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V-charged: powering up the world-class university as a global actor

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ABSTRACT

A great deal has been written about the rise of the world-class university and global university rankings over the past two decades. Much of this work focuses on either the efficacy of the indicators used to measure world classness or on the purposes they serve regarding student choice in an international market. However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which spatial power, particularly the politics of sight and size, brings into view and makes visible and actionable new sets of socio-spatial relations between entities. In this paper, I draw on a spatial vocabulary of sight, vision, visibility, verticality, volume and vertigo. Taken together, these modalities of space ‘V-Charge’ the reimagining, recalibrating and remaking of universities as a global enterprise.

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Projecting greatness

As Esposito and Stark (2019, 3–4) note; ‘... we are surrounded by rankings ... They are ubiquitous’. Rankings guide our reading of the world around us, from the top 100 places to eat to the 10 best books to read. Nations are ranked for their level of competitiveness, while universities around the world are ranked on one or more of a growing number of league tables. The rise of rankings has spawned a rapidly growing industry that now surrounds them, from bodies aimed at ensuring best practices to dedicated conferences, summits and accompanying media campaigns to launch the latest new ranking tables or celebrate the latest ranking winners. Rankings are based on numbers, and numbers in the form of quantification and big data have become pervasive features of contemporary society (Bartl, Papilloud, and Terracher-Lipinski 2019; Thevenot 2019).

Hardly surprising, there has been a parallel growth in academic commentary on quantification and rankings, their history, purposes and shortcomings, including the rise of global rankings of universities (c.f. Usher 2017; Huang 2012). However, as both Marginson (2014) and Welsh (2019, 1) remark, much of this work is policy-oriented, descriptive, under-theorised and normative. I agree with them. Looking at the voluminous literature on world-class university rankings, it treads well-worn paths. Rankings are variously understood as new tools of accountability and transparency (e.g. Usher and Salvino 2006; Salmi 2009), sources of information for students to make informed choices in the context of higher education markets (Hazelkorn 2009, 2017), or new mode of governing universities using quantification (Thevenot 2019; Huber and Hillebrandt 2019). This latter work draws on the sociology of statistics pioneered by Desrosieres (1998) and Porter (1995) who observed that if you can count something you can also account for it.

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For sure, rankings are increasingly used by students to choose a university or a department, and administrators and academics feel the full heat of rankings as a tool of accountability, and as a means of accounting for oneself. However, as I have argued elsewhere (see Robertson and Olds 2017, 74), we need a more nuanced and theorised account of the new modalities of power and control at work in rankings that enable them to have the effects they have.

The purpose of this paper is to engage with the ways in which spatial power, particularly the politics of sight and size and their effects, bring into view and make visible and actionable, new sets of socio-spatial relations between entities and how they are to be governed. This entails asking questions such as, what does it mean to see like a ranker or the ranked, and how are such regimes of sight legitimated? How does the organisation of space vertically bring into play new social processes, relations and outcomes? How does vertically organised relational space – of those at the top and those at the bottom – set in motion a politics of affect? And how does the device itself, the rankings, calibrate these spatial politics?

Powering up the global university

How do universities project an image of being world class in the world in a context where national governments – from Russia to Japan, China and beyond – join this global competition to boost their standing (Taradina and Yudekevich 2017; Sirat, Azman, and Wan 2017)? Of course, long histories help. In Cambridge where I currently work, the footpaths are crowded year-round with tourists from all over the world on a pilgrimage to see this university city and its colleges, some dating back to the 1200s. A healthy trade in Cambridge memorabilia – from branded shirts to postcards of punting on the Cam with Kings College radiant in the sunlight – reinforces Cambridge's greatness.

If time and tourism help secure Cambridge's place in the pantheon of great universities, so too does its position on the global rankings that have emerged over the past two decades – the most prominent being the ShanghaiRanking Consultancy's *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU), Quacquarelli Symond's *QS World Rankings*, and the Times Higher's *World University Rankings*. Being ranked in the Top 10 universities in the world from among around 26,000 universities worldwide, makes it visible for all to see who is at the 'top', and thus superior, and provides an answer to the question posed on the QS website: 'who rules?'

