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The reporting of university league table employability rankings; a critical review

Author: Fiona Christie

Affiliation: Careers & Employability, University of Salford, Salford, UK & Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK.

Email: f.christie@salford.ac.uk

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Biography: Fiona Christie is a career development specialist and practising careers consultant in higher education. She has also worked as a careers adviser in secondary and further education. She is currently undertaking doctoral studies in educational research with a focus on employability and careers.

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The reporting of university league table employability rankings; a critical review

Which are the best and worst universities in the UK for getting a job when you graduate? This question attracts readers of the employability rankings in national league tables. This study critically reviews the employability measure used in the rankings and its subsequent reporting in public news and commentary sources, such as national and local media, student and advisory websites as well as universities and the publishers themselves. A debate that is constrained by a reproduction of the content and apparent neutrality of the employability measure in the tables is revealed. Universities themselves are the most frequent commentators, and echo the content of the tables fairly uncritically. Analysis leads to a consideration that participants in higher education may not be served well by a proliferation of information that can lead to simultaneous over-simplification and obfuscation that does not result in clarity or trust. I will argue that prospective students and their advisers need to review information that is available critically, and that universities individually and collectively should facilitate the production of a more nuanced narrative about graduate career pathways that is not controlled by marketing and metrics.

Keywords: employability; rankings; higher education; league tables; careers advice

Introduction

The university league tables routinely include graduate career prospects as one of their ranking indicators. The tables provide the scope for readers to explore how whole institutions as well as individual subject areas compare specifically around graduate destinations. This indicator in the tables has become commonly known as the employability ranking or measurement of institutions. Prospective students and their parents/carers are encouraged to consider the career destinations associated with doing a degree and how this varies depending on where and what you study. UK-domiciled undergraduates (and in particular English students) face the highest ever costs in order to study for a degree. Students attending UK universities can expect to pay up to a £9,000 tuition fee per year. National UK league table publishers argue it is more important than ever to weigh up whether this investment is worth it in terms of career prospects and financial return.

This study reviews the employability measurement in the league tables of three major national publishers (Times 2013, Guardian 2013, Complete University Guide 2013b) with a specific focus on the 2014 tables (published in 2013), considering both its value and shortcomings with a particular focus on what the measure offers to the prospective students who it is ostensibly designed to help. How publishers present this aspect of their tables and the subsequent discussion of the employability rankings in the media and other public sources will be analysed with a view to distil what this reporting contributes to discourses about higher education. These reflections also lead to practical considerations about how prospective students and their advisers can use the employability rankings as well as how policy and practice in universities is being influenced.

The data used by the major league tables in creating this employability measurement is drawn from the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey. This is a long-standing government-led census of graduate destinations six months after graduation. It has evolved in form but also in application from being a benchmark of general interest in labour market trends to a measuring stick which allows a whole range of stakeholders including league table publishers to make comparisons between universities. The design and management of the survey attracts continual attention amongst policy makers, e.g., at the time of writing, the Higher Educational Statistics Agency (HESA) is conducting on a major review of the measure (HESA 2015, 2016). The use of such statistical data as a performative measure is associated with the role of government to regulate higher education, but also with prospective students having maximum data in order to make well-informed choices. Government policy endorses the need for information to be readily available to those choosing higher education (Department of Business Innovation & Skills 2011). The stakes have been raised in relation to the usage of publicly available data about universities in order to enable student choices in the development of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which was proposed in a recent government white paper

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(Department of Business Innovation & Skills 2016a). Current plans include use of DLHE data (Department of Business Innovation & Skills 2016b, 11) as one instrument of assessing student outcomes as part of the teaching quality of institutions which will be linked to individual universities ability to set higher tuition fees. Details of how this metric will be utilised and weighted are under consultation.

This policy commitment to more information for prospective students runs parallel to other education policy which has led to there being less support for some UK students in how they may be able to optimise the use of such information. In England, control of careers guidance provision has been handed to schools and colleges to manage themselves while removing the budget that had previously existed for a public careers service (Department for Education 2015, Watts 2015, 333). This has resulted in patchy provision of careers guidance (CommunicateResearch 2014), which has increasingly been added to teacher workloads with a reduction of specialist career development staff in the school and college sectors. The value of the wide range of information that is available about higher education has been contested - a recent HEFCE report expressed reservations about whether more data for prospective students actually helps them make better choices at all (Diamond et al. 2014). It warns of the complex and dynamic nature of information-processing and the scale of support individuals may need to do this effectively.

