

Raise Your Game

20 Inexpensive Ways to Rise in the Rankings

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The rankings race is on, and the competition is expanding all the time: universities around the world are upping the ante and learning how to play the ratings game.

If we have reservations about being part of this dirty business, don't worry: we are in good company. The University of California is arguably one of the best public university systems in the world (although the current cuts are taking their toll). The success of UC is often attributed to its former President, Clark Kerr, a distinguished economist. When Clark Kerr was Chancellor of Berkeley in the 1950s, he used rankings to motivate change. Kerr's yearning was to overtake Harvard, Yale and Princeton, a desire that was eventually met in 1964, when the American Council of Education placed Berkeley at number 1. The only difference between the race in the 1960s and the race today is that it is now happening everywhere.

What can universities do to improve their position? I have constructed a list drawn from evidence, experience and anecdote. The suggestions are mainly for research universities, and, importantly given the impending cuts, they are not high cost.

For consideration by vice chancellors, pro-vice chancellors and registrars.

1. To change a university, you need to change people's incentives

The average person in a university is completely unaware of your university strategy document. If they have seen it, they think it is waffle. So if your strategy is supposed to change behaviour, you have to provide new incentives for your staff, and monitor performance from the top. University strategy works best if it is a simple list of key priorities (i.e. not an operations manual). Marketing experts may advise us that we need elaborate brochures, but the effect of these on the internal community is questionable. Something glossy may be useful for fundraising purposes, however.

2. To attract the best faculty, you need the best leaders

If raising or maintaining research quality is part of the strategy, hire the best scholars you can into positions of power -- PVCs for research, deans or heads of departments. The best universities and business schools have been shown to hire the best scholars as their heads. The probable reason is that other great scholars will choose to be there because the culture and values of the place will likely be more amenable under a fellow researcher. Also, a dean who is a successful scholar may feel less threatened by someone 'famous' coming in. Finally, if a dean or PVC in charge of research is not a good scholar, they may have limited credibility and power within the institution. Imagine that a PVC with few publications is trying to apply pressure to other faculty members to improve their research output; why should anyone listen?

3. Control quality through hiring panels

The VC is the standard bearer, and, therefore, he or she should set the quality threshold in the institution. If you want good hires to be made, then control the process yourself. A head will and should delegate, but only after those receiving the delegated powers have proved themselves. Make sure the very best researchers are on hiring and probation committees. Humans tend to select others who are like themselves. A hiring panel made up of grade 2 researchers is unlikely to want to hire a grade 1 researcher. The same is true in academic departments or schools. Why make life difficult for ourselves by hiring people who are much better than us? The status quo is much preferable, at least among the established faculty -- the younger ones are more likely to want to raise standards.

Create a 'Committee to Advise the President' that polices all hiring, promotion and probation decisions. Ultimately, if this process is going to work, it has to be driven and monitored by a leader. Finally, ban the phrase "is there anyone on the list who is appointable". It encourages tolerance for mediocrity.

4. Hire the best

Again, the VC should create and drive this process, and be available to talk to potential hires personally, as should the PVC for research and head of the recruiting department. As mentioned earlier, the VC should sit on major hiring panels or, at the very least, review the candidates. If the university head isn't able or prepared to control the people who are hired or leave then the game is lost.

Don't just advertise; think about whom the perfect candidate might be. HR departments could become more active in attracting (and keeping) the best staff. If you are looking to hire the dean of a school or head of department, *stop all new appointments* prior to the head arriving, especially with key positions, such as professorships or head of PR. The

power to make one's own appointments is an important incentive for an incoming head. A new dean should also be able to put in place his or her own top management team.

Start schmoozing from the moment you speak to a potential candidate. HR should help department heads by feeding candidates information about local schools and housing etc. Wine and dine them, and whatever you do don't let the perfect candidate wander round campus on their own trying to find a sandwich!