While prospective students, universities and governments are clearly concerned with the question of *who* rules, in this section, I am particularly interested in the question of *how*? Specifically, I ask: how do world rankings, as particular kinds of intermediary devices, use space as a modality of power to project and amplify size in space, so that from a distance those at the top appear even larger? After all, universities like Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge and Stanford, are relatively tiny in terms of absolute space if we look at enrolments: Stanford has 16,500 students, Cambridge 19,950, Oxford 24,000, and Harvard 15,250. By way of contrast, universities like the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) enrol some 350,000 students over multiple campuses. What kind of spatial politics are at work here so that absolute space and represented space are recalibrated before our very eyes (see Robertson 2010)? In the following sections, I draw upon, and develop, a vocabulary aimed at capturing spatial power using optical concepts such as vision, visibility, verticality, volume and vertigo. These will be used to explore how seeing and being seen, size and height, are activated in the realising of world-class universities.

Vision and visibility

Vision has two meanings: the ability to see, and the ability to think about, or plan for, the future in an imaginative way. Visibility refers to the state of being able to be seen, the conditions for seeing and by attracting attention – standing out (OED 2019). Indicators are involved in seeing, for as Bartl, Papilloud, and Terracher-Lipinski (2019); etymologically, indicators mean pointing. That

is, an indicator points to something which exists out there which needs to be made more visible. And as Jasanoff points out, ‘... any act of data collection involves, to begin with, an act of seeing and recording something that was previously hidden and possibly nameless’ (2017, 2) – in this case, evidence of superior qualities.

Indicators are also a form of quantification whose number-based information reduces the complexity of something – in this case – the university – to make visible those features of the university that need to be attended to. Agostinho (2019, 1–2) argues that optical metaphors have accompanied the rise of big data, promising to open new vistas and worlds hitherto not seen before. What does this mean, she asks, for how we perceive and understand the epistemological potential of large-scale information, and what is at stake in imagining big data through optics? ‘Why is it that the sense of sight, with its shift to datafication, is being mobilised and recast through the modern un-situated observing subject who aims to render the world as knowable through amplification of the senses’ (Agostinho 2019, 2)? Even data itself, which powers world rankings and is also sold back in crafted packages to universities, now claims ‘bigness’ – as in Big Data – as part of its identity. Could it be that even the parsing of data as BIG works on our senses and on spaces so that like a photographer’s macro lens, we are brought closer in to see while standing further away? These elements – that of vision, visibility, indicators and data, are key practices constituting producing social relations in rankings.

Vision and visibility are relational ideas in that the ability to see, and being seen, *implies* a subject/object relationship. In this regard, it was James C. Scott (1998) who coined the highly suggestive term – ‘seeing like a state’. Scott’s contribution was to argue that the power to see particular entities in the landscape was key to modern statecraft. However, for the state, this means bringing into view subjects of the state using simplifying devices – such as standardisation and rationalising – to make subjects *visible* and legible, and the object of governing. However, simplifications are like ‘abridged maps’; they do not represent actual activity but rather activity that interests the official observer (Scott 1998, 3). In the case of the state, the subject is likely to be a potential taxpayer, a defender of the state’s territory, or an enforcer of the state’s rules (see also Bartl, Papilloud, and Terracher-Lipinski 2019, 15).

The idea of ‘seeing like state’ has continued to be generative of other vision projects – from ‘seeing like a survey’ to ‘seeing like a business’, ‘seeing like a citizen’, ‘seeing like an international organisation’ or ‘seeing like a market’. In seeing like an oil company, Ferguson (2005) shows that in Africa, the large transnational oil companies have embraced a political-economic logic that enables them to jump from point to point ‘... neatly skipping over what lies in between’ to avoid state regulation and taxation (Ferguson 2005, 379). In their paper – seeing like a market – Fourcade and Healy (2017, 9) also ask: ‘what do markets see’ when they look at people in the context of huge quantities of individual-level data and an interest in deepening the reach of the market to create new lines of profit making? Similarly, we might ask, ‘what do rankers see’ when they look out at the world to identify universities?

One answer here is that rankers point to, and thus make visible, features any of a university they deem to be attributes of excellence. The representation of these attributes in numbers gives them an aura of objectivity (Bartl, Papilloud, and Terracher-Lipinski 2019, 9). Nominal and ordinal scales of measurement are then put to use. Nominal scales enable the ranker to identify different kinds of categories of university to attribute an identity value, such as a university who is under 50-years old, an Asian University, a liberal arts identity and so on. Ordinal scales of measurement allow units to be ranked with a value now attached to it – as better or worse than other universities in this identity category. Ordinal scales, however, ignore small and large differences between universities instead using the rank to assign value. However, this strips out complexity and difference, suggesting that the terrain on which universities might strive to become excellent is relatively flat, and thus a fair process.

