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| Institution: University of Oxford |
| Unit of Assessment: 30 |
| Title of case study: Re-interpreting University Rankings |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) ‘Competition generally drives up standards and drives down prices.’ This is the principle upon which first the Browne Review and then the HE White Paper proposed the ‘radical reform’ of higher education in England in October 2010 and June 2011. The theoretical reasoning underlying this maxim is familiar. But is its application to higher education supported by empirical evidence – that is, by historical experience? Howard Hotson’s research on Central European universities in the seventeenth century, a time of marketisation of university qualifications and expansion, has provided a model with which to understand current policy developments in higher education. He has used insights arising from this research to shift the terms of the national debate on whether the marketisation of British universities will drive standards up or down.</p> |
| <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) In his 2007 monograph, <i>Commonplace Learning: Ramism and its German Ramifications, 1543-1630</i> (3.1) and subsequent series of related articles (3.2-4), Hotson used basic statistical analysis to show how an open market for educational innovation turned Reformed Germany into the pedagogical laboratory of Protestant Europe. In central Europe, territorial fragmentation created a fertile free market in educational ideas, while in the half-century before the outbreak of the Thirty Years War in 1618, the growth of territorial states and confessional churches created unprecedented demand for educated officeholders. The resulting educational boom saw huge surges in university foundations, in student matriculations, in textbook production, and in pedagogical experimentation in a highly decentralised system of higher education. Although Ramism (named after the French Huguenot scholar Petrus Ramus) and the traditions deriving from it were condemned for ‘dumbing down’ both the scholastic and high humanist curricula of the previous period, they proved immensely popular with students (3.1), spreading throughout the English-speaking world (3.2) and issuing in the greatest encyclopaedic tradition of the period (3.3), which prepared the groundwork for the most important educational theorist of the seventeenth century, Jan Amos Comenius (3.4).</p> <p>This research has enabled Hotson to establish a theoretical framework for thinking about universities and their relationship to the market. What made the university sector intellectually vibrant in C16/17 Europe was that local communities – city Councils, city fathers, local rulers – invested in education leading to a system that was non-centralized, diverse, open to new foundations, and responsive to the need for innovation. Hotson was struck by the many parallels with the modern period. But the key difference, he argues, is that marketization as it is now practised threatens to become centralized. An international education market dominated by big education ‘brands’ creates a market in higher education that is shaped by supply from above, whereas that in early modern Europe was shaped by demand from below.</p> <p>Using the methodology Hotson had pioneered for studying central European intellectual history in the 17th century, he then set out to test whether competition really did drive up standards in the present. He took the <i>Times Higher Education World University Rankings</i> which have historically been dominated by US universities, and – particularly at the very apex of the Rankings – America’s elite private universities. As the Rankings’s editor, Phil Baty, had put it in a headline announcing the results of the 2010 Rankings, ‘Measure for Measure: the US is the Best of the Best’ (5.1), with three times the number of UK universities in the upper divisions of the Rankings. Yet characterisations such as this, endlessly repeated in the national and international press, take no account of the relative size of the US population (5 times that of the UK), economy (6.5 times the UK), or higher education spending (15.4 times that of the UK). Based directly on the methodology he used to assess Heidelberg’s status among other universities in the seventeenth century, Hotson argued in his first intervention in this debate that if relative size and spending are taken into consideration, the UK university system outperforms the US system at virtually every level and by</p> |

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a huge margin overall by the crucial index of value for money. This analysis of the most readily available evidence therefore suggests the diametrical opposite of the assumption underlying the radical reform of English universities, for the UK had not hitherto had an HE sector governed by competition, but it outperformed the USA nevertheless. This argument was first outlined in a letter published in the *London Review of Books*. It attracted a great deal of attention; nationally it changed the terms of the higher education debate. Hotson was Fellow and Tutor, and Professor at Oxford while he undertook the research.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1 Howard Hotson, *Commonplace Learning: Ramism and its German Ramifications, 1543-1630* [Oxford-Warburg Studies] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. (leading university press) Available on request.

3.2 Howard Hotson, 'A "General Reformation of Common Learning" and its Reception in the English-Speaking World, 1560-1642', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 164 [Polly Ha and Patrick Collinson, eds., *The Reception of Continental Reformation in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010]. Pp. 193-228. ISBN 978-0-19-726468-3 (leading university press) Available on request.