The study utilises discourse analysis as a way to unpick the ways of speaking that surround the employability measure: 'to discover who does the speaking and the positions and viewpoints from which they speak' (Foucault 1976, 11). Discourse analysis assumes that there is no neutral transmitter of language, and is especially suspicious of language (including both words and numbers) that is presented as neutral. I also draw upon recent writings that have explored the rankings logic within higher education. In analysis of legal education in the US (Sauder and Espeland 2009, Espeland and Sauder 2007), the concept of 'reactivity' has been developed as a lens to explore universities' response to rankings. Their writing is influenced by the Foucauldian concepts of discipline and governmentality and explores the disciplining effects of metrics and audit and the discourses associated with these on how people think and behave. In such environments certain discourses become more dominant. Notably, in contrast to the state-regulated disciplining that Foucault originally described, society is arguably now subject to multiple and flexible structures which regulate individuals, for example, the media, which can act as a vehicle for a variety of market mechanisms, such as league tables which appear to organise and interpret areas of human activity. Locke (2014, 81-84) has also utilised the concept of 'reactivity' in his work on rankings in the UK context reflecting upon and identifying different impacts and responses by universities, including 'strategic positioning and decision-making' a 'redefining of activities', and 'resisting, managing, exploiting and gaming', as well as 'affective' and 'evolving responses'

League Tables and Higher Education

League tables act as third party external evaluation of higher education, which then impacts on how universities are subsequently managed. Trowler, Saunders, and Bamber (2012) map discourses that can be observed in how higher education is organised, which can serve to contextualise the tables. These include managerialism with its focus on metrics and outcomes, efficiency and economy; massification, as participation and globalisation grow; marketisation, with an emphasis on competition and consumers; the role of the regulatory state in accessing funding and framing higher education policy; and the evolution of an integrated system of universities working with both the state but also employers, rather than as an independent and autonomous creator of knowledge and educator of students.

There has been considerable criticism of such trends. Collini (2012, 198) argues that the growth of accountability measures and the evolution of government as an adversary threatens the moral purpose of higher education as a guardian of independent knowledge with responsibility 'for conserving, understanding, extending, and handing on to subsequent generations the intellectual, scientific, and artistic heritage of mankind.' Others have argued (Marginson 2013, Lorenz 2012, Lynch 2015) that the principles of the neoliberal market model or new public management are flawed and counter-productive for universities. They argue that the characteristic combination of free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control has serious contradictions at play. There is not a free market in education due to entrenched status differences, and considerable state regulation; and consumers' choices are often limited by their background both educational and social. The latter point is particularly significant for this study as the metrics associated with league tables are associated with consumer power, which has become a marker of free market rhetoric in new public management.

University league tables can be viewed as an example of our wider cultural pre-occupation with performativity across many different fields, e.g. in schools and hospitals (Strathern 2000, Ball 2003). Lists and tables are something that pervade modern life and individuals routinely use, whether for choosing a restaurant or a car insurance provider. What may work for car insurance may not work for choosing a degree course though. The supporters of league tables argue that they give prospective students considerable amount of information to make their choice of university more effectively and can put order and transparency on what is an increasingly complex and overwhelming amount of information. However, a number of writers are sceptical of whether league tables really influence the choices of students, and speculate whether they have any statistical influence at all. Arguably, notions of reputation, proximity and career choice prevail (Bowden 2000, Soo 2013).

It can be argued that the apparent transparency that league tables offer is illusory as any audit system effectively gives privilege to some features which are easier to measure and can conceal others that may be very important, but just harder to measure. Such a tendency to performativity risks leading to less trust from prospective students rather than more as university managers may feel obliged to engineer their measures positively (Anonymous 2015). The tables attract scrutiny and as a result continually develop their design, e.g. HEFCE (King et al. 2008) made recommendations, some of which have been taken up with the help of internet technology, e.g., the development of discipline-specific tables. Every year minor changes are made, however, many of their limitations still remain to this day, in particular a focus on indicators that do seem to favour elite institutions (e.g., Oxbridge and Russell Group), resulting in league tables where there is very little change over time. The ordinal rankings of circa 124 universities (only a few universities have opted out of the process) against the same set of criteria ignores the possibility that universities and disciplines are varied in their missions and outcomes and may historically have different measures of success. For example in the case of graduate prospects, degrees that are associated with NHS workforce planning are very likely to have more positive immediate outcomes than degrees in such areas as the creative disciplines which are characteristically insecure and associated with freelance and self-employed work.

However, it would seem that university rankings are here to stay and they are something we have to live with (Brown 2006). Numerous writers argue that it is in the interests of educators to find ways to create meaningful narratives about higher education that are not controlled by the tables and the enduring hierarchy these represent (Locke 2014, Lynch 2015) and some glimmers of alternative responses to rankings have been observed especially in relation to international rankings (O'Connell 2015).

Of the three national tables in the year reviewed for this project (table 1), the factors used to create league table positioning include: student satisfaction scores (NSS); research activity and performance (REF); entry standards of new students; student/staff ratio; spending on academic services; spending on facilities; spending per student; good honours degrees achieved; completion rates of students; graduate prospects (DLHE); value-added score (Guardian only) relating to students' social backgrounds. The weighting of different aspects varies depending on the table. These factors are those which it is possible for publishers to secure data for therefore such data is prioritised. The graduate prospects measure has variable weighting across both institutional and subject league tables. However, its greatest weighting is in the subject tables for the Times and Complete University Guide for which it represents 25% of a league table score. Arguably, it is the one factor that universities have least control over, as it is largely dependent on employers having opportunities for graduates.