A second answer to the question – ‘what does a ranker see?’ – relates to the ranker’s fundamental interest in the development of rankings. While of course rankers, such as ShanghaiRanking

Consultancy, Quacquarelli Symond and the Times Higher, all claiming the identification and development of university excellence, their interests are determined by bottom-line profitability. TES Global, the parent company of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, is a commercial publishing company located in the UK, while Quacquarelli Symonds is a firm founded in 1990 who specialise in selling education services. ShanghaiRankings Consultancy describes itself as an independent organisation, though it is evident it sells advertising space and so has commercial interests. As commercial entities, this means keeping those who pay for products or services interested in both existing and new ones.

Looking at QS and the Times Higher over the past decade and a half, we can see both have expanded their range of products and services. When the Times Higher rankings were first launched in 2004, Times Higher insisted they would rank only the top 200 universities (less than 1%). By 2015/16, the number of universities they ranked had increased to 800; in 2016/17 to 980; and in 2019 to 1250 (Times Higher 2019). There are now a range of different nominal categories of rankings for the Times Higher – from its premier product of Top 100 of World Rankings to ‘Young Universities’, World Reputation Rankings; Regional Rankings – Asia, Central Asia, Latin America; Emerging Economies; University Impact Rankings and so on. In line with these products, it hosts a series of Summits in major cities around the globe related to these different identities; World Academic, Innovation and Impact, Asia Universities and Young University. In short, the Times Higher has been particularly active in imagining the future for universities which they play a central part in orchestrating. So, too, have Quacquarelli Symon, who have carved out a market niche focused upon the recruitment of international students, and who host a series of Global Tours involving universities and students over the course of a year.

While as we can see vision and visibility are important in that they place the ranker and they ranked into a relationship with each other, their relationship is mediated by a third object – that of the ranking table produced annually by each ranker. The ranking table is an intermediary device which now stands *between* the ranker and the ranked. This has the effect of making the rankers and their fundamental interests invisible in that it is the device that now becomes the focus of attention.

We can now ask – what is it that those who are ranked, or those who use rankings data, see? Inscribed onto the surface of the ranking device – for example, ARWU 2019 – is a series of features which begin with *world rank* (1, 2, 3 ... etc.), the *name of the institution* (Harvard University, Stanford University, University of Cambridge ... and so on), with a flag denoting the *country of origin* of the university. We immediately see that the USA and UK are dominant countries because of the number of country flags that are visible. Down a right-hand column, we are given ‘total scores’ (100, 75.1, 72.3 ... and so on). The relationship between those who are ranked in the Top 10 is now visible. The device has done its job as an intermediary. It works as a means of commensuration, bringing universities from different national contexts around the world into a relationship with each other, and then allocating a rank which now signifies a moment of valuing, and thus attributing a certain status, to the university, and to the nation. In doing so, the ranker is now obscured from view, while those universities ranked at the top are amplified in both size and loudness. They become a visual compass for universities lower down encouraged to increase their standing in the higher education landscape.

However, ranking information on its own is not enough; the information must be actionable in some way to complete its work, and preferably when there are commercial interests involved, a price for the advice or product. Rankings have a clear message about what to do. Click on the ARWU methodology tab page and the device’s indicators tell the viewer what to do to become world class: that its alumni and staff acquire Nobel Prizes and Field Awards, have papers published in Nature and Science, have research outputs indexed in the Science Citation Index or the Social Science Citation Index, and so on. Yet this set of rules is strategically selective; they are skewed to the sciences, to English-mediated journals, and to large research-intensive institutions with significant financial and symbolic capital able to attract large grants and the top scientists. Size matters now in a new way.

