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Transparency through Quality Profiles

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Quality



- The Quality Question, asked by prospective students, employers, industry, funders and the general public, is simple:

“Is the University of X a good university?”

- To this question,
 - The answer given by Quality Assurance Agencies is inadequate and confusing,
 - The answer that could be given by the state is not wanted,
 - And the university sector itself offers no answer at all.
- The only answer currently available to the public, then, is to look at league tables and rankings.

League Tables



- League tables are founded on a fallacy.
- They transmute the question “Is it good?” into a different question: “Is it better than the others?”
- The fallacy: From the fact that $A \neq B$ one cannot infer that either A is better than B or B is better than A.
- In a diverse sector, universities are different from each other to the extent that any ranking is an artificial construct, and no ranking has any more legitimacy than any other.
- But we cannot leave the Quality Question unanswered.
- Claim: We can compare universities, without having to rank them.

What to do?



- The University sector should take back the initiative.
- Find a baseline agreement of how a university should present its quality profile:
 - Comprehensively (i.e. dealing with all 3 core functions: research, teaching and societal engagement)
 - Factually (all information are independently verifiable)
 - Transparently (publicly available, no hiding any information)
 - Comparatively (the profile can be compared with other profiles)
- Let each university put its quality profile on its website.
- Then let those who want to do rankings carry on – the more rankings the better.

Example: quality profiling in research



Research Assessment Exercise in the UK:

Unit of assessment A	Full-time equivalent research staff submitted for assessment	Percentage of research activity in the submission judged to meet the standard for:				
		4*	3*	2*	1*	Unclassified
University X	50	15	25	40	15	5
University Y	20	0	5	40	45	10

4* = world-leading

3* = internationally excellent

2* = recognised internationally

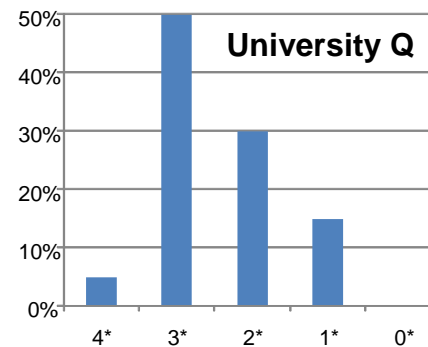
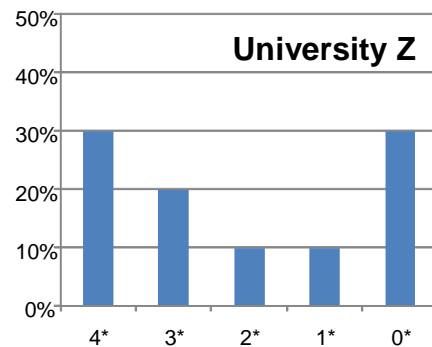
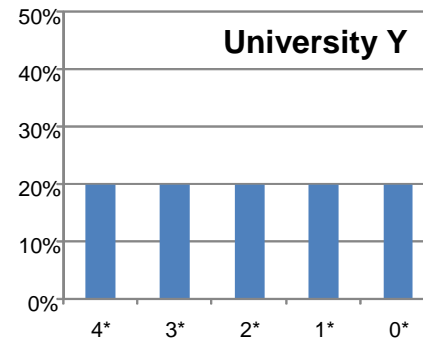
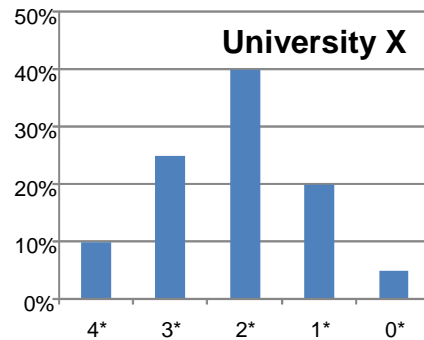
1* = recognised nationally

0* = unclassified; below standard

Quality profiles



- More like shapes, less like numbers. E.g:



- These shapes can be compared, but have no unique ranking.

Conclusion



- While there are many different ways of ranking university performance, there is no substantive sense in which any one of them encapsulates all of what we call quality.
- Quality does not lend itself to a linear ranking.
- But quality can be profiled, and thus compared.

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Note: Papers on these topics can be found at

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/about/peoplestructures/staff/bios/brinkspeeches.htm>

Or just go to the Newcastle University website, type “Chris Brink” into the search engine, and follow the links.

Thank you