Insert Table 1

Employability and Higher Education

Dominant conceptual themes around employability have been traced which illustrate a diversity of discourses which go far beyond the simplistic employability measure used by league tables. Tomlinson (2012) identifies key themes including human capital, identity, positional conflict, skills, and social reproduction. Which of these themes has priority tends to depend on who is talking about employability, of which there are numerous stakeholders including government, employers, policy-makers, universities, students and graduates.

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The scrutiny of graduate destinations within the league tables is at the sharp-end of the relationship between higher education, employers and the state. The weighting given to graduate destinations in the tables certainly appears to privilege an assumption about the role of universities to equip graduates for work after their studies. This corresponds with more functional ideas about the purpose of higher education. Functionalism upholds a close connection between education and preparing individuals for their position as productive workers in the economy and sits comfortably with theories of human capital which have dominated some discourses around employability and higher education, especially those that come from employers and government (CIPD 2015, Wilson 2012).

DLHE can only very loosely be considered a measure of the employability of a university's graduates. The employability measurement (extracted from DLHE) used by league tables is effectively a score of how many of a university's first degree graduates are in a positive destination (as defined by the publishers) six months after they complete their studies. However, it is widely used (including in league tables) as a performative indicator of an institution's ability to produce employable graduates. Harvey (2000, 2001) argued against this as a valid measure, suggesting that the results of this census-style survey, although creating interesting data cannot be considered a satisfactory indicator of institutional employability as really it is a measurement of available jobs in the job market and individuals capacity often depending on social capital to succeed in getting a job. This debate has continued to rumble since Harvey's original critique but our universities and graduates are still subject to this survey, which the league tables continue to use.

There have been considerable criticisms made of the underlying principles with regard to higher education's role in relation to employability. Warning against a narrow functionalism, Boden & Nedeva (2010) argue that the performative discourse of employability in higher education as demonstrated in the importance given to the DLHE survey represents a fundamental shift in thinking about higher education which may be detrimental to universities, as they are pushed to amend and dumb down their curricula to create docile and employable graduates, as opposed to critical and active citizens. Other critical voices (Moreau and Leathwood 2006) observe how universities have become agents in the promotion of individualist employability, in which ultimate responsibility lies firmly at the door of individuals who are expected to manage their own path to becoming employable.

Other more pragmatic and evaluative writing on employability has come from those tasked with considering how pedagogy and the student experience can support the development of employability, for example, Pegg et al. (2012), Yorke (2006). A number of models have developed to guide the practices of developing student employability. Popular approaches in universities tend to address a combination of identity and skills and include the USEM model (Yorke 2006) and the CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007). A sanguine view of employability that promises more agency for individuals and universities has emerged from a recent evaluation of Scottish university employability policies in which a trend is observed which reveals academic disciplines adapting the employability agenda to their own situation rather than being dominated and controlled by it (Dempster, Saunders, and Darglish 2015). Arguably the Scottish approach to enhancement themes in higher education is an attempt to improve quality that does not rely on auditing metrics.

In summary, employability is a slippery concept, and the employment/career status of graduates six months after they graduate captures a very small element of the discussions about the topic. Emphasis given to the employability ranking privileges a functionalist discourse and marries it to a discourse of marketisation which ostensibly encourages prospective students to choose a course based on relevance to an imagined future employment status as defined by a percentage point in a comparative list. Through the employability ranking, functionalism and marketisation join forces with a managerialist focus on metrics and outcomes which is endorsed by government policy. This process shifts the public gaze away from wider economic and social trends which impact upon graduate prospects, and also silences a more nuanced discussion of graduate career pathways.

Reviewing the employability measure

The first stage of the project was to conduct a review of publicly available information about the employability measure in order to understand what it is and its role in the league tables. In reviewing published methodological information about each table in one year (Complete University Guide 2013b, Guardian 2013, Times 2013), my endeavour was to distil this in a way that would be possible for any

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interested lay reader of the tables. Other sources of information that use the DLHE survey were also considered to assist in contextualising the league tables' use of the employability measure. These included the HESA employment performance indicator as well as careers information for prospective students.

Each major table creates its graduate prospects score based on the outcomes of the DLHE survey. Each publisher has a similar approach to this measure. The employability of graduates is assessed by looking at the most recent HESA destination data (usually two years prior to edition of the league table). The proportion of UK-domiciled graduates (undergraduate degrees only) who find graduate-level employment, and/or study at a higher or professional level, within six months of graduation is measured. The professional employment marker is derived from the latest standard occupational classification codes.