The Times Higher presents their World University Rankings in a similar way to the ShanghaiRankers. A left-hand column carries the position of the university in the rankings – running from Rank 1 downwards; 2, 3 ... 50, 100 and so on. The device draws attention to features of ‘quality’ on the ranker’s table: the size of the institution, staff-student teaching ratios, the number of international students, male/female ratio and so on. Above the ranking table some text provides more information regarding what new developments to take notice of: for example, that Yale had joined the top 10, ETH Zurich had dropped out of the top 10, Tsinghua was now the top university in Asia, Japan had overtaken the UK as the second most represented nation in the world, or that there was now ‘good news for France’. This is a race to the top, with competition and affect used to drive the universities’ behaviours forward using a very specific logic.

What do those top institutions do with their rankings? Here I examined the home web pages of three of the ‘Top 10’ universities: Harvard, Stanford, and Cambridge, to see which ranker they might refer to, and how. What is notable is the absence of any reference to ranking tables. In each of these three universities – either under ‘About’ or ‘Research Impact’ – reference is made only to alumni and Nobel Award winners. Stanford parses its reference in a headline banner: ‘From Nobel Prize winners to undergraduates, all members of the Stanford Community are engaged in creating new knowledge’ (Stanford University, 2019). Harvard refers to global influence via an honours roll: 48 Nobel Laureates, 32 Heads of State and 48 Pulitzer Prize winners (Harvard University, 2019). Cambridge refers to research impact – and lists 107 Nobel Prize winners who cover all categories of the award since the inception of the Nobel award in 1904. Their greatness clearly speaks for itself via an economy of worth and value that connects with the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy’s indicator: Nobel Awards. Could it be that to be superior, or great, it is a projected habitus that is recognisable by others, and not simply an aspiration? The top 10 universities are recognised as world class as those engaged in knowledge production in their classrooms and laboratories are award-winning scientists, while those paying for their education both come from and go to elite posts around the globe.

What then of other universities that sit below the top 10, 20 or 30, where being great is an aspiration? In the UK, these are the second-tier institutions that compete for students, staff, research funding and other philanthropic donations. This second tier includes, for example, universities in the United Kingdom such as the University of Manchester, the University of Bristol, the University of Exeter and so on. On inspecting their web pages, each of these universities makes a reference to a global ranking on their front web pages. The University of Bristol refers to the QS and Times Higher rankings, as well as ranking 11th on the ‘cool list’ of destinations; the University of Manchester refers to moving upward on the Shanghai Ranking (clearly chosen so that it represents itself in the best light), while the University of Exeter makes vague reference to being in the top 200 but with no specific ranking identified. Here we can observe a fascinating set of politics at play; that of visibility and invisibility. The effortless visibility of the world’s top universities is accompanied by the invisibility of references to ranking devices, while those lower down make judgement calls regarding which rankers and ranking tables to draw upon to make reputational claims, and what to say.

Rankings, as particular kinds of accounts of being world class, need to be seen to be legitimate. But as Jasanoff notes: ‘... disputes about the significance or importance of an issue tend to cluster around the *legitimacy* of the processes of making the invisible visible’ (2017, 2). In essence, this means asking about ‘practices of authorised seeing’. Jasanoff (2017, 3) develops an account of legitimacy discourses arising out of what she calls ‘regimes of sight’: in her case she refers to the ‘view from nowhere’, the ‘view from everywhere’ and the ‘view from somewhere’. Each of these standpoints has a particular kind of *institutional locus* (respectively science, expert advice, witness), a *political claim* being able to see (e.g. outside politics, inclusive of all affected, personal injury), a *legitimising discourse* (e.g. objectivity, reason, authenticity), and *set of legitimating practices* (e.g. peer review, representation, first-person narrative).

The three biggest rankers seem to combine aspects of the ‘view from nowhere’, ‘everywhere’ and ‘somewhere’ but for different purposes. All promote their methodology as an objective science supported, where needed, by expert advice, quality assurance stamps, and pre-eminent thought leaders. First-person narratives which draw on prominent scientists are used as a form of witnessing, reinforcing the value of ranking. In combination, these multiple sightlines expand and extend the capacity of the rankers to speak to different stakeholders and take in new geographic spaces to now make these places visible. In doing so, they secure legitimacy in multiple ways.

