**The Economist Daily Chart Submission**

**Course for Concern?**

**Students at the most prestigious universities are not the most satisfied with their courses**

Many university rankings are simply not fit for purpose. They are there to inform potential students of the strengths of universities in particular subjects, yet give metrics such as citations per faculty and research intensiveness far too much weighting in ranking universities. As a result, the most sought after universities remain those that excel in research. This makes little sense, given that undergraduate students rarely dabble in publishing papers; certainly few sixth formers have interest or experience in doing so. Staff holding Nobel prizes and Fields Medals make pretty reading, but tell nothing about how satisfied students are with teaching and course quality.

As of 2010, every student leaves university having paid fees or indebted at least £27,000, making the stakes in selecting the right institution higher than ever. There is more financial pressure to attend a top institution with stellar career prospects to make a good return. Scrolling to the top universities in the world, the same famous names tend to reoccur; MIT, Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge, Imperial, UCL, LSE, Stanford. It is always good to aspire to reach the top, but those choosing a university based solely on its academic prowess, and career prospects fail to see the bigger picture; will they actually enjoy their course? This thinking is due to the self-fulfilling prophecy traditional university rankings produce, which suggest research intensive universities are superior and more prestigious in every way than their peers. Certainly, many are perceived this way by employers, so can prospective students be blamed for choosing these research heavy universities? The main point of a degree still remains to generate higher lifetime earnings, with education acting as a signaller to employers in the market.

Take the Russell Group, the self-selected 24 UK universities, traditionally seen as the top in the UK among students and employers. Their graduates make up 17% of university graduates, yet hold 61% of UK jobs requiring a degree. The group receives over 75% of all UK research income and grants, and awards 60% of the country’s doctorates. These are quite astounding numbers, given there are 121 universities. Yet according to The Guardian University Guide, (which includes metrics of more direct importance to students, such as course satisfaction), none of the Russell Group appear in the top 5 for course satisfaction or teaching satisfaction. By any satisfaction measures, Bath, Loughborough, Lancaster and St Andrews positively dominate the Russell Group, being placed higher than any member. They are not too shabby in terms of career prospects either. Indeed, LSE and Imperial College London, two members of the G5 which are supposedly the best universities in the country, achieved mediocre satisfaction rates of 80%. The other two G5 members, Oxford and Cambridge did not publish their rates. As a result, the overall Guardian rankings mean that these non-Russell Group universities are planted firmly in the top 10, slowly ending the Russell Group monopoly.

In recent years, slow shakeups of university ranking methodology has begun, with awards such as the Teaching Excellence Framework, which measures teaching quality, learning environment and student outcomes. Again, one of the most prestigious and highly regarded universities suffered, with LSE awarded only a bronze rather than a silver or gold award. This had no impact on its formidable reputation though, with students still clamouring to gain entry with views to a prosperous career in the City. A reputation built solely on its research not teaching, one might add. With more rankings hopefully following The Guardian’s lead, more students will become aware that the traditional top universities, are not the top ones for students.