The shortcomings of the employability measurement are evident, despite the adjustments the table analysis makes to accommodate how certain universities and in particular, subject areas may be advantaged (e.g., health and medical courses which have a close connection to NHS workforce planning generally do well). Typical concerns about the use of DLHE include: the focus on graduate level employment, as defined by the standard occupational codes, which may categorise as non-graduate some occupations that are a positive destination for a graduate in terms of their proposed career, e.g., a graduate who is working as a teaching assistant before doing a teaching qualification; regional differences are ignored although graduate destinations may be more positive in areas where employment is more buoyant; the recent inclusion of postgraduate study as a positive destination may favour graduates who have the social background which can help support the financial cost of staying in education and could favour institutions with lower postgraduate fees or loyalty discount offers; the potential unreliability of self-reporting of career activity by graduates completing the survey; and finally and above all, it is questionable as to whether the destinations of graduates just six months after leaving is really a good measure of the career success, as very often it can take longer for graduates to establish a career. Reservations about the measure used in the league tables are linked to such ongoing debates about the DLHE survey itself.

Content comparison of the employability rankings across the tables was undertaken which illustrated some variance, e.g., in the 2014 tables, only 19 universities appear in the top 30 for employability in each table, and 14 universities appear in the bottom 30 of each table. This is despite the similarities in published methodology. Positioning in the employability rankings is affected by very small percentage differences which contribute to volatility of positioning between tables especially in the lower and middle rankings. The elite Russell Group universities (especially those in the south) consistently fare well in the employability measure. Of its 24 members, 12 are in the top 20 in the Complete University Guide, 14 in the Times and 13 in the Guardian.

Supporters of the DLHE survey who challenge its usage in the league tables argue that it is a comprehensive and versatile survey which allows for detailed labour market intelligence. It is used consistently across all universities each year so it provides a reliable source of information for prospective students, as well as for universities to know where their graduates are going to. Its data can demonstrate how graduates under 25 are half as likely to be unemployed as their peers without a degree. It can also dispel myths about universities, for example, a graduate with a 2:1 from a less selective institution is less likely to be in unemployed six months after graduation than a graduate from a more selective institution with a 2:2 (Ball 2013a). DLHE data has also been used in a recent analysis of social mobility in an alternative league table of employability in which elite universities scored less well (Brown 2014). In contrast the status of elite universities remains unchallenged in surveys of graduate recruiters. High Fliers (2015) reports that 21 of the 25 most targeted universities by leading graduate recruiters are from the Russell Group.

DLHE is used in other sources of careers information, e.g., on the Unistats website (2014) which is targeted at prospective students and also the HESA Performance indicators (PIs) for Employment (HESA 2014) which exist for universities to self-evaluate and benchmark. As a government-endorsed website which was set up in 2012, Unistats is a more official source of information for prospective students than league tables. Early evaluation of the site reveal some concerns amongst users about the sheer quantity of data available, and quantitative metrics lacking much context, e.g., percentage figures being used for graduate prospects without any narrative around this (Hooley, Mellors-Bourne, and Sutton

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2013); the league tables are a simpler read. The Which University guide website which is a government-endorsed source of advisory information also uses the DLHE data and routinely features the three national university league tables in university profiles although these are not officially recognised (Which 2014). In contrast, some careers information sources that are more qualitative in content about careers from certain subjects have reduced in scope (Graduate Prospects 2015). One resource that does explicitly endeavour to blend the quantitative results of DLHE with more qualitative commentary about prospects after a degree is ‘What do Graduates Do?’ (AGCAS & HECSU 2014). More nuanced labour market intelligence is also emerging from longitudinal follow up surveys to DLHE which have also started to be conducted, creating data about what graduates are doing a few years after graduation, not just after six months.

The HESA employment performance indicator (PI) is considered by many as a much better measure of the employability of university graduates for universities, as it has a more nuanced approach to benchmarking universities, taking into considerations factors such as student backgrounds, location and qualifications on entry. However, it seems as if many universities pay more attention to league tables than PIs due to their perceived prominence in the public eye (Pollard et al. 2013, 31). Even the employment performance indicator measure is considered in need for an overhaul with suggestions of a PI which includes longitudinal destinations as well as capturing details of links with employers (Pollard et al. 2013, 42-44).

It is clear that the DLHE survey data has value, however, its adoption as part of third party auditing of institutional employability within league tables constitutes a conflation of early employment status of graduates with employability which is a much larger concept. I will go on to analyse whether the well-established caveats of the employability measure are conveyed in reporting of the employability component of league tables in the year under investigation.

Policy makers have endorsed the need to address some of the shortcomings of the DLHE survey (House of Commons Business Innovation and Skills Committee 2016) and how it will be used as an employability and outcomes indicator by the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework. A fundamental critique has been made about whether graduate outcomes are a valid measure of teaching quality at all. However, early indications are that the TEF risks foregrounding the same data about employability (from DLHE) that league tables do and that is easily over-simplified by commentators. The TEF consultation also suggests using even more numerical data by harvesting information about graduate salaries from the HMRC, in a similar way to work conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Britton et al. 2016). Thus it risks giving prospective students more of the same sort of quantitative information already supplied by league tables rather than something truly different or that can really help individuals make career choices based on their own abilities and interests. Notably, media sources are quick to pick up simplified metrics to report upon and are already publishing stories which estimate how universities will perform in employability TEF metrics, even though the details have not been confirmed (Havergal 2016).

