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Benchmarking in universities: league tables revisited

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Abstract

This paper examines the practice of benchmarking universities using a 'league table' approach. Taking the example of the Sunday Times University League Table, the author re-analyses the descriptive data on UK universities. Using a linear programming technique, data envelope analysis (DEA), the author uses the re-analysis to demonstrate the major shortcomings of current league tables. Those shortcomings include the arbitrary allocation of weightings to performance indicators, the failure to differentiate between inputs and outputs, and the comparison of institutions with dissimilar comparators. DEA is used to exemplify how these three shortcomings could be overcome, and how a better approach to benchmarking could be developed. In particular, it is argued that a DEA approach to benchmarking allows for the recognition of diverse missions, which is more appropriate to universities.

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