5. Know the talent list and congratulate people

It is inconceivable that a successful commercial organization would not be fully aware of their most talented staff. Find out who they are in your university – researchers, and also great teachers and administrators. If someone does something commendable, make sure you have people on the ground whose job it is to let the VC know. Then send a congratulatory note. When you award your teachers, make it generous. Try to let people know that their contribution has not gone unnoticed. An academic's life is lonely. Loyalty, it is often remarked, is to the discipline not the university. This is rational. Researchers usually *only* receive positive feedback from colleagues in their field – assessment is by their peers, which leads to publishing, promotion and ultimately pay. Academics will show loyalty to their university, but the institution has to do more than get them to fill in forms.

Ensure one or more members of staff – preferably in the HR department – know exactly who your outstanding people are, and whether they are happy or not. Attracting top staff is a gruelling and increasingly expensive process. *Don't then lose them!*

6. No pain, no gain

If you want to change an organization then it is going to hurt. If you just want an easy ride for a few years before you get a pension, then don't bother with a strategy for change. The leader, board members, junior faculty and some of the top people may think that moving up in the rankings is a great idea. But it is unlikely that everyone else will. We all tend to prefer the status quo.

Making 'tenure' decisions can sometimes hurt the most. You get to know the person; maybe by now you are good friends. This is why the Head of Department should be someone who is capable of taking tough but fair decisions; and when HoDs make those difficult decisions, the VC and other top team members must support them. Final say on tenure or probation decisions should come from outside of a department. But often there is a culture of "if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" – in other words, we'll go with your department's first choice if you go with ours. Any committee making probation decisions has got to be controlled by the VC via delegation to a PVC Research if necessary, and it should be populated by your best scholars who are fully aware of the university's strategy with regards hiring and promotions criteria. A probation decision

should not be made lightly. A new faculty member could stay on the pay roll for 35 years.

Also, a wrong decision will hurt the junior academic in the long run. Being in a department where you feel you are just not good enough is stressful. Having colleagues who are a little better is motivating. But if they are all a lot better it can lead to depression and isolation.

7. Too much change, no gain

If there's one thing we have learned under new Labour, it is that too much organizational change drives people mad. University strategy is usually initiated and led by the VC. Leaders should have control of the strategy, and the concomitant powers to make it happen. But a head may only stay in post for a few years. So to avoid the institution's strategy flip flopping each time a new leader arrives, the board should attempt to bear overall responsibility for it. In other words, try to be consistent when hiring leaders. If the overarching strategy is to develop the best interdisciplinary social science faculty, or the largest medical school in the region, then hire the next VC with this in mind. It needn't be the only thing an incoming VC thinks about (they will have their own agenda) but if their predecessor has invested university resources and effort, don't waste what has been achieved. Universities take a very long time to change. To be the best in anything requires focus, tenacity and time.

8. Pay a top salary if you want the right department head

There aren't many more important posts in a university than the position of head of department. Pulling teeth from an angry dog is easier than hiring good HoDs. A university should be prepared to pay a decent salary for the privilege of a department head. Offer a lot more than one term's sabbatical leave, often spent in rehab! Great department chairs make all the difference to the job of VC. Again, HoDs should be among the best scholars in the department, and the VC should make the appointment.

9. Incentivise raising research money

All new VCs or presidents do the rounds of departments when they arrive. It is a rare thing when "we want to raise more research money" is not top of their list. What doesn't get said, however, is why members of a department should do it when there is rarely any mention of incentives. If you want more research money raised in the university, offer to give something back in return; for example, the department gets to keep an extra 10% (buying out teaching and administration time should be a given).

10. Reduce the red tape and number of committees

How often have we heard this said, and how often does it happen? Red tape really does cause a lot of damage in our universities. It slows everything down, affects innovation, weakens motivation, reduces research time, and therefore, quality. Bureaucracy can also be a deterrent when trying to keep good staff. Administrative processes have ballooned. We have got to stop the tail wagging the dog. All committees, systems and processes should be assessed, and the question posed: how does this help the core business of research and teaching? If the case is unclear then get rid of it.

Committee minutes and reports could be cut to a minimum. If necessary, hire a lawyer to make sure the dots are covered. Don't let your best people waste productive time on administration. This is especially relevant when trying to encourage scholars to take management jobs. If you don't know where red tape causes the most jams in your institution, ask your best researchers, teachers and administrators, and consult with a recently joined faculty member preferably from the US.