3.3 Howard Hotson, 'Die Herborner *Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta* von Johann Heinrich Alsted', Part I (with contributions from Rüdiger Störkel): 'Nassauischer Ursprung und internationale Rezeption'; Part II: 'Verbesserungsversuche und allgemeines geschichtliche Bedeutung', *Nassauische Annalen* 123, (2012) 183-223; 124 (2013: in press). Commissioned for the centennial number of this journal. Part I: 16,000 words. Part II: 10,000 words. (refereed journal) Available on request.

3.4 Howard Hotson, 'The Ramist Roots of Comenian Pansophia', in Steven John Reid and Emma Wilson, eds., *Ramus, Pedagogy and the Liberal Arts: Ramism in Britain and the Wider World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011). Pp. 227-252. (major refereed press) Available on request.

3.5 Howard Hotson, 'Don't Look to the Ivy League', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 33 No. 10 (19 May 2011), pp. 20-22: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n10/howard-hotson/dont-look-to-the-ivy-league>

3.6 Howard Hotson, 'An inappropriate model. Adjust for population, GDP and funding, and US dominance disappears. And so does the case for neoliberal university reform', *Times Higher Education* (London, 6 October 2011): <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/417652.article>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Immediately after the *LRB* article was published, the Universities Minister David Willetts wrote a full page letter of reply in the *LRB* defending government policy (5.1). The *Times Higher Education* (THE) picked up Hotson's new interpretation of their own Rankings in an article, flagged up in the editor's Leader, and presenting further evidence collected by Hotson (5.2). Half a dozen articles developed the argument in subsequent issues of the *THE*, in which Hotson was cited over two dozen times (5.3). Rapidly propagated by social media (5.4), the argument was taken up by the mainstream press as well: one article in the *Guardian* prompted a further response from Willetts (5.5); another example was the invitation to appear on *Newsnight* on 28 June 2011. Within a few weeks, Michael Blastland observed in the *BBC News Magazine* that this argument was becoming the new consensus: 'Maybe the conclusion is never to underestimate our ability to overlook the blinkin' obvious in search of a quick answer' (5.6).

No less remarkable was the reception overseas. Within weeks of publication, unauthorised translations appeared in Chile and France; authorised translations followed in South Korea and Spain; and extensive summaries were published in Brazil, Hungary, Sweden, and the US (5.7). Hotson's lectures and interviews on this and related material have subsequently been published in Romania, Denmark, Germany, and the Czech Republic, and picked up by bloggers in Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Italy, and France.

When the *THE* published their 2011-12 Rankings in the autumn, it was clear that Hotson's article had changed the terms of the debate. Instead of interpreting their Rankings as confirmation that 'the US is the best of the best', the 2011 Rankings were published on with three separate articles arguing something very different including a Leader by the editor, entitled 'The best, pound for pound' and a lead article captioned, 'US muscle reigns, but there's a world of difference in value. The UK and others are best for efficiency and bang for buck' (5.8). The same line of analysis was picked up by the broadsheet press on the same day, most explicitly in *The Telegraph* (5.9).

The following week provided clear evidence that the argument had entered mainstream political debate and policymaking when it featured repeatedly in the debate on University reform in the **House of Lords** on 13 October 2011 (5.10). Lord Krebs (Crossbench) rehearsed Hotson's argument at some length: 'As has already been said, the UK university sector is an outstanding success. In fact, it has been said that it is second to the United States. Actually, that is not quite right. If you correct for population size and investment - remember the United States invests 15 times as much as the United Kingdom in universities - we have three times the success rate, relative to investment, in the world's top 20. If you go farther down the league table, the story is the same. In short, our top universities are not just globally outstanding, but, as a whole, our university sector offers unparalleled value for money - three times as much value for money as the American system.' Lord Bragg, Lord Parekh, and Lord Stevenson of Balmacara registered their support for the same argument, while Lord Bew (Crossbench) backed up similar points with explicit reference both to the *THE* and to Willetts's response to Hotson's original LRB article.

Hotson was also invited to give numerous invited **public lectures** at University College London (11/01/2012), Universities of Birmingham (24/01/2012) and Cambridge (16/02/2012), National Council of University Professors (London, 22/02/2012), Middlesex Business School (12/06/2012), and the Czech Academy of Sciences (27/11/2012), and opening or closing **plenaries** at the International Society for Intellectual History's annual conference (Bucharest, 27/05/2011), at a conference marking the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the University of St Andrews (31/08/2012), and at the annual international conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education (Newport, 12/12/2012). All this further disseminated Hotson's ideas: for example, the lecture in Bucharest was subsequently translated and published online (now behind a pay-wall), thus reaching an even wider audience.

