The rhetoric and reality of research reputation: “fur coat and no knickers”

Abstract

Evaluation systems including global university rankings have been recently introduced as mechanisms for assessing overall academic quality, appraising research reputation and as a basis for funding and policy decisions. This study explores the concept of research reputation in terms of how it is defined, constituted and assessed. Eight professor-level academics from a range of disciplines based at European universities were interviewed. The findings highlight the subjective and multidimensional nature of research reputation, the role of informal and formal communications in creating and building research reputation, and the inter-relationships between academics, departments and institutions in enabling research reputation, individually and collectively. Given the problematic nature of research reputation, it is critical that higher education institutions engage in effective strategic reputation management at all levels. Consistency of understanding of research reputation should also exist among all users of ranking systems, particularly those involved in higher education policy and research strategy decision-making.

Keywords: research reputation, appraising research quality, university rankings, reputation management, higher education policy