What does ‘authorised seeing’ look like amongst these world university rankers? For the ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, Quacquarelli Symonds and the Times Higher, establishing authority is important to be credible precisely because they are a monetarising machine. This is a relational process and requires work on multiple fronts – from the rankers, the ranked and third parties – to provide a stamp of approval. Credibility reinforces legitimacy and vice versa – ensuring ranking outcomes circulate and are used, to make decisions and guide action. The ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, located in China (the ARWU was initially developed by Shanghai Jiao Tong University), describes themselves as a ‘fully independent’ organisation ‘not subordinated to any university or government’. They legitimise themselves by referring to an international board of academics and experts (the view from everywhere) who provide advice on the development of the ARWU.

An International Ranking Expert Group (IREG), a third party who claims independence from the rankers, has developed criteria for best practice among rankers – the IREG Seal of Approval. QS proudly advertises that they are IREG Approved. The Times Higher has not sought to use IREG approval; instead, they refer to five decades of service to the higher education, and that their ranking calculations have been audited by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, a professional services firm (Times Higher 2019).

Another means of securing authority is to publish the methodology used in the ranking. However, differences between rankers regarding their methodology’s indicators and weightings (e.g. use of number of Nobel Awards by ARWU; QS’s use of academic peer review; TH’s heavy weighting of citations), as well as very different combinations of who is in the top 100 and thus world class, have the potential to controversy. Paradoxically, these differences are useful for universities who can select the ranking table where their rank is highest and thus most visible.

Authority is also derived from being seen to have a legitimate source of data. Over time sources of data have changed, in turn altering the ranked location for different universities. Each change is accompanied by an argument about being more robust. The Times Higher’s citation information is supplied by Elsevier (one of the largest education publishing houses in the world), replacing Thompson Reuters. In contrast to the Times Higher, QS draws on its large ‘reputation’ survey (in 2019, 129,000 academics and administrators responded), 4700 institutions (to rank 1100) and 12 million papers indexed by Elsevier Scopus, to generate its rankings of the ‘top universities’. Yet they face criticisms, such as reputation surveys viewed as problematic because they are not objective, in turn potentially undermining the credibility of QS.

The activities that the rankers host during the year – which include major summits, conferences and tours – are aimed at further conferring and confirming legitimacy. The Times Higher represents itself as the orchestrator of debates among the global thought leaders all committed to the development of excellence within the sector. At the same time, these are simultaneously political events aimed at capturing the attention of the politicians; a revenue-generating event from those who pay to participate in the spectacle, and a media-generating event because of the stories that can be told and sold. QS orients its activities toward prospective students and admissions officers, with a very large number of global tours over the course of the year parsed as ‘ensuring good decisions’. ShanghaiRanking Consultancy hosts a biennial conference aimed at policymakers, university presidents, senior administrators, academics and ranking analysts. Taken together these activities recasts the role of the ranker into that of a sector orchestrator and influencer of ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’, while the world-class institutions are invited to share their thoughts around best

practice, keeping them in the spotlight and line of sight on the various national, regional and global and stages.

Pointing to the political commitments behind the façade of impersonal power conjured up by the presumed objectivity of data helps make a broader point: that concepts and tropes, like big data, rankings or governing by numbers, erase from view the observational standpoints and associated political choices that accompany any compilation of authoritative information (Jasanoff 2017, 12). In drawing attention to these distinct regimes of sight, we can also see that the politics of vision and what is made visible is a construct that re/calibrates the relations between the observer, the observed and the users of observations. This is important for our analysis, for seeing like a ranker is never an innocent or accidental activity. Vision and making visible objects in the landscape differ for different actors they have different sets of interests and organising logics which alter how agents (e.g. state, firm, university) see and are seen.

Vertical vision

World university rankings are, as I have detailed, represented in a particular way. And representations of data have their own distinct politics so that what is projected also shapes ways of seeing. A powerful example can be found in Quinn Slobodian's *Globalists* (2018). He shows how the idea of a world economy came into being as a concept as a response to the Great Depression in the 1930s and the search for a global economic solution (Slobodian 2018, 56). The economists began to play with ideas regarding how to 'see' a global economy. Economists and statisticians also began to think about how to represent the world economy and its activity to manage it (Slobodian 2018, 57–59).

One of the more infamous statistical representations was called the Kindleberger Spiral – a circular graph to track the decline in the volume of world trade. Slobodian (2018) describes this as 'barometer vision'; a means of measuring the pulse of the world and in doing so, making visible the laws related to the sequence of economic fluctuations. If one could 'see' the economy correctly, then it was argued that future world depressions could be prevented. Over time we have come to take for granted that such representations are a way of 'seeing' economic activity. In short, we have come to see as legitimate a particular mode of representation, as if the data and the object were one in the same thing; in this case, the economy and the representations of the business cycle.

