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Fabricating World Class: Global university league tables, status differentiation strategies and myths of global competition

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Fabricated World Class: Global university league tables, status differentiation and myths of global competition

Abstract

United Kingdom (UK) media coverage of global university league tables shows systematic bias towards the Russell Group, though also highlighting tensions within its membership. Coverage positions UK 'elite' institutions between United States superiority and Asian ascent. Coverage claims league table results warrant UK university funding reform. However, league table data for all years to 2012 (when major funding reforms were implemented – most radically in England) does not show either US superiority or Asian ascent. Citation bias defines media content. Text itself is structured by three discursive 'ratchets'; highlighting US successes but never failures, rising Asian institutions but never falls, and claiming UK results warrant the same policy irrespective of whether results improve or worsen. These combine with selective doubt by 'elites' who question but are not questioned. These four discursive mechanisms fabricate an illusory threat of global competition. This threat is then used to warrant neo-liberal policies at home.

Global University Leagues and UK Funding Reform

Global university league tables emerged in the early 2000s (Bowden 2000, Federkeil 2008). The United States (US) has always had more entries at the top of all such leagues. It is by far the largest wealthy English speaking nation. Domination in league tables is routinely said to reflect its differentiated funding arrangements and the very high fees charged to students by its most prestigious institutions; not just its size, wealth and language (Hazelkorn, 2011). In the UK mass media, attention to global league tables has been modest but significant in framing policy debates (Stacka 2013). However, coverage increased in the run up to the 2012 removal of almost all central government funding for university teaching.

Government funding cuts were replaced by raising the £3000 annual 'home' student tuition fee 'cap' to £9000. For Welsh students the Welsh government pays the difference between the old 'cap' (index linked) and what universities can now charge. The Northern Irish government does the same for students remaining in Northern Ireland. The Scottish government pays the full fee for 'Scottish' undergraduates in Scotland. English undergraduates (over 80% of the UK total) are fully liable for 'their' fees. League table results are interpreted by those cited in media coverage as warranting this 'Americanized' policy in

England of partial deregulation, full privatization and radical escalation of fees. This article evaluates the relationship between such claims and the data on which such claims are supposedly based.

Two qualifications need to be made. Firstly, it is not being claimed here that world university league tables are 'true' measures of 'quality' (for discussion of validity and inconsistency problems, see Bergseth, Petocz and Abrandt Dahlgrena 2014, Bowden 2000, David 2012, Turnera 2005, Usher and Savino 2007). The research focus here is upon whether global league table results correspond with claims supposedly based upon them. This research is about 'claims making'. Secondly, this article does not address the significant issue of what universities are for. Appearance in league tables is not the only/best measure of quality. Quality in serving local, national and global economic cultural, political and educational needs may not be best measured in citations, reputation indexes, grant income, Nobel prizes etc. (Collini 2012, Delanty 2001).

Despite such problems, 'global profile' in terms of league table success is increasingly seen as 'the' measure of quality. France's 'Sorbonne League' attempts to create elite institutions, visible on a world stage, in distinction to the relatively egalitarian structure of French Universities and the non-research orientation of its elite écoles (Grove 2011). Germany's 'Exzellenz-initiative',

seeks to create a top tier of institutions with a 'worldwide' profile in the style

of 'the elite Oxbridge and Ivy League institutions of the Anglophone world'

(Mechan-Schmidt 2012, 22). China's 'Project 211' (Brown et al. 2011, 33), of

which the Shanghai Index is itself a part, also evidences the growing power of

global ranking in status competition. These initiatives, and others in Saudi

Arabia, Russia, and Brazil, alongside UK policy reforms, are equally misguided if

US 'success' claims are illusory, as this article suggests.

Research Questions and Design; Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis (Guest et al. 2012) combines the comprehensive character of

content analysis (Krippendorff 2004) with the depth and detail achieved in

discourse analysis (Potter 1996; and Silverman 2006). Using various terms and

synonyms, Lexus/Nexus and BBC archive searches were carried out for all UK

news coverage of global university league tables. For the period since such

league tables were initiated (in 2003), until 2012 (when radical HE funding

reform was implemented), 52 items were identified in seven outlets. An

inductive content analysis was carried out to address the first research

question: *What are the recurrent themes, objects and actors in media text?*

This was followed by thematic analysis of media text to address a second

research question: *What are the dominant frames within the textual data?* Key

themes identified were: US superiority (linked to fees and spending), Asian

ascent, and 'selective doubt' over league table results.

The next step was to compare media representation with the results of league

tables themselves regarding US superiority and Asian ascent. The top 200

results for the three leading world university league tables (Shanghai, QS and

Times Higher Education (THE)) were collected for all years to 2012 (with the

exception of QS's first two years as this data was corrupted). Only analysing

the top 200 results is to sample on the dependent variable (King et al. 1994),

and would therefore be a source of bias if this research sought to make claims

about higher education based on league table results. It does not. Rather it

seeks to evaluate media claims that are said to be based on such results. The

third and fourth research questions are then addressed: *Do league table*

results show US superiority and/or Asian ascent? 'Selective doubt' is then

addressed.