Methodology

Having undertaken a review of the employability rankings and their well-established shortcomings in order to situate the project, the next stage was to conduct a review of the reporting of the employability measure (table 2). In conducting this analysis, my approach was to investigate openly available sources about the topic, sources that would be readily accessible to prospective students and their sponsors. My aim was to consider what narratives of graduate employability a non-expert consumer of the tables could be subject to. A ‘point in time’ barometer of reporting was sought and two week periods around the publication of each table were searched and search terms were chosen to ensure consistency. Some filtering of duplicate and irrelevant results was conducted and in general the items selected for analysis appeared in the first 20 search results of an advanced google search. Sources were collected in NVIVO 10 which allowed for a systematic review and drilling down of themes, using nodes. Careful selection of exemplary quotations was undertaken.

Of the 57 items selected for review, 18 can be considered to comment/report in more detail on the employability ranking element of the tables. The rest of the articles make reference to the graduate prospects part of the table but do not pay this any detailed attention. This level of interest is perhaps indicative that other aspects of the league tables may draw greater interest in reporting than employability. Notably in my online searches, in terms of national media coverage, each league table is

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(with very few exceptions, e.g. a Telegraph blogger disparaging the Guardian table) only covered in the output of the publisher itself. Beyond this, the biggest reporting on the tables is on university websites themselves, hence searches were refined to include and exclude university websites. There is also some reporting in local newspapers, university staff and student blogs, as well as independent websites and blogs offering advice to prospective students.

Insert table 2

The positioning of league tables as purveyors of accurate, objective information about universities invited a discourse analytical approach to analysing reportage reviewed in this study, which critically unpicks how language is not a neutral transmitter of ideas but can systematically reveal different subject positions and resulting power relations. A Foucauldian discourse analytical framing argues that modern states rely on forms of knowledge that regulate populations by describing and defining what is considered true so that citizens govern themselves and seemingly *choose* to comply with a dominant discourse. Espeland and Sauder utilised such ideas in their development of the concept of ‘reactivity’ in the rankings logic. The mechanisms of ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’ and ‘commensuration’ developed by Espeland and Sauder (2007) trace a process of internalisation of the rankings by universities which is both coercive and seductive. Commensuration can directly change how individuals think about what they speak of:

(It) ‘shapes what we pay attention to, which things are connected to other things, and how we express sameness and difference. Three core features of commensuration change sense making; its capacity to reduce, simplify, and integrate information’ (p.16).

Self-fulfilling prophecies relate to how discourses can create and reproduce what they speak of:

‘Processes by which reactions to social measures confirm the expectations or predictions that are embedded in measures or which increase the validity of the measures, by encouraging behaviour that conforms to it’ (p.11).

Of these 2 mechanisms, commensuration seemed most useful for my analysis as it describes how what is paid attention to (as evidenced in this study in public reportage), can change the way people think, whereas the mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy is harder to gauge with the data used in this study which did not explore any verifiable internal processes, apart from what was said publicly about those processes. Analysis of data reflects upon these mechanisms and what discourses are present in the reporting of the tables and how this appears to be influencing ways of thinking, speaking and even doing by different commentators. I set out to seek out complexity in what may appear neutral or transparent, and reveal any contradictions and silences; guided by an awareness of the potential significance of discourses associated with functionalism, marketisation and managerialism in how league tables are situated and thus reported upon.

Reviewing the reporting of the employability measure

Which is the ‘worst’ university in the UK?

‘So, who are the bottom ten universities in the country, according to the higher beings at the Guardian? Who wins? Well, it’s (graduation) caps off to Anytown University, where... students have got a 48% chance of having “career prospects” – whatever that means. (All stats are taken from the Guardian, FYI. Views expressed do not represent what we...actually think. We’re just reporting the news.)’ (Hall 2013)

A variety of points of view were traced in the reporting on the employability rankings. The ordinal rankings of all the universities invites commentators to use the language of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ albeit with some ambivalence. We also read of winners, losers, scores, points, ranking, rises, falls, slumps, upping their game, bigger, better, lesser, dropped to the bottom, star performer, movers, shakers, top position, beat, beating and so on. The above quote from a student source also illustrates the confusion associated with some commentary that may well appear sceptical but simultaneously amplifies the language of the ‘best’ and ‘worst’. Such vocabulary positions universities as goods that can be ranked in a marketised environment.

The rankings provide a social good

Publisher sources emphasise that the rankings are trustworthy and authoritative, and provide a public service that is doing a social good. Publishers stress their credentials as objective arbiters of university performance. The Times reports its history of being initially disliked by the universities but that they had held their ground and now were accepted by the university establishment. Reference is also made to dynamic development of methods in consultation with expert planning teams (O'Leary 2013, 12). Publishers also stress the scope for tables to help prospective students to have choice, e.g., the Complete University Guide stresses its independent role in helping students make choices. 'Our independent UK University League Tables & Rankings 2014 give you a good guide to which university is best for you, overall and by subject' (Complete University Guide 2013a).