Our representations emerge out of classificatory judgements where '... we learn to split, lump together, and assign things and people, including ourselves, to categorical schemas passed on to us' (Fourcade 2016, 175). These categories gain their identity and authority through being '... collectively crafted, sustained, and enforced' (Fourcade 2016) in ways that take on meaning and stamps of approval, and in doing so, we are bound to each other.

Fourcade identifies three types of classificatory judgement: (i) nominal, (ii) cardinal and (iii) ordinal. Earlier, I noted that nominal scales of classificatory judgement are oriented to the essence of a category because of lumping things together (e.g. universities less than 50 years old; the total number of BRIC universities). By way of contrast, cardinal classificatory judgements are tied to practices of collecting and accumulating (Fourcade 2016, 177); for example, the increasing number of international students studying at university over time (leading to analyses such as from elite to a massified system). Ordinal classificatory judgements typically operate according to a vertically organised polarity; of up and down positions (1–100) of relative ranks (no matter the size of difference either between or across ranks), and imply different judgements and valuations (best to least best). Modern ordinal judgements tend toward numerical commensuration. In doing so, they present themselves as an objective process of quantification, for example, the top 10, or top 100 universities in the world. Taking a cue from Slobodian's (2018) barometer vision, I have called this 'vertical vision' (Robertson 2018).

Building on my earlier argument around data and actions, ordinal rankings can now be conceptualised as devices that have inscribed onto their surfaces the spatial politics of the rules of the game

being played (a competition for valued position), and the solution to be actioned. As Mitterle (2019, 1) observes:

Universities can monitor each other in devices but they can also perceive themselves as acting entities. And as Georg Simmel famously noted, a third allows for the construction of conflict without direct interaction. Only through a commensurating entity can Stanford compete with Oxford. Both have to remain aware of the third while assuming the transcendence of the wholeness it depicts. In this sense the competition of 'all against all' turns into a competition 'of all for all'. Universities do not compete against each other but for the favor of the third.

Ordinal systems have their own spatial dynamics, in that small differences between entities are amplified. This is because only one entity can occupy one space at a time, despite in some cases very marginal differences between entities. In other cases, the differences are huge (including vastly different levels of wealth of universities). But an ordinal scale does not measure absolutes. Small differences are amplified, and large differences are scaled back.

The vertical organisation of space, of top and bottom, winner and loser, sets up relations between universities which reinforces competition. Seeing the world as vertically organised means to seeing the world as globally stratified – of those who are great and those who would wish to be great. This is now a world of winners and losers in a range of games (e.g. top Asian, BRICS, younger than 50) created through the prism of the device. The device sets in motion a race to the top which is kept in place by annual cycles of representing the winners and would-be winners. The magic of *vertical vision* is that it is intended to energise a forward/upward movement guided by what is valued by the ranking device. And while difference is the name of the game (1, 2, 3 ...), these differences are also standardised, imposing a new kind of rationality on the sector where it is '... standardization not as simple equivalence, but as inequality structured through the form of equivalence' (Mongia 2007, 410). Standardisation reduces the 'volume' of inequality between institutions, suggesting that the race is broadly one among equals.

A moral economy accompanies this way of seeing and shapes what is considered of worth and of value (Fourcade 2017). However, it would be wrong to think that only those at the top have value. As Fourcade (2017, 672) states: '... let us not forget that the finality of market devices is to make money – not to produce calculative agencies'. Seen through the eyes of rankers with products and services to sell, those ranked at the bottom are valuable precisely because they become a new market for a corrective product. In sum, those at the top (aligned with the criteria) and those at the bottom (not-aligned) are sources of profitability for commercial rankers. Those aligned are encouraged to keep on investing (more research-active academics, potential Nobel award winners, etc.) to remain in place, while those not-aligned are the target of specialised services aimed at repair.