'US superiority' (relative to the UK) was measured by comparing English

speaking countries only, and the number of entries within league tables was

then correlated with population size (see Lia, Shankara and Ki Tanga 2011a and

2001b for earlier work controlling for language, size and wealth). A measure of

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placement within tables was also calculated. In addition, the sum of all ranked positions was then correlated with population size (again controlling for language).

A parallel set of counts was carried out for the number Asian universities ranked in each league for each year to evaluate evidence regarding 'Asian ascent'. As with the data for English language countries, so with Asian countries (Singapore and Hong Kong being in both sets), a sum of all ranked positions, average rankings and a count of numbers of entries were calculated.

With media claims regarding US superiority and Asian ascent not being supported by league table data, a fifth (and final) research question is then addressed: *How is such misrepresentation constructed, firstly though the selection of people cited and objects sighted; and secondly through discursive mechanisms at work within the text?*

Research Question One: What are the recurrent themes, objects and actors in media text?

[Table 1]

A LexusNexus and BBC archive search using terms associated with university

world or global league tables and their compilers generated 52 articles (Table

1). Coverage rises gradually from 2004 onwards. Systematic inductive 'invivo

coding' (Miles and Huberman 1994) identified 505 significant terms. Inductive

coding using 'constant comparison' in NVivo enabled subsequent thematic

selection (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

[Table 2]

Of actors referred to or quoted (see Table 2), the self-selecting 'elite' Russell

Group is cited seventeen times, it's now disbanded challenger, the 1994

Group, is cited only once, Universities UK (UUK) seven times, the University

and College Union (UCU) four times, and the National Union of Students (NUS)

twice. Across 24 articles, eighteen people are cited in their capacity as

university heads and their names are mentioned 37 times. Apart from

Aberdeen and St. Andrews all these led Russell Group universities. Whilst Steve

Smith was head of a then 1994 Group university, he is only ever cited as UUK

chair. 'Professor' is used 34 times. Professors are always named. 'Student'

occurred 326 times. Only 14 are named. 'Lecturers' are referred to 30 times

but only one is cited. Lecturers and students are often discussed but rarely

speak.

A coding for verbs revealed 54 cases of competing or competition and twelve

cases of rivalry, with no references to cooperation and only five to collaborat(-

ion/ing). A coding for proper nouns found UK synonyms occurred 359 times.

UK universities receive 519 mentions. The US equivalents are 128 and 280.

Next is mainland China, mentioned 32 times, but Chinese universities receive

only four mentions. Hong Kong adds 23 and its universities 17 references.

Japan adds 12 and nine respectively. Korea (15), Taiwan (7), Singapore (6),

Bombay and Delhi (once each), Asia (29) and 'Far East' (twice) add to this. With

408 US and 157 Asian references, 'Europe' receives only 30 mentions. The UK

is framed between named US stars and a more general Asian ascendance.

As can be seen in Table 2, all sources bar the Sun cite multiple university

heads; all bar the Sun and Independent cite the Russell group; whilst only the

Independent cites the NUS. Only the BBC cites the 1994 Group (once) but cites

the Russell Group six times. UCU leader Sally Hunt is cited by three sources.

BBC 'balance' within elite pluralism, Times and Telegraph elitism, Independent

mild anti-elitism, Sun (scantily evidenced) populism, and Mail/Guardian elite

orientation with a wink to class conflict (if with different eyes) accords with the

'folk wisdom' of British media 'bias' (Curran and Seaton 2009). Nonetheless,

citing 'elites' and highlighting successful institutions characterised most

coverage. Yet, 19 articles express some doubt concerning the validity of league

table data.

Research Question Two: What are the dominant frames within the textual

data?

Content analysis shows the predominance of elite voices, and the UK framed

between US superiority and Asian ascent. Positive and negative descriptors,

and the categories of places, universities, cities and countries cluster around

the theme of geographical comparison, and this is dominated by comparisons

between the UK and either the US or Asia. 'Europe' is mentioned more

negatively than positively, and is not therefore constructed as a 'threat'. The

textual constructions of US superiority and Asian ascent are now addressed,

but are followed by discussion of the important subsidiary theme of 'selective

doubt' about the data itself. Such doubt, whilst recurrent, never challenges the

two dominant themes.

US Superiority?

[Table 3]

As shown in Table 3, 76 of 120 UK/other comparisons favoured the other. Only

27 favoured the UK. Half the UK comparisons were with the US,

overwhelmingly favouring America. Of 63 comparisons 48 favoured the US, six

were neutral, with only nine favouring the UK. Overwhelmingly, attention was

paid to particular US successes, i.e. its most prestigious institutions.

Over half the sampled articles compare spending levels (Mail 80%, Guardian

and BBC 75%, Telegraph 50%, Times 38%, Independent once, Sun none).

