing in most national league tables, by refusing to release data for their preparation. Vanishing from league tables has public relations risks, but there may in some cases be a dividend in protecting managerial and staff morale and reducing unproductive data management.

One major objection to league tables is that they 'count what is measured' rather than 'measuring what counts' (Locke et al, 2008). The goals of HE may be richly described (Robbins, 1963; Dearing, 1997) but they defy precise formulation and reduction to a single measure. The challenge to managers is to reconcile that inevitable truth with the equally inevitable wish of external audiences to find simple metrics for their narrow purposes. The managerialist turn has meant proliferation of measurement, target-setting, key performance indicators and other monitoring and regulatory devices which sit uneasily with the more qualitative commitment of many staff, motivated by higher ideals than ticking boxes in the corporate strategy. There is scope for using qualitative evidence – case studies, human stories, prizes, awards – to rebalance the league table story. And the cause is not hopeless: journalism thrives on human interest, and prefers stories to statistics.

Institutional evaluation is an instrument of political will for change (Henkel, 1998). Institutions cannot ignore and must therefore confront the challenge posed by new forms of evaluation, going beyond critique to develop alternatives to league tables. To reconcile internal and external demands, institutional evaluation must take forms acceptable to and usable by external audiences, but which also reflect academics' views of "embedded issues of values and of the purposes of social inquiry" (Henkel, 1998: 286). The challenge is to find a synthesis which goes beyond Watson's caricatures of academic populism and new managerialism. Academic populism is unconstructive resistance; managerialism is undue domination of the practical 'wisdom' that in fact puts excessive reliance on an analytic-rational paradigm of management unsuited to much performance management in HE (Cuthbert, 2007). Both are inadequate responses to the legitimate challenge of institutional evaluation for accountability.

In responding to evaluations managers make choices often represented in either-or terms: summative or formative; improvement or justification; quality assurance or quality

enhancement; playing the Government game or promoting educational values. But this reduces resistance to mere opposition, and we need to do more than change evaluation **methods**. Co-opting peer review, for example, does not necessarily imply greater legitimacy (Henkel, 1998), as successive Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) have shown. The challenge is to transcend this 'dialectical managerialism' by seeking synthesis.

This means bringing different values and theories into the process of 'disciplining' institutions to conform to a model of global business organisation (Reid, 2009). In (social) practice this is unlikely to mean a few big decisions, or rewriting a corporate strategy. It is more likely to involve frequent reaffirmation of core educational/academic values in small ways, in particular reaffirmation by senior staff for middle managers, who might otherwise assume, perhaps wrongly, that managerialist thinking is expected. For example, my institution once ranked very low in a national league table for the proportion of first class degrees awarded. There was a danger that managers would press for more first class awards in a way that staff might have found anti-academic. A public announcement deprecating such moves would have been ineffective: "they have to **say** that, but they don't mean it". But if we **were** being unduly harsh we were disadvantaging high-achieving students, so as Deputy Vice-Chancellor I invited discussion by our Learning and Teaching Committee. They commissioned qualitative research which showed the low proportion of firsts was not, as many had supposed, due to the rigidity of the assessment framework, nor could higher proportions of firsts in some areas be attributed to the nature of the disciplines. Rather, our assessment culture and practices made it impossible in many areas for students to achieve much more than 70 on a scale supposedly stretching to 100. Publishing this research internally led to reflective self-appraisal by many staff and assessment boards, a spread of good practices such as differentiating between levels of first class achievement – and a small increase in the proportion of firsts, two or three years later. We had found a way to respond to a league table evaluation which stayed true to educational values and commanded academic support.

Without such responses, league tables will threaten institutional diversity. Dill and Soo (2005) argue that global league tables are converging on a common definition of academic quality, and Enders (2009) points to the danger of "organisational isomorphism" as institutions indulge in a "costly academic reputation race" and league tables become key influences in constructing the HE field by defining what matters most for globally leading universities. But collaborative work to develop alternatives is emerging, notably in the European Union-funded project by the CHERPA network². Such work, at international and national level, is urgently needed to counteract league table reductionism.

University senior managers may need to change how they think about managing, so they can respond better to staff expectations, student demand, financial restriction, public and journalistic scrutiny, Government requirements, and more. These pressures point in different directions and demand creative management thinking as well as good judgement. Managers shape institutional narratives to make external ambiguity manageable for Governors, staff and students. If they over-use rationalistic analysis, targets and key performance indicators as 'weapons' to respond to the 'attacks' they face, they may reinforce the very problem which causes the pressure - the inappropriately managerialist framing of evaluation questions. Mechanistic responses which do not sufficiently acknowledge academic and educational values reproduce external managerialist practices within the institution.

As tuition fees increase and public spending decreases HE faces major new challenges of accountability. HE's stakeholders have varying levels of understanding of, and varying interests in, the business of HE. There is a lack of trust between the parties involved, many institutions are financially at risk, and managers in these circumstances will struggle to assert and sustain alternative ways of thinking. The irony is that if they cannot, the

excellence which league tables purport to promote will be denied. To make things better we must rise to the challenge of institutional evaluation and transcend dialectical managerialism.

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¹ These tables can be accessed online at:

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/good_university_guide/ <http://www.usnews.com/rankings> and the Times HE

• THE <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/WorldUniversityRankings2009.html>

Shanghai Jiao Tong www.arwu.org/ARWU2009.jsp
National Student Survey (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2009/nss.htm>)

² See http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news1416_en.htm