Individually, publishers assert that their table is the most reliable table, being fairly quick to pick holes in their competitors. Each table stresses that they are special in comparison to competitors. The Complete University Guide stresses its independence, the Times stresses its longevity and the Guardian argues that it is the most popular amongst students: 'Why the Guardian Guide is the one to watch' (Guardian Students 2013).

Publisher sources are careful to stress the authority that their rankings present. The drawing upon externally validated information from sources such as NSS, REF and DLHE are provided as evidence of the neutrality of the content of the table. There is an implication that what is presented in each table is a fair and unbiased ranking of universities, and specifically in the employability indicator that the ranking provides an accurate, neutral and unassailable picture of graduate prospects from each university. The fact that only limited factors are measured is ignored, and no question is raised with regard to issues such as whether it is appropriate to attribute 25% of a subject league table score (in the case of the Times and the Complete University Guide) to the employability measure. The weightings of the table indicators are not readily transparent to ordinary readers who may not even understand what the different table measures and weightings actually represent. However, all tables position themselves as doing a social good by holding universities to account. The question is raised as to what do publishers benefit by putting such a lot of effort into league tables; certainly in the case of the Times and Guardian it serves to attract and retain their readership, and status as a quality news outlet, as well as the ability to attract advertising. A faith in a system of metrics to measure complex institutions such as universities resonates with a managerialist discourse, in which a valuable market mechanism is being published by a third party in the dubious guise of providing a public service.

The rankings reveal the truth

Universities themselves are the biggest reporter of the tables, and in general the response is perhaps unsurprising with regard to reputation management. Those who do well tend to amplify and those that do not tend to criticise. Other commentators also appear to be accepting of what the rankings may suggest.

University press releases promote their achievements if they have done well in the table and use the word employability uncritically. For example, Imperial reports it has come top in the employability ranking of the Times table; 'National accolade recognises Imperial students' employability' (Jones 2013). Student commentary can be equally accepting with a fairly uncritical reproduction of the rankings. An Oxford student website describes relatively worse employability rankings compared to competitors. 'Oxford graduates have worse employment prospects than those from twelve other universities, including Bath, Newcastle and Buckingham, according to the latest Times Good University Guide.' (Goldstein 2013)

Other media sources often amplify the tables. Student news commentary shows students venting criticism of their university for not doing enough to support students' employability. Rankings are used as strong evidence for university to take action for improvement. One student paper argues that league table ranking is a strong argument for imminent action. 'York's not in a crisis by any stretch of the imagination, but there are clear areas which we need to address. Employment prospects are obviously one – and this is an area which goes beyond 'improving the careers' service' and one that should look into how our courses here equip students for later life' (Johnston 2013).

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Publishers make reference to enduring stability in the overall rankings. The Times reports that 7 of same universities in top 10 the 2014 guide as it did 20 years ago in its first table. Employability rankings are presented as having a very slightly different order to the main tables so adding some newsworthiness to the mix (O'Leary 2013, 11). What this difference actually represents, is marginal in terms of the overall rankings, but does include factors such as Oxford and Cambridge not being first for employability, universities with high number of science and technology courses doing well, and those with high number of creative subjects doing less well, as well as universities in locations where the labour market is buoyant scoring higher for employability (a factor that can be subject to ups and downs in certain industries, e.g., oil industry in northern Scotland).

The apparent acceptance of the truth claims of the tables in relation to employability reveals an acceptance of a functionalist discourse that universities should be producing a suitably prepared generation of graduates to supply the labour market and match its needs. The shortcomings of the measure in capturing the diversity and complexity of graduate career pathways are ignored in favour of a simplified measure of outcomes.

The rankings are a catalyst for improvement

Many universities report on the actions they are taking to support employability. Universities, especially those who have done less well, report on what action they have and will be taking. Sussex demonstrate what action they have taken to support employment of students, 'introducing a wide range of new careers initiatives and moving the Careers and Employability Centre into a new, central location within the Library' (Sussex University 2013). Other universities report positively of the ranking as accurate evidence of progress. Swansea University states that the employability ranking is a justified outcome of work the university has done to develop employability of students. 'Our hard work on developing employability skills is paying off as we're now 17th in the UK' (Swansea University 2013).

What these claims of improvement amount to in practice cannot be verified but it is evident that universities react to the measure by making public statements about what improvements they have made or plan to make. It appears that the rankings are being internalised by universities and practices are being altered as a result and resources being allocated to improve a ranking position. This response is associated with the mechanism of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' in which practices are altered in order to make a desired definition come true. No mention is made of the staff time consumed in collecting the statistics that contribute to DLHE, and how this may reduce available staff resourcing for career counselling students and work with employers to encourage the creation of job vacancies (all such activities tend to be shared by careers service personnel).

The rankings provoke ambivalent responses

There does appear to be lip service being paid to the rankings from some sources. University press releases sometimes acknowledge the tables, but they suggest they should not be taken too seriously. Universities who have done well report on the tables while expressing some fairly vague reservations. Reading University argues for a 'modicum of caution' with regard to league tables – suggesting that league table data is only one way to help choose a university course (Reading University 2013).