'Other countries invest more', 'the UK must invest more' is the repeated

message. Harvard University's endowment was referred to by the Times,

Telegraph, BBC, Mail, and Guardian. Initially cited without source on November

4th 2004, the Times associated Harvard's number one position in the then new

QS/THE league with its $23bl endowment. On November 9th 2007 the

Telegraph estimated this endowment to be greater than the total UK higher

education budget. On October 8th 2008 this comparison (now the endowment

was said to be greater than the UK's total public sector university budget) was

attributed to Ann Mroz (editor of THE) in the Telegraph and without source in

the Times. The next day the same 'factoid' was attributed to Ann Mroz by the

Mail and BBC, and to Russell Group Executive Director Wendy Piatt in the

Guardian.

Eighteen articles address UK funding reform in relation to league tables. On

October 5th 2006 the Mail claimed: 'The pole positions of Oxford and

Cambridge are likely to strengthen their case in pressing the Government for

an increase in tuition fees after 2009... On Tuesday, Oxford's vice chancellor Dr

John Hood said it was 'inevitable' the £3,000 a-year charges introduced last

month would increase'. That year's QS/THE results saw Oxford and Cambridge

rise one place each to third and second, after Harvard, with a jump from 23 to

29 UK institutions in the top 200, the paper reported.

On November 8th 2007 this message was repeated after UK institutions in the

QS/THE top 200 rose to 31. The Mail claimed: 'Vice chancellors are now likely

to seize on their strong showing to press the case for the £3,000 a-year cap on

tuition fees to be lifted when it is reviewed in 2009'. The telegraph agreed:

'This improved performance is likely to strengthen the universities' case for

lifting the cap on student tuition fees ahead of a review in 2009. Many want to

charge more than the existing £3,000 limit to enable them to compete with

those in the US'.

When UK results dipped, the Times reported on October 8th 2008: 'Vice-chancellors and commentators voiced concern that, without an increase in investment, Britain's standing as a first-class destination for higher education could be under threat'. Piatt was cited reinforcing this view, whilst Ann Mroz claimed: '"As a percentage of gross domestic product the US spends more than twice as much on its universities as the UK does".' That same day, the Telegraph reported: 'The findings come amid warnings that British universities will lose their world-class position unless ministers increase vital funding levels. Last week, Lord Patten, the Oxford chancellor, called for the "intolerable" £3,000-a-year cap on tuition fees to be lifted to allow Britain to retain "its international standing in higher education"'.

Other titles concurred the following day: 'The results could put more pressure on the Government to raise the £3,000-a-year cap on students' tuition fees when it is reviewed next year. Many British vice-chancellors say they do not receive enough funds to cover the costs of teaching their courses and as a result cannot compete internationally. Last week, Oxford Chancellor Lord Patten said middle-class students should be prepared to pay higher tuition fees' (Mail). 'This [rising Asian competition] is a good reason to uphold the higher education sector in this country. The funding settlement will not hold for long. The cap on fees will have to be lifted' (Times). '[V]ice-chancellors

claimed it [fewer UK entries] showed they were in need of more money to

cement their position' (Guardian). This same call is repeated in later years,

whether results went up or down.

League tables were overwhelmingly interpreted as showing US superiority, and

it's most successful institutions were to be copied. Whether or not putting all

one's eggs in one basket did increase overall success (which league table

results do not suggest – see below) is never asked. The US model of a highly

differentiated higher education is never questioned, and such a system of

'competition' rather than collaboration between academics, institutions and

countries is taken as necessary and good. Competition is 'brutal' (Times),

'aggressive' (BBC), 'fierce' (Mail, Guardian, Telegraph and BBC), at

'unprecedented' levels (BBC), 'challenging' BBC), 'increasing' (Mail and BBC),

'ever harder' (Times), and 'growing' Telegraph, BBC and Times).

Competition is generic; collaboration is competitive, particular and temporary;

and cooperation unheard of. The UK is 'struggling' (BBC) to 'punch above our

weight' (Guardian, BBC and Times) in a 'global market' (BBC and Times) or

'world market' (BBC). 'Elite' UK institutions need to 'match the ambition' (BBC)

of 'global super brands' (Telegraph and BBC), or face 'losing out to American

rivals' (Mail, Guardian, BBC and Times) and Asian threats 'snapping at our

heals' (Guardian and BBC). Yale's international collaborators recruited harder

(Times). THE and QS stopped collaborating (BBC).

Asian ascent

[Table 4]

Asia was favourably compared directly with the UK ten times, and negatively

only once. Twenty articles referred to Asia rising (see Table 4). None claimed

'Asian dissent' or stasis. On November 4th 2004, the Times noted the 'highest-

ranked institution in Asia' being Tokyo in 12th place (QS/THE), with Beijing

17th. On November 8th 2007 the BBC asserted: 'Asian universities improve

their position.' On October 8th 2008, in the Telegraph: 'Wendy Piatt... warned

Britain faced fierce competition from China' amongst others; repeating the

warning that day in the Times.