11. As a leader, be accessible

Not just to your top team. Have a policy of hearing what others are trying to say. Be able to take bad news too. You have made it to the top and that is quite something. Now you can have a little humility and make others feel good about them selves. There's nothing better than being told that what you do makes a contribution. So what if Professor X has a massive ego. Be available to students also. Eat where they eat. Give a seminar or lecture directed at the student body. Let them know who you are.

If you are the kind of vice chancellor who mainly wants to be liked, or maybe you compete with your staff, then don't take the job of leader. Also, many VCs and senior managers start to talk in a different language – managerialism. Don't forget the culture and the values of the place. Plain English works best.

12. Clarify the relationship between administrative and academic staff

How many times have we heard academics and administrators moan about each other -- even registrars making jokes about academics in large administrative meetings. The core business of a university – research and teaching – does not exist without academics. This should be explained. It rarely is. If a great scholar leaves, it will have negative implications for the whole institution. That needs to be known by everyone. Similarly, the role of administrators can be viewed as 'less important' by academics. The relationship between academics and administrators is inter-dependent. Better communication and a bit more networking time together could make the world of difference. If the central administration is located in a building miles away from the

academics, mutual respect and understanding will be less likely. Academic-related administrators, fundraisers and PR staff should dine (in decent facilities) with academics regularly.

13. Start to train scholars in management when they are young

If, as I have argued, good scholars make the best leaders in universities, then potential scholar-leaders need to be trained early in their careers. Much management education is viewed as overly long-winded and not tailored to the needs of academics. Young scholars have almost no incentive to go onto these types of courses, because they are viewed as being detrimental to their research careers. Short, concise, relevant courses (half day max) should be offered with necessary incentives to researchers throughout their careers – little but relatively often. (Maybe they could replace the long-drawn-out teaching courses?).

14. Pick your board or council members because (and only because) they are good for the university, and then educate them

The former head of one of America's most famous universities told me that "*Private universities are much better at selecting boards. They only choose people who are deemed to be good for the university.*" Is that true of your board or council members?

A second important question is: do your board members really understand the business of universities? Do they know what your university does best? It is crucially important that board members understand the institutions that they are governing.

Finally, and in relation to both previous points, ensure that you have outstanding scholars on your board or council. These should be individuals from among current staff, and, importantly, Emeritus scholars or professors from outside the university, ideally former students who feel loyal towards the institution. Former registrars or key administrative staff may also be good additions to boards.

15. Tell Government no!

University leaders are the vanguard of the sector. If they lie down, the tanks roll in. There is no other protection. Being a VC is the hardest job in HE – no doubt. It is depressing when we hear that universities will have to pay for the mess caused by the City. Let's hope VCs fight the good fight!

16. Give them food for their tummies as well as thought

The importance of good food cannot be overestimated. And how often do we hear the words “we want to encourage interdisciplinarity”? Where are these disciplines supposed to meet each other? Rarely are there good quality restaurants in UK universities - places that openly encourage academics to meet with each other (or with academic related staff). Usually they are embarrassing! There is a strong correlation between the consumption of fruit and vegetables and good mental health. (You want more mad professors?).

For consideration by chair of council and council members.

17. Hire a scholar-leader

The evidence from my research shows that the best universities are led by outstanding scholars; and, that better scholars actually improve the future performance of universities. Of course leaders must be good managers with experience of leadership, but that should be assumed. A back-of-an-envelope suggestion is that the vice chancellor, or rector or president, should be at least as good as the top 10% of scholars in the institution.

18. Make sure the leader stays at least 5 and preferably more years

A university leader who is in post for much less than 5 years is unlikely to have the institution’s best interests at heart. In my research, those universities that performed the best in the RAE were led by scholar-leaders whose tenure was between 7 and 10 years. But VCs shouldn’t over-stay either.

19. Give the leader plenty of power (or don’t bother hiring one)

Leaders need power if they are to be effective. Don’t force them to go through loads of committees before a decision can be made. Give a leader power and their own modest pot of money, but ensure you have a decent chair of the board/council acting as overseer.

20. Let the leader pick their own top team.

A university head must have the power to pick his or her top management team. The VC should if possible select the top team within the first few months of being in post.

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