St Mary's University Twickenham London

Making sense of the league tables

With over 37,000 courses across 370 providers navigating choices in higher education is a tricky business. League tables can act as a good source of reference but looking at the rankings without any context or knowledge can be misleading and confusing. This guide should help you, your students and their parents interpret league tables and use them to some extent in a more meaningful way.

The Guardian, The Times, The Sunday Times and *The Independent* tend to be the most common source of national publications but there are, of course, others.

How are they ranked?

Each league table uses different factors to rank universities, so it is important to check what this is based on; position can vary drastically between tables. A university that might be ranked quite far down overall may have individual departments that are ranked fairly high, therefore investigate the subject of interest as well as the university itself.

Student satisfaction (NSS)

All the league tables use this score, which is based upon the feedback given by final year students about the university they have been studying at. Universities have no control over the responses given.

Research

This data is based on the 2014 Research Assessment Exercise. The quality and impact of the research being conducted by a certain department may well be important and could well feed into the module choices on a particular subject. Do not assume the published researcher will be teaching on the course – if it is an important factor then check this out.

Teaching

In addition to the areas above that are used to measure suitability of a university, it is important to be aware of The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which will be launching for 2017.

TEF assesses a university's teaching with the aim of ensuring that all students receive an excellent teaching experience that encourages original thinking, drives up engagement and prepares them for the world of work. It has been created to recognise institutions that do the most to welcome students from a range of backgrounds and support their retention and progression rather than focusing solely on research and NSS scores.

Entry standards/points

It can be difficult to gauge from this score how well a student will get on at a university as an individual. Lots of factors feed into this, such as less attractive locations or a national decline in demand for a particular subject area.

Universities have also published entry requirements but often the reality can be different when taking a more holistic approach in considering applicants, which can explain a difference in published requirements versus the reality of league table entry standards.

Career or graduate prospects

This data is collected six months after graduation – some graduates by nature of subject area or personal choices take longer than six months to get into an area they wish to pursue and income may not be the driving factor. Nonetheless, with financial commitment of tuition fees to consider, this ranking can help decide the return on investment and career support provision.