The next day the BBC cited Piatt claiming: '..."China already looks set to

overtake the UK very soon in terms of total research publications [meaning

little], and its universities have been steadily climbing up international league

tables [incorrect]".' On the same day the Guardian claimed, developing

countries are 'challenging our position', whilst in the Times Piatt; ' ...warned

that rivals China were coming up fast...', and in the Mail that: 'China was

looming as a major academic rival'.

On October 7th 2009, Piatt was reported by the BBC claiming; '..."countries like

China and Korea, which are investing massively in their best institutions, are

snapping at our heels".' The article heralded Tokyo, the highest (QS) Asian

institution that year, coming 22nd, omitting to recall Tokyo came 12th in 2004.

The broadcaster highlighted that the University of Hong Kong (HKU) had risen

two places. On October 8th the Guardian claimed results showed '...advances

of academia in Asia, which will pose a challenge to the Ivy League and

Oxbridge'; adding: 'Leading UK universities said institutions in Japan, South

Korea and Hong Kong were "snapping at the heels" of Western institutions,

arguing that they needed more funding to compete on the global stage.' It

then quoted Piatt saying '..."countries like China and Korea are snapping at our

heels"...', with THE's Phil Baty adding: '"Spending on higher education in Asia is

phenomenal and that's why you see their results going up".' On the same day

the Times claimed the; '...growing presence and impact of Asian and European

institutions'.

Asian rises in 2010 and 2011 were reported by the BBC and Telegraph

respectively. Falls were not. On September 16th 2010, the Guardian reported

'Peking' as mainland China's highest ranked institution in 37th place. It failed to

recall 'Beijing's' 17th place six years earlier.

Selective Doubt

Most BBC and Guardian articles contained limited questioning of league table

validity. The Times, Telegraph and Mail doubted once each. The Sun and

Independent do not question the 'data'. However, 'questioning' was always by

elites, never of them. On October 9th 2008 the BBC reported: 'The director

general of the Russell Group of leading UK universities, Dr Wendy Piatt, said it

had reservations about the use and accuracy of "league tables" but the group

was pleased that its member universities were continuing to perform well

against major global competitors'.

On October 7th 2009 the BBC reported Piatt repeating this combination of

scepticism with undiluted acceptance that results supported her organisation's

agenda: '"The broad message of these tables is clear - the leading UK research

universities are held in high esteem internationally… But countries like China

and Korea, which are investing massively in their best institutions, are snapping

at our heels… The precise accuracy of league tables like this can be debated,

but there is no mistaking the alarm bell warning that our success is at risk if we

as a nation don't take action to fight off such fierce competition".'

Cited the next day, by the BBC, Times, Telegraph and Guardian, an Oxford

spokesman claimed Oxford's fall behind three other UK universities was

questionable as Oxford had come first in other tables. Alongside Piatt and the

Russell Group (questioning three more times in 2011), Oxford has the status to

question any questioning of its status.

Similarly, Steve Smith is quoted by the BBC on September 16th 2010: '"Clearly,

league tables must always come with a health warning as they never tell the

whole story, but these rankings provide a useful indicator of international

trends".' Phil Baty (same piece) pointed out that '..."a change to the way the

tables had been compiled made comparisons over time difficult".' In a second

BBC piece that day Baty elaborated: '"Because of the change to the

methodology, any movement up or down since 2009 cannot be seen as a

change in performance by an individual country or institution".' Smith, 'post-

positivist' social scientist (1996), Vice-Chancellor and former UUK head, shows

no such methodological inhibition.

On September 16th 2010 the BBC mentioned a European Commission report

where: 'Experts have expressed "serious reservations" about the

methodologies used by global ranking organisations', but then listed US/UK

successes, thus framing European reservations as sour grapes. On October 6th

2011 the broadcaster again cited 'elite university' leaders questioning methods

only to claim results supported elite-prioritizing proposals.

On June 9th 2011 the BBC (citing Oxford University Professor Howard Hotson)

noted bigger English speaking countries did better. On March 15th 2012 the

BBC observed; 'responses have put 44 US universities in the top 100 - and 44%

of responses came from academics in US universities', but continued to draw

the standard conclusion of US superiority. The Russell Group, Oxford

University, UUK and league table constructors occupy the space for doubt, but

never doubt themselves.

**Research Questions Three and Four: Do league tables show US superiority
and/or Asian ascent?**

US Superiority?

Given the significance of the English language in citations and reputation

measures, and given this third research question addresses the UK's position

relative to the US, comparison here is between English speaking countries. US

institutions predominate in all leagues for all years. US institutions have

occupied between 87 and 93 of the top 200 places in the Shanghai Index since

its inception, between 53 and 58 top 200 places in QS tables; and between 72

and 75 top 200 entries in THE results. However, the number of top 200 entries

correlates almost entirely with population size.

