

More students using University League Tables but new research shows recruitment impact only felt by top 10

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New research shows that university league tables, such as The Times and The Guardian, are being used more widely by students but a modest ranking is not a major barrier to universities seeking to maximize recruitment.

David Roberts of The Knowledge Partnership, an expert in reputation analysis, led the research and identified that league tables were only one part of the complex decision making process that students use to create a mental picture of the universities.

One of the main findings from the research is that a university's position in the subject specific charts probably has greater impact than their standing in the overall rankings. Universities whose departments moved into a top 10 position in the subject charts were more likely to see an increase in both the volume and quality of student applications. Interestingly, however, institutions which gained the prestigious 5* rating in the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) for the first time, typically did not reap any reward in the undergraduate market.

Dave Roberts explains:

“The really ambitious students seek out league table information, but typically they know what subject they want to do before they view the league tables and thus the subject tables have greater relevance. Being in the top 10 in one of these charts gives a department greater visibility and credibility. These findings are in line with extensive findings that shows that subject related factors remain the key driver from many students in their choice of university.

However, whilst the RAE may have an impact on postgraduate and academic staff recruitment it doesn't appear to have affected undergraduate recruitment to any great extent.”

The research suggests that a University may only gain a clear advantage in terms of recruitment if they out perform their peers and direct competitors.

As Roberts explains:

“As students have so many universities to choose from in the UK, it's likely that they will create their own 'ladders in their mind' – for example, they work out which are the best in

their region, and it's not simply a matter of whether your university has gone up or down in a league table, but how its position has changed compared with its closest rivals."

So why does the research indicate that more students are using league tables but the impact on decisions appears muted? The answer is that these charts are often used to support decisions of where to apply or accept, rather than as a basis for challenging pre-conceptions. Students may use them to justify choices to parents. Thus their impact is still less marked than one might expect

"We are still some way off from the day when league table position makes a huge impact on where students decide to go. This is partly because there is scepticism about which data is used, and how it's weighted, but it's probably also more to do with a very complex decision making process at play. Students are still saying that university reputation (word of mouth recommendation, media image, what their families think etc) is more important to them than a university's position in a league table at any single point in time. This is both good and bad news for universities – it means it's quite hard to develop a reputation but also that having created one, the market will forgive a poor ranking in any one cycle."

The research reveals that the most widely read table is *The Times* followed by *The Guardian*. League tables as a source of 'hard data' are most likely to be used by: Asians, men, those from a high income background and high achievers. Students who choose more distant universities are also more likely to use them, as are second generation students. Similarly international students use league tables to inform their decision making more than domestic undergraduates.

The research tracked past trends, looked at international research, and examined HESA and UCAS data in relation to institutional RAE scores and national league table performance. The study also drew on new data from Higher Expectations, a survey of 13,000 new undergraduates which found that 61% of UK students had at least looked at one of the various published university charts.

Ben Marks of Opinionpanel who conducted the research in association with The Knowledge Partnership said:

"The evidence indicates that more students are looking at league tables as part of their decision-making and more than half now say they are of some importance in their choices. However just 16% said they were very important – far fewer than placed a premium on a university being highly recommended by significant others. This latest research suggests that many factors continue to play a part in university choice including course content, guarantees of accommodation and the quality of service to applicants."

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Notes for Editors

1. **For a full copy of the report, email d.roberts@theknowledgepartnership.com, or download it from www.theknowledgepartnership.com**
2. **David Roberts** is the Managing Partner of The Knowledge Partnership. The Chief Executive of the Heist for over a decade, he has worked as a consultant to

universities, colleges, government departments, charities and other knowledge sectors for 20 years, with clients in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and across the EU. He specializes in marketing reviews and evidence-based strategy development. He devised the first UK Education Marketing Awards and founded the magazine, Education Marketing in 1990. Later he led the development and delivery of the first postgraduate qualification in education marketing. In 2003 he led the development of the MaXimizE framework for evaluating university market orientation, funded by HEFCE and has used this model to evaluate over 35 HEIs.

3. Analysis to support the research was undertaken by **Lisa Thompson**, market analyst at The Knowledge Partnership. A graduate of the University of York she has considerable expertise in the analysis of HESA and UCAS data and labour market intelligence
4. **Higher Expectations**, the first major survey of student attitudes towards recruitment processes and admissions among First year Students paying the new higher fee, has also been undertaken by Opinionpanel Research, in association with The Knowledge Partnership. Preliminary findings will be presented at The Knowledge Partnership Conference in Cambridge on 3 April.

For more information contact:

David Roberts
Managing Partner
The Knowledge Partnership UK Ltd
Telephone 0113 2556990
Mobile 0781 165 7518
www.theknowledgepartnership.com