Comparisons are not impossible

by John O’Leary

Every high-quality research university wants to be counted among the world leaders, as Uwe Brandenburg acknowledged in the last issue of EAIE Forum. But who is to say whether or not they achieve it?

No-one, according to Mr Brandenburg and his colleagues at the Centre for Higher Education Development, who travel the international conference circuit picking holes in the fledgling global rankings and promoting their own business of ‘benchmarking’.

Comparing whole universities is meaningless, on this line of argument, because all are stronger in some fields than others. Indeed, some critics insist that ‘no-one knows what a world-class university is’. Well, more than a million visits to The Times Higher Education Supplement’s website following the publication of this year’s rankings suggest that a great many readers think they know. Like the universities themselves – many of which have set themselves targets based on their international standing – most of them do not believe it is impossible to make comparisons.

It is easy to see why international rankings – or benchmarking – are in such demand. Companies and governments mount global searches before placing valuable research contracts, top academics frequently move continents to further their careers and students, too, are increasingly mobile, particularly at postgraduate level. For some students, a move abroad may be the only way to find top quality tuition and a high standard of academic facilities in their particular subject; for others, to experience a different culture and a new way of thinking is valuable in itself and a big attraction for future employers.

Not the finished article

That is not to say that the THES-QS rankings, or those published by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, are the finished article by any means. Both teams of researchers have been open about the dif-
ficulties they have encountered and have engaged the academic community in debate on the scope for improvements. In large part, these stem from a shortage of data that are genuinely comparable worldwide, but there are some key areas of university activity (such as teaching) that may never be capable of satisfactory comparison.

In the THES-QS exercise, academic staffing levels have been adopted as a proxy, if not for the measurement of teaching standards, at least for the support available to students. Citations per academic are included as a measure of both the quality and quantity of research, while the proportion of students and staff from other countries give a flavour of the international outlook, which surely should be present in a truly global institution. The other half of a university’s score is accumulated through peer review – mainly among academics, but also recruiters of graduates. More than 3700 full-time academics in 90 countries have passed judgment on the best universities in the world in their subject, with the results then weighted to ensure that the main geographical regions and subject areas are fairly represented in the pool of respondents. The opinions of 736 international employers bring another valuable dimension but are given less weight than those of academics.

Peer review
Peer review has been the most controversial element of the THES-QS rankings, but it is the method used to assess academic quality in universities all over the world and it has formed a part of US university league tables for many years. Telling as the other statistics are, it remains a matter of opinion which are the best universities in the world. And by asking the experts, it is possible to paint a much more up-to-date picture of universities than by limiting the exercise to purely statistical measures. Even citations (the classic measure of research strength) may refer to work done several years earlier, while the main academic prizes are often awarded for even older projects. Among the other indicators considered for inclusion in the rankings have been various spending measures. Many domestic tables measure the amount spent on libraries, for example, but it was decided that – even if genuinely comparable data could be collected – too great an advantage would be conferred upon wealthy nations for the results to be meaningful. Similar objections have been raised to the use of graduate employment rates: there is a danger of comparing economies more than universities.

Entry standards
Entry standards provide another obvious area of comparison – and one much used in national league tables. But although business schools have an international entry standard, most areas of university life do not. Much work has been done on the equivalence of different qualifications, but it is not yet clear how this can be incorporated into a system of rankings such as these. No doubt other measures will be developed – the proportion of staff with PhDs is one area of inquiry, as is the number of PhDs awarded by each university – but, despite frequent appeals for workable additions, no glaring omission has yet emerged.

Need is growing
What has become clear is that the need for international comparisons is growing all the time. The travelling scholar dates back to the Middle Ages, but never have such numbers been crossing national boundaries. There were great leaps forward in student mobility in the late 1970s, when numbers rose by 30%, and at the beginning of the 1990s, when the increase was even larger. But they were as nothing compared with the near-50% growth that has taken place since the millennium. UNESCO now estimates total student numbers to be beyond 132 million, almost 3 million of whom are studying abroad.

Excellence is spread more widely
The Shanghai Jiao Tong table, which is dominated by expensive science research and is more historical than the THES-QS rankings, shows the American domination that many observers expected from global institutional comparisons. But the use of peer review and the adoption of different indicators designed to reflect universities in the round produce outcomes that suggest excellence is now spread much more widely. Thirty countries have universities in the top 200 in the world, and more will be represented in the 500 that will be listed in a book based on the rankings which will be published in the next few weeks. That, surely, is the reality of modern higher education and one that will continue to attract growing interest in the years to come.

John O'Leary is editor of the Times Higher Education Supplement. The paper's rankings are at www.thes.co.uk/worldrankings