[Table 5]

The population of English speaking countries (US 310million, UK 62m, South

Africa 50m, Canada 34m, Australia 22.3m, Hong Kong 7m, Singapore 5m,

Ireland 4.5m, and New Zealand 4.4m) was correlated with each country's

number of top 200 institutions for each league table for each year of that

table's existence. Alternative calculations were made to remove first language

French speaking Canadians, Cantonese only speakers in Hong Kong, and the

non-English speaking majority in South Africa, but none altered the

correlations beyond the range noted below and so are not elaborated upon

here.

As table 5 shows, population size correlates with numbers of universities in

league tables at values from 0.914-0.988. There is therefore only negligible

variation between English speaking countries over and above that predicted by

the size of each country's population. Ranked highest to lowest a country's

population size and number of top 200 institutions associates absolutely for all

years and leagues barring QS in 2006, when Australia marginally overtook the

slightly larger Canada before falling back into rank order again thereafter.

Variation between English speaking countries with top 200 entries matches

population size. However, amongst English speaking countries only OECD

members have top 200 entries. Wealth is a necessary condition. Population

only then explains entry variations. Table 6's 'Entries per million of population'

column shows the United States performing less well than most other English

speaking countries, only outperforming South Africa and matching New

Zealand. The United States only outperforms South Africa when South Africa's

total population is used. If only South Africa's 3.7 million first language English

speakers were counted South Africa would outperform the US on ranked

institutions per capita, as do all other English speaking countries barring New

Zealand. That population size does not correlate perfectly with the number of

institutions ranked is the result of the relative failure of the US and, in even

more extreme terms, South Africa.

[Table 6]

However, number of entries alone does not tell the whole story. Higher ranked

entries have scored better than those lower down. An overall measure of

rankings within tables might then redeem the claim that league tables show US

superiority. US institutions routinely occupy many of the top slots. Giving each

ranked institution a reverse score (200 points for 1st place, one point for 200th

place) measures this. Applied to the THE 2011-12 data a calculation of this kind

offers some support to the US superiority thesis (see Table 6). The average US

institution in the top 200 is seven places higher than the average UK entry, four

points above Canada's, six above Australia's etc.. However, whilst the US has

higher mean scores for those universities ranked, it has fewer institutions

ranked per capita than other English speaking countries bar (almost identical)

New Zealand and (much weaker) South Africa.

A Pearson's correlation between the sum of all ranked positions and national

population size shows an association of 0.967. Whilst the US scores higher on

average for those institutions ranked, this is cancelled out by having fewer

entries per capita. Having a ten percent lower average position relative to the

US, the UK has 100 percent more top 200 entries per capita. Putting one's eggs

in fewer baskets does not improve overall performance. This outcome is nearly

identical for all other league tables in all other years. Calculating this was

marginally more complex for the Shanghai data as institutions 101-150 and

151-200 were presented in blocks. As such, those placed in the 101-150 block

were assigned a value of 75, and those in the 151-200 block the value 25.

Overall results were not altered. There is no evidence in any league table for

any year to support the view that the US university system is superior, size for

size, to any other English speaking country bar South Africa.

Asian Ascent?

[Table 7]

What of the claim that league tables herald the ascent of Asian universities to

challenge the UK? In terms of numbers ranked results fluctuated in all tables

(see Table 7). There is very limited fluctuation in the Shanghai data, and an

even weaker fluctuation in the QS results. Neither movement produces

statistically significant change (p. = 0.142 and 0.152 respectively). For the THE

data the methods used between the two years changed, so the sharp decline

in Asian universities ranked by THE between 2010-11 and 2011-12 cannot be

interpreted. Overall, there is no evidence for Asian ascent but rather more

suggestion of stability.

[Table 8]

What then of the possibility that higher rankings, rather than just overall

numbers ranked, show an improved performance by Asian universities? Giving

each ranked institution a reverse score (as conducted for English speaking

countries above) was repeated for all Asian universities for all league tables for

all years (see table 8). In the Shanghai data the overall sum of ranked scores

fluctuated around a very similar level, and showed no statistically significant

change over time (p. = 0.300).

The QS data did show a statistically significant rise in the overall sum of ranked

scores over time at the 5% level of confidence, though the result was not

significant at the 1% level (p. = 0.019). However, this rise is explained by one

country. South Korea's entries in the QS top 200 rose from three to five. The position of institutions ranked also rose. Excluding South Korea, the overall performance of Asian countries saw no statistically significant change (p. = 0.155).

Once again, the radical drop in the number of Asian institutions ranked and in the positions of those ranked in the THE table between 2010-11 and 2011-12 cannot be interpreted due to its methodological changes.

There is support in the QS league table for the claim that South Korea has improved its standing in world league tables. However, overall, the results for Asian Universities simply fluctuated, with no evidence of any systematic or statistically significant improvement relative to the rest of the world. Different leagues suggest that Japan is either improving or falling back, and that Taiwan is either improving or slipping. Likewise China is either marginally up or down depending of which method is applied. Even including the success (by one index) of South Korea, overall fluctuation cancels out year on year changes.