Volume

Volume is important in the politics of space and size. Volume can have two meanings: size and the level of sound. Volume as size refers to either the amount of space contained within the object or the changing amount of something. While technically those placed at the top occupy in many cases a smaller amount of absolute space than those located below, their success means that they take up a significantly larger discursive space as identities to emulate through the ways in which winning is amplified by the rankers: ranking tables, newspaper articles, branding, conference circuits or better credit ratings. Ordinal rankings amplify these differences. They can be seen from afar through the visual clarity of vertical representations so that their reputations travel through space, in turn turning up the volume of their loudness. This louder volume confirms their superiority. Fourcade and Healy suggest that the multiple forms of superiority, or greatness, can be understood as 'über capital:

... a form of capital arising from one's position and trajectory according to various scoring, grading and ranking methods. We use the term 'über' to denote the meta-generalised or transcendent nature of this capital. ...

The term *über* also connotes something or someone who is extraordinary, who stands above the world and others in it. ... *Übercapital* is routinely understood and mobilised as an index of superiority. (2017, 14)

However, paradoxically, standardisation also reduces ‘volume’ in terms of the largeness and the loudness of the differences that matter in terms of social justice (e.g. Harvard versus the University of Manchester). To be recognised as fairly judged as superior, the race must be seen to be fair. Standardisation conceals the unfairness attributes implying the race is broadly one amongst those who are equals.

Vertigo

Finally, the fear of losing height, of losing one’s place in vertically organised space, gives rise to a sensation that the world around them is spinning. We can call this sensation *vertigo*. This is because ordinal rankings and their vertical vision have effects through *affect*. This can include fear regarding what might follow a loss of height. Epseland and Sauder (2017) describe academic rankings as ‘engines of anxiety’. In their book on rankings and US law schools, they provide a detailed account of how different actors within the university describe their experiences of rankings. They quote a Dean’s ‘dread’ about falling down the rankings table of USA law schools:

I hate to say this, but when the USN comes out, it reminds me of when I used to live at an apartment that had roaches. And I developed a protective instinct, which is that I would close my eyes before I turned on the light to give them time to run away so that I didn’t really have to see them. The last time USN came out, I just closed my eyes and I looked in the fourth tier just to make sure that we weren’t there because I live in fear and dread that we will fall to the fourth tier on my watch. That’s ridiculous! We’re a wonderful law school. (Epseland and Sauder 2017, 104)

Like many who see problems with rankings (see Hazelkorn 2017), Epseland and Sauder (2017, 106–107) discuss the criticisms deans have. They include the veracity of the data and methods used to construct rankings (for instance, what the reputational surveys really say), whether quality can be quantified, what is left out of quantification processes that are important to reputation (such as quality of teachers, racial diversity of student intake) and the qualifications of the journalists to make these judgements. But however flawed rankings are, their presence nevertheless spurs the institution into action. Drawing again from Epseland and Sauder’s study of Law Schools in the USA, they quote an Admissions Director describing a Dean’s reaction to a drop in the rankings: ‘[We] experienced a drop of two positions, the dean really kind of went into overdrive to send out letters to alumni and in their alumni magazine to make a very elaborate explanation’ (2017, 108).

Yet injecting movement into rankings is essential so as to ensure alertness and attentiveness to the device. Movement as volatility in the system also secures ongoing interest amongst those who are ranked, and those buying ranking results. Volatility sells newspapers and it keeps universities engaged, aspirational, wondering and dreading. Too much volatility, however, creates problems of credibility. The ShanghaiRankings Consultancy has been praised for its consistent and transparent methodology, and stability. However, in 2019, they added a new criterion which resulted in significant movements up and down the rankings, causing doubts about the rigour of its indicators and methods.

Given these multiple concerns, is it possible for a university to ignore rankings, or to walk away from providing ranking data at all? The entanglement of rankings with multiple audiences and agendas – from the firms who make money from selling rankings results to governing bodies, legislators and potential students – makes either exit from, or ignoring, rankings challenging. The threat of exit by an Australian university attracted the disdain of Phil Baty in charge of the Times Higher World University Rankings, as the institution wanting to hide its poor performance. Viewed in this way, it could be argued that paradoxically it is now impossible for some universities to become invisible. In essence, rankings have managed to galvanise action even among reluctant players, and in that sense have managed to become powerful tools in the hands of the different interested

parties. Rankings thus have the power to bring us into alignment with those whose visions have authority and are accorded legitimacy. And while modern institutions are increasingly expert at carefully calibrating their technical interfaces to reflect their best story, they also live with the sensations which arise out of a lack of control over the rules.