Finally Hotson wrote *Do British Universities Need 'Radical Reform'?* [New Paradigms in Public Policy] developing the case considerably in response to the debate, and which was published by the British Academy in 2012.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 David Willetts, Letter in response to Howard Hotson, 'Don't look to the Ivy League', *London Review of Books*, 14/07/11: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n14/letters#letter1>; reported in Jack Grove, 'I plead guilty to believing in choice': Willetts responds to attack by Howard Hotson', *Times Higher Education*, 5/07/11: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/416727.article>

5.2 *Times Higher Education*, 26/05/11: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/416275.article> and <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/416283.article>

5.3 List of articles discussing 'Howard Hotson' in the *Times Higher Education* magazine: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/searchresults?qsearch=1&qkeyword=howard+hotson>

5.4 Twitter track-back on article 3.1: http://topsy.com/www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n10/howard-hotson/dont-look-to-the-ivy-league?utm_source=otter

5.5 Peter Wilby, 'Universities: a half-baked Ivy League that spells two tiers of unfairness', *Guardian*, Wednesday 29/06/11: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jun/29/universities-half-baked-ivy-league>; with

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response by David Willetts, 'Enhancing choice in higher education', *Guardian*, 6/07/11, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/jul/06/enhancing-choice-in-higher-education>

5.6 Michael Blastland, 'Go Figure: How good are UK universities? Seeing stats in a different way', *BBC News Magazine*, 9/06/11: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-13709877>

5.7 Howard Hotson, 'Don't Look to the Ivy League', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 33 No. 10 (19/05/11), pp. 20-22: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n10/howard-hotson/dont-look-to-the-ivy-league>

Full reproductions and translations corroborate the influence of this piece:

Chile: Estudios de la Economía, 17/05/11 (unauthorized English text with Spanish translation):

http://mt.educarchile.cl/MT/jjbrunner/archives/2011/05/sobre_educacion_1.html; **France:**

Facebook, 13/05/2011 (unauthorized English version): <http://fr->

fr.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=144874958918227; South Korea (authorised Korean

translation); Spain: Revista de libros de la Fundacion Caja Madrid, 15/11/2011 (authorised Spanish translation): <http://www.revistadelibros.com/articulos/mejor-mirar-hacia-otro-lado> and

http://www.revistadelibros.com/articulo_imprimible.php?art=5103&t=articulos;

Extensive summaries and abridgements: **Brazil:** ABMES, 23/05/11:

<http://www.abmeseduca.com/?p=2010>; **Hungary:** Márton Szentpéteri, "Non damus fidem," BUKSZ

(Budapest Review of Books), 23/2 (2011 Summer), 194-198: see <http://buzsz.c3.hu/>; **Sweden:**

Sacobloggen, 25/05/11: <http://sacobloggen.se/2011/05/25/dont-look-to-the-ivy-league/>; **UK:**

National Union of Students, 9/06/2011: [www.nusconnect.org.uk/.../73e76104-f5c6-41d5-9871-](http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/.../73e76104-f5c6-41d5-9871-d18bc8369b4c/)

[d18bc8369b4c/](http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/.../73e76104-f5c6-41d5-9871-d18bc8369b4c/); **US:** Science: [http://scienceresearchprojects.com/2011/05/measure-for-measure-](http://scienceresearchprojects.com/2011/05/measure-for-measure-us-universities-are-manifestly-not-the-best-of-the-best/)

[us-universities-are-manifestly-not-the-best-of-the-best/](http://scienceresearchprojects.com/2011/05/measure-for-measure-us-universities-are-manifestly-not-the-best-of-the-best/); Yahoo Group (3/06/11):

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MediainMontreal/message/65019?var=1> (abridged).

5.8 *Times Higher Education*, 6/10/11, pp. 5, 6-7

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=417689&c=1>;

excerpted and adapted in *Education World: Human Development Magazine*, 8/11/11:

<http://educationworldonline.net/index.php/page-article-choice-more-id-2933>

5.9 *The Telegraph*, 6/10/11:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8808522/Times-Higher-university-rankings-Britain-has-better-universities-than-the-government-realises.html>

5.10 House of Lords, Debate: 'Universities: Impact of Government Policy', 13/10/11:

<http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2011-10-13a.1870.1&s=speaker%3A13483#g1870.4>