Japan was and remains the predominant contributor to Asian success in league tables, China remains far behind, Singapore and Hong Kong remain successful relative to their size, whilst Malaysia, India and Thailand remain very much behind. The claim that league tables show Asian ascent is false. South Korea's improved QS results are roughly equal to those of Scotland (which has just

over a tenth of its population). Asia's overall ranking began and remains the

same as or just below that of the UK (which has fifty times fewer people).

The Gap

In league tables the US performs no better than the UK (size for size) and Asia

is not catching up. Media coverage of world university league tables suggests

otherwise. Asian ascent (understood as catching/overtaking the UK) is a myth

based on misinterpreting international rankings. Asian universities may be

improving, but only in line with improvements elsewhere. South Korea's

improvement in QS rankings is interesting, but being in only one of the three

leagues is not a secure pattern, and being only one country cannot be said to

show overall Asian ascent. South Korea's parallel with Scotland is particularly

challenging to any attempt to deduce the merits or otherwise of UK funding

reforms from league table results. South Korea has high fees and fee

differentiation. Scotland has neither. The fifth research question arises: how is

media misrepresentation 'achieved' at the level of content and discourse?

Research Question Five: How is textual misrepresentation constructed?

Content Bias – Who is cited/what is sighted

Russell Group director Wendy Piatt; representatives and heads of specific

Russell Group universities; and in particular those from Oxford University,

occupy most of the discursive space. The 1994 Group's Paul Marshall was cited

only once. This was on October 6th 2011, by the BBC: 'UK universities are facing

budget cuts, despite the new fee regime. The sweeping reductions to capital

grants will make it harder to invest in the facilities that make our universities

world leaders.' Marshall's comment is located between comments from Piatt

and then Oxford vice-chancellor Andrew Hamilton. Piatt and Hamilton frame

debate over just who 'our' world class universities are. Marshall does not.

The head of a 1994 Group institution until 2012, Steve Smith's concerns about

the concentration of funding within the Russell Group receive no coverage. As

head of UUK he is cited suggesting results showed the need for more money in

general. Similarly, Sally Hunt of the University and College Union is cited

suggesting league table results show the need for more funding, but her and

her union's campaigns for a more egalitarian distribution of funds is never

cited. Only Russell Group representatives can speak on where funding should

be focused (on themselves).

However, the Russell Group is not an internally homogeneous, nor an

externally discrete, cluster of 'research intensive' universities. Oxbridge stands

apart and many non-Russell Group institutions score just as well if not better

than members of this self-appointed 'elite' when subject specific funding

differences are controlled for (Boliver 2015). Outsiders (UCU, UUK and the

1994 Group), when cited, are only given space to agree with the 'global

competition' frame presented by Russell group representatives. Yet, internal

divisions exist in Russell Group commentary on world university league tables.

As noted above, Wendy Piatt routinely claims the supposed success of the US

university system, and 'Asian ascent', are due to concentrating funding on elite

institutions, something she wishes the UK to emulate in favour of her

members. On the other hand, Oxford University explicitly advocates removing

the tuition fee cap as the means to increase resources and to concentrate

them at the top, something Piatt does not openly advocate, at least in

coverage of global university league tables.

League table results do not suggest the more differentiated and private fee

funded US system performs better than the less differentiated and mainly

state funded (pre 2012) UK system. Differentiation simply produces higher

highs that are cancelled out by lower lows. Yet, this 'overall' effect of

differentiation is not a shared experience. Winners win and losers lose. When

those that do or believe they will benefit from a revised and more uneven

distribution of resources are asked, they claim (and perhaps believe) that what

may benefit them is also for the common good. If others are given no space to

question the self-evidence of success, the self-interest of the successful will be

presented as unquestionably right and true.

Closure in terms of who gets cited makes it very easy for self-interest to stand

as self-evident. Such closure may explain why media representations reflect

the interests and beliefs of 'elites', even when their claims contradict the data

the claims are allegedly based upon. However, the question still remains how

such misrepresentation is constructed.

Discursive Mechanisms: Three Ratchets and Selective Doubt

The Oxford English Dictionary (1996) defines a ratchet as; 'a set of teeth on the

edge of a bar or wheel in which a device engages to ensure motion in one

direction only'. A discursive 'ratchet' occurs when all evidence provided is

either selected or interpreted to move an argument in one direction only. The

first manifestation of this discursive mechanism is in selecting only successful

US institutions, and taking their success as evidence that the US system itself is

superior. Differentiated systems have higher highs and lower lows, so

highlighting one type of outcome (success) is misleading.