Critical voices of the rankings are at surface level, arguing against the position obtained in the table as opposed to whether the employability ranking is a valid measure in the first place, and do not draw upon some of the well-established caveats of the DLHE survey and its subsequent usage by the tables. Sussex challenges the Guardian employability figures for 2014, arguing against the data used: 'This fall in the rankings largely reflects a blip in historic data collected for graduate employment prospects relating to students who started here in 2008 and graduated in 2011' (Sussex University 2013). This statement made by Sussex about a blip in historic data appears a fairly superficial one. 2011 data will have been used consistently across the 2014 Guardian tables and Sussex has not been singled out in this respect. If Sussex had drawn upon the well-known caveats of the employability rankings, it could have made a more convincing critique.

Advisory sites try to explain the tables in a measured way but appear to reproduce the tables' content. In some cases a merging and confusing of the different methodologies of each of the three tables as well as the subject and institutional tables takes place. There is guarded criticism of how the employability rankings are constituted: 'This ranking is slightly controversial as graduate employment

rates are arguably largely dependent on the individual not the institution' (New College Manchester 2013).

Some student and local news commentary sources also criticise the tables, defending a home university in cases where the university has a disappointing ranking. A local media source reports on a low ranking quoting a university's vigorous response - the local honour is defended for readers: 'University of Bolton bosses hit back at unreliable league tables...For all students, over the past year, we have introduced employability skills into all courses and started graduate summer schools to help graduates who want to boost their skills further. From this year all students will take part in two new employability weeks and we have increased one-to-one sessions with employment counsellors' (Chaudhari 2013).

Caution and muted criticism demonstrates an entanglement with the metrics which is associated with the mechanism of 'commensuration' which traces how even those who espouse scepticism can be sucked in by the very fact they feel obliged to give their attention to certain measures. Discourses associated with marketisation make it harder for critics and sceptics to resist the influence that the transparency and authority of rankings present to important stakeholders.

Conclusions

There are clear differences in the emphasis given by different sources in their reporting on the tables. Publishers emphasise the authority of their tables, universities are more ambivalent, and other sources appear to echo content about the tables that may come from both publishers and universities. More complex discussion of the employability ranking and a more nuanced reflection of DLHE are not present in the reporting. Dominant discourses of marketisation and consumer choice, as well as the functional purpose of higher education to prepare graduates for the labour market are not contested. The disciplining effect of the rankings emerges in university responses and it is possible to see how hard it is for universities to resist the quantitative metrics especially as stakeholders such as students appear to embrace the rankings. The mechanism of 'commensuration' (Espeland and Sauder 2007) is played out in the reporting as the employability rankings appear to control how commentators (not just universities) think and speak about employability. Aspects of employability that may be of most interest to both current and prospective students are completely ignored by the metric used, and yet we witness student commentary accepting the ranking uncritically. Within this debate students are encouraged to attribute considerable responsibility to universities for providing good career prospects for them, rather than consider wider labour market and structural issues that affect career options for graduates.

A number of questions are raised about who writes what and for whom about the league tables. What significance do the league tables have for the publishers themselves in establishing their trustworthy status on an important topic which will help them secure advertising not to mention readership? The tone of the publishers is authoritative and implies that a social good is being served. Much reporting is by universities themselves and there is evidence that university practices are being influenced especially as they compare themselves to one another, and prove themselves to stakeholders. Ambiguity and entanglement are evident in university sources, as they simultaneously acknowledge and dismiss league tables. Other sources, such as student commentary, appear to take on a role of righteous consumer and amplify the findings rather than critically evaluate them.

The reporting reviewed in this study reveals a fairly constrained and limited debate about the employability rankings. Even those articles that are critical do not seem to criticise the principle of having a ranking and the underpinning rationale of its construction, but criticise the way an individual university has been ranked. There does seem to be a wide reproduction of the league table employability component, and very few glimmers of even the commonly held critiques discussed earlier about the employability measurement. The analysis of Foucault around the power of discourses to regulate people and which Espeland and Sauder (2007) draw upon in their reactivity mechanisms, appears to be borne out. Notably, the self-regulation of universities themselves is evident in their responses to the tables, showing a complicit (albeit sometimes shaped ambiguously) acceptance of the employability measure, despite its well-known limitations. Locke's (2014) categories of analysis, in which he utilises Espeland and Sauder's (2007) reactivity mechanisms, resonate with the voices that are present in the reporting analysed in this study. In the reporting, it is possible to observe universities resisting (e.g. Sussex,

Bolton), managing (e.g., Swansea, Sussex), exploiting (e.g., Imperial, Swansea). A normative functionalist discourse (Saunders 2006) is apparent as there is no disagreement that the employability measurement is a valid way to evaluate universities.