V-charging the global university – conclusions

It could be argued too that the ubiquity of quantification and rankings in the ongoing construction of world-class universities has lulled us into a less complex analysis than these projects deserve. It might also be the case that ‘... because global rankings are here to stay’ we need to direct attention ‘... to the minimisation of their negative effects’ (Marginson 2014, 45–47). For sure this is a laudable goal. Even so, questions such as: what makes world-class university rankings particularly powerful, where does this power derive from and what different modalities of power are involved, are important? The purpose of this paper has been to build on earlier work on spatial and temporal power (Robertson and Olds 2017), to focus specifically on sight and size. I have sought to do this using optical metaphors like vision, visibility, verticality, volume and vertigo. I now draw out five broad conclusions.

First, it is not enough to simply invoke vision and visibility in talking about rankers and the ranked, as much depends on the underlying interests of those doing the seeing, what is being pointed to and what is made visible. That these rankers are commercial actors and not the state changes the project of seeing, and the consequences of what it means to become visible. To begin, multiple nominal categories are created that enable the ranker to imagine innovative products targeted at different geographies, institutional histories and distinct political economies. Across the different rankers, different indicators are deployed that enable these products to sit side-by-side on the metaphoric supermarket shelf, with universities helping themselves to the one that fits their sense of identity and budget in a world that has now been nationally, regionally and globally stratified.

Second, each ranking has its own politics of size and space. The premier ranking – World University – are the deluxe products that configure and confirm the giants in the landscape. The top 10 universities’ presence in absolute space has been transformed through the spatial politics of representation. Closer in, I have shown how these giants do not sing their own praises of greatness through mobilising these global rankings – unlike the second tier of universities. The rankings do it for them. They simply are – superior. This is their habitus. Instead, they refer to indicators of greatness, such as the number of alumni with Nobel Prizes, or who are Heads of State. These different sizes and spaces also make up a world of globally stratified universities whose positionings can be read for different purposes.

Third, the ranking table itself, as a device, works in a remarkable way; as an intermediary device which stands between the ranker and the ranked, and in doing so changes the nature of their relationship. The device brings the ranked institutions into a relationship with each other, and drawing on an ordinal scale of measurement, orders their relationships vertically to assign a value tied to a new kind of economy of worth. As a ranked table of vertically ordered universities, we are invited to see the world as vertically organised – inviting ‘vertical vision’. This is no innocent vision, for it invokes a competition around a set of rules universities do not control. I also argued that ordinal scales of measurement have their own spatial politics. They simultaneously reduce *and* amplify differences suggesting an even playing field and thus a fair competition. That the differences between universities can be measured in billions, which makes the difference to those indicators that matter (academic stars, staff-student ratios, publications in *Nature*), is a case in point.

Fourth, rankings need to be legitimated, and practices of authorised seeing are particularly important for understanding how rankers manage issues of legitimacy and credibility, particularly as commercial entities. After all, ranking devices are a tool for constituting a global higher education market. But it needs those who are ranked, and those who use rankings, to buy into the process. But

this takes discursive and political work. Here we can see the full repertoire of regimes of sight are strategised and mobilised by rankers, which in turn gives them the space to become influential and powerful, setting the rules for the game.

Fifth, ranking tables work best as devices for governing when the politics of affect can be mobilised. By affect, I mean that the sensation of falling – or ‘vertigo’ – is sufficient to energise the institution into acting to limit the consequences of a decline in the future. This kind of affective reaction has performative effects; it powers the rankings forward, for another year and another year after that. Exit seems impossible, as without a ranking you nothing. Being ranked at least means visibility, and visibility activates aspirations about the future and what needs to be done.

Finally, rankings produce a new economy of worth and value; one that is now no longer entirely controlled by the academy, or even indeed the state. For the moment rankings do some of the work of governing for the state, as a proxy for creating knowledge-economies. But there is no evidence that one maps onto the other. Rankings also do a great deal of market-making work, as products and services are created that structure and institute a series of globally stratified higher education markets (Komljenovic and Robertson 2016). Who benefits the most? Those who always have the most. Paradoxically, the bigger in representational terms – as one of the top 10 – these giants bask in the glory of superiority unannounced within, and loud beyond, but whose now voluminous shadow is orchestrated by the rankers to touch every vista and shape every line of sight.

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