A second discursive ratchet is achieved in relation to Asian ascent by citing

rises and new entries, but not falls and exits, enabling a constant ascent

narrative. Ascending cases are reported. In 2008 China's only prior Shanghai

entry (2005-7) dropped out. This was not reported. However, QS saw three

Asian re-entries, which were reported. It was not reported that 2007 had the

lowest number of Asian entries in QS to date. 2008's improvement on 2007

was reported in five sources. That there were still fewer Asian institutions

ranked in 2008 than in 2006 was not reported. A new THE methodology in

2010 saw China gain more entries than Japan. On September 16th 2010, this

was reported by the BBC and Guardian as evidence of China's rise (though,

given the new methodology there was no past to compare with). Further

reformulation of THE methods in 2011 saw China, South Korea and Taiwan fall

back. This was not reported.

Singapore remained constant in all tables for all years and so was rarely

reported. Hong Kong institutions fluctuated in different years/tables. Only rises

were reported. Despite stability in the number of Asian entries in QS's 2011

table, the BBC reported on September 5th; '…the main up-and-coming region is East Asia, particularly Hong Kong, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, said [QS's] Mr Sowter'. Of these six only South Korea actually saw rankings improve. Declines went unrecorded. The BBC's March 15th 2012 description of 'the rise of Asian countries as the new education superpowers' was, again, simply based upon highlighting rises whilst ignoring falls.

Tuition fee coverage, when set against league table results year on year, highlights a third form of discursive 'ratchet'. When UK universities improved their position in league tables, coverage suggested success warranted increased fees. Years with fewer UK entries saw the same conclusion drawn. Success strengthens the case to raise tuition fees. Failure puts more pressure on government to do the same. Removing the fee's cap was said to be justified by whatever the actual outcomes were. In the case of US superiority and Asian ascent, the ratchet effect of always reaching the same conclusion is achieved by selecting only cases that support the pre-established frame. In the case of UK results and fees the discursive ratchet is achieved by interpreting divergent findings year of year to support the established frame.

It might be objected that highlighting the discursive mechanisms above suggests media coverage offers an uncritical acceptance of league table data, when there is much criticism and doubt expressed in reporting. However, such

doubt is only ever selective, reserved for dominant actors, and always

contained within continued acceptance of dominant interpretations of results.

Selectively 'sighting' only results that confirm an established frame (US

superiority) and narrative (Asian ascent), drawing the same conclusions

irrespective of the results themselves, and selective doubt by those authorized

to speak, combine to construct a reading of global university league tables that

confirms the assumptions and interests of those given predominant space to

speak.

Discussion

This article assesses whether league table data shows US superiority and/or

Asian ascent. It does not. Claims that league table results show the superiority

of the deregulated and higher student fee based arrangements seen in the US,

relative to the more regulated and state funded arrangements in place across

the UK prior to 2012, are false. As such this paper supports critiques of 'neo-

liberalization' in higher education (Amsler and Bolsmann 2012, Olssen and

Peters 2005) by debunking claims that league table results show the

superiority of market deregulated systems.

The article has not directly addressed other significant critical questions

regarding neo-liberal reforms in university funding; those of access and the

ethics of repayment. These questions have been addressed elsewhere, and can

be summarised briefly. Student self-funding reduces fiscal (state) limits on

university access (Barr 2004), but self-funding does not actually increase levels

of access and participation (David 2012). Graduates on average earn more than

non-graduates (Barr 2004). However, this differential is itself class, race and

gender dependent (Egerton and Savage 1997, Green and Zhu 2007, Meister

2011, McGettigan 2012). As graduate earnings are so unequal, it is wrong,

even above a repayment threshold, that graduates should re-pay the flat cost

of their education in addition to general taxation, if, by general progressive

taxation, they will pay more *if* they earn more anyway (Brown et al. 2011).

Prior research challenges neo-liberal reform on access and ethical grounds.

This article challenges the claim that neo-liberal policies deliver 'success' even

in neo-liberalism's own terms (i.e. in relation to 'global competition'

indicators).

University league tables emphasise competition and relative position over

substantive functions (Hirsch 1977, Brown 2000). If differentiation works it

highlights 'elites' and renders 'losers' invisible. Ellen Hazelkorn's research into

university ranking schemes, as both reflection and promoter of differentiation,

competition and market globalization, suggests league tables both legitimate

reputational competition and intensify it. 'Despite continued dispute about the

validity of the choice of indicators and/or their weightings, rankings have

acquired legitimacy because the methodology appears statistically rigorous'

(2011, 28).

Media assertions as to the 'reality' and 'benefits' of differentiation,

competition and global marketization claim to draw on statistical (league table)

data, even when such data does not warrant these claims. That the legitimacy

of statistical rankings is used to support policies even when ranking data does

not evidence the success of such policies requires further explanation than

simply 'faith' in numbers (however misguided).

Conclusions

Attention to global university league tables has risen in recent years. Results

are interpreted to justify increased de-regulation, privatization and escalation

in 'user' fees. It is claimed that results show such neo-liberal reforms 'work' in

enabling US success and Asian ascent. Emulation of this 'model', it is claimed,

will enable 'elite' UK universities to compete. Yet, neither US superiority nor

Asian ascent is evidenced in league tables. Media accounts suggesting

otherwise are explained in terms of who gets cited and the discursive

mechanisms deployed by them. However, 'elite' university representatives are

not fully at one regarding what form such emulation should take. The Russell

Group calls for more spending and greater concentration at the top. Oxford

University more explicitly advocates fee deregulation and escalation to achieve

this end.