In addition, the discourses of marketisation and the new managerialism of metrics and outcomes in higher education are constantly present and the prevailing idea that individuals do really have a choice of higher education and metrics are useful to them in making that choice is undisputed. However, it is debatable whether the tables really do empower individuals to make well-informed choices based on a true understanding of the employability measure as having a grasp of how it really works may be hard for many readers. The proliferation of information may lead to a mistrust of the apparent transparency in the tables. Much of what may be inferred by readers may end up relying on common sense ideas about which degrees are good for getting a job and those that are not. There is an absence of any qualitative content in the tables and in the reporting of the careers and paths that may be available – readers are asked to draw relevant conclusions from percentage points instead (Diamond et al. 2014). A creeping trend of quantitative metrics being presented as useful careers information is also evident in other sources which use the DLHE survey, e.g., Unistats (2014). The availability of such metrics has increased, while a professional careers advisory service in colleges and sixth forms which can meaningfully interpret such information has been reduced.

The reporting simultaneously amplifies, simplifies and obfuscates, and one is left with the sense that those writing on the subject do not always have a clear understanding of league table factors, so what hope is there for the public readers? The prevalence of the established order of universities in the ranking means that publishers may be looking for an angle to cover up a reality that there is not really any news. Similarly, it is not really news that the overall trends do still indicate that graduates are better placed on average in the job market than those without a degree, despite warnings about the value of a degree from those universities or subjects with the worst employability rankings. The essentialist tone of the reporting belies that the employability measure is a very limited view of the career paths that graduates may have and how well-equipped they are to start them. It would be of interest to conduct further research of coverage, which may demonstrate a more balanced view of the measure, e.g., a small search using the same search terms that was not date-restricted did find some items that presented a slightly more nuanced view (Bailey 2013, Ball 2013b). However, the data analysed in this project shows that commentary that coincides with the publishing of league tables tends to uncritically reproduce their content.

The question is raised as to why universities do not provide a stronger counter-narrative to that provided by the league tables on employability? Instead, a managed public relations performance is played out. The power of a functionalist, marketised and managerially-constituted employability discourse is revealed and there is no evidence of a counter-narrative which could benefit both institutions and prospective students that others have argued for (Locke 2014, Lynch 2015). Those providing information about higher education and supporting potential participants face a challenge in fully understanding the limitations of the publicly available information and associated reporting. Potential students may be more likely to turn to the advice of individuals they respect to help them navigate a bewildering sea of data. The important role is raised of educators in the pre-higher education sector to encourage prospective students to think critically about available data, very often merely reproduced rather than meaningfully reflected upon. Universities themselves could benefit from both individual and collective activity to create more nuanced narratives about graduate career prospects. The development of more authentic narratives about graduate career paths, that go beyond both the DLHE survey and standard course marketing, which can provide a more trustworthy picture of likely career destinations, would be useful to prospective students as they make career decisions in a complex environment. This could contribute to countering the constrained ways of thinking about graduate employability that the league tables' application of the DLHE survey induces. With the development of TEF and its apparent endorsement of quantitative metrics, the need for universities to create meaningful counter narratives about graduate careers has greater urgency and the risk of university responses that are purely reactive should be guarded against. The opportunity that TEF offers for additional evidence from “provider submissions” may give scope for universities to tell a more nuanced story about employability and careers. The expansion of available data the TEF promises, serves to emphasise the glaring absence of a universally available advisory service for students considering university study to make sense of that data and may present a social mobility barrier as it is doubtful whether another raft of data (very likely filtered via partial commentators) will be used by students, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

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Table 1. Institutional and subject tables - Factors evaluated and usual weighting in three national league tables

	Institutional tables			Subject tables		
	<i>Complete University Guide</i>	<i>Times</i>	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>Complete University Guide</i>	<i>Times</i>	<i>Guardian</i>
Overall Student satisfaction (NSS)	15%	16.7%	5%	25%	25%	5%
Teaching (NSS)			10%			10%
Assessment & Feedback (NSS)			10%			10%
Research assessment (REF)	15%	16.7%		25%	25%	
Entry standards	10%	11.1%	15%	25%	25%	15%
Student/staff ratio	10%	11.1%	15%			15%
Academic services spend	10%					
Facilities spend	10%					
Expenditure per Student (facilities/services combined)		11.1%	15%			15%
Good honours	10%	11.1%				
Completion	10%	11.1%				
Graduate prospects (DLHE)	10%	11.1%	15%	25%	25%	15%
Value-added			15%			15%

Note: data adapted from published methodologies of league tables

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Table 2. Items selected for content analysis

University league table (2014)	Publication date	Dates for advanced google search	Number of articles selected for content analysis						
			Actual Publisher	University	University staff/sector	Local media	Other advice sources	Student	Other National online
Complete University Guide	26 April 2013	25 April - 9 May	3	6	2	3	2	1	1
Guardian	4 June 2013	3 - 17 June	4	9	1	0	2	4	2
Times	22 September 2013	21 September- 9 October	4	5	0	4	0	3	0
Total 57 items reviewed									

Note: Search terms used - university league table graduate career prospects.