Media citation is overwhelmingly biased in favour of dominant institutional

representatives. These actors frame debate. Other voices are only ever aligned

with the dominant frame. Drawing attention only to US successes, rather than

the weaknesses generated by its more differentiated system; and noting rises

but never falls by Asian institutions, perform discursive 'ratchets' enabling the

same frame to be 'evidenced' irrespective of results to the contrary. Claiming

UK success and UK failure evidence the necessity of funding reform is another

discursive 'ratchet' operating in media coverage. The discursive mechanism of

selective doubt further immunises challenge by including partial reflexivity

rather than any genuinely alternative perspectives.

Numbers cannot speak. They can only be interpreted. When discursive space is

predominantly occupied by one powerful lobby it is not surprising media

accounts conform to their agenda, irrespective of whether the data under

discussion actually confirms their claims. The claim that 'global competition'

warrants policy reform at home is fabricated through discursive mechanisms,

not faith in numbers. Policy change was certainly not justified by the numbers

themselves.

However, for all its success, the Russell Group fundamentally failed. Whether

paid by students or devolved governments, higher fees simply replaced central

government funding. Government underwriting of loans turned the £9000

'cap' into the standard tariff; replacing central funds, not adding new money,

and certainly not boosting 'elite' institutions' resources. Fee escalation and

privatization were achieved in England, but sectarian lobbying merely aided

the government in cutting funding. Calls for further privatization, fee

escalation and differentiation to address this 'failure' have already been raised.

Given the unreliability of claims-making to date, such calls will require ongoing

critical scrutiny.

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Table 1: World league table reference by source and year 2004-2012

Year/ Source	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
BBC				1	1	2	4	6	3	17
Mail			1	2	1		1			5
Sun						1				1
Independent		1					2	2	1	6
Times	1			3	4	2	1	2		13
Guardian					1	1	1	1		4
Telegraph				1	1	1		3		6
Total	1	1	1	7	8	7	9	14	4	52

NB Data for 2012 ended in Mid-March

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Table 2: Reference to academic actors by source

Reference /Source	Word Total	Russell Group	1994 Group	Sally Hunt	UUK	NUS	Student	Lecturer	Prof	Chancellor (& VC or PVC)
BBC	10200	6	1	2	5		45	2	10	5
Mail	2200	2		1	1		11	1	2	5
Sun	100						2			
Independent	6000					2	81	5	10	2
Times	11750	5					141	23	10	6
Guardian	2200	3		1			12			3
Telegraph	5000	1			1		34		2	3
Total		**17**	**1**	**4**	**7**	**2**	**326**	**31**	**34**	**24**

Table 3: Positive or negative comparisons

	Other better/risen	Other worse/fallen	Parallel/equal	Total
US	48	9	6	63
Europe	9	14	7	30
Asia (East)	10	1	3	14
Australia	3	3	1	7
Canada	2			2
Latin America	2			2
Middle East	1			1
India	1			1
Total	**76**	**27**	**17**	**120**

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Table 4: Articles referring to Asian ascent

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
Times	1				3	1				5/13
BBC				1	1	1	2	2	1	8/17
Mail					1					1/5
Telegraph					1			1		2/6
Guardian					1	1	1			3/4
Independent								1		1/6
Sun										0/1
Total	**1**			**1**	**7**	**3**	**3**	**4**	**1**	**20/52**

Table 5: Pearson's Test for entries by population in English speaking countries

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Shanghai	.987	.988	.987	.984	.984	.985	.984	.987	.987
QS				.920	.924	.934	.928	.916	.914
THE								.962	.957

Note: All results have p values of .000, except for QS 2010 and 2011, which have p values of .001.

Table 6: Mean scores, number ranked and sum of scores for English speaking countries (THE2011-12)

Country	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	N*M	Entries per million of population
US	63.6	75	15.8	4770	0.24
UK	56.6	32	14.7	1811.2	0.5
Canada	59.4	9	15.3	534.3	0.27
Australia	57.5	7	11.8	402.7	0.32
Hong Kong	55.8	4	13.7	223.2	0.57
Singapore	58	2	18.3	115.9	0.4
Rep. of Ireland	48.5	2	3.7	97	0.44
South Africa	53.2	1	0	53.2	0.02
New Zealand	44.6	1	0	44.6	0.23

Table 7: Shanghai, QS and THE results –Asian countries – number of top 200 entries

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Shanghai	12	12	13	14	13	12	12	15	14
QS				30	26	29	33	32	32
THE								25	18

Table 8: Asian sum of scores for all years in Shanghai, QS and THE Indexes

	2003	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**
Shanghai	1196	1175	1160	1236	1153	1015	1049	1173	1159
QS				2675	2770	2777	3139	2980	3157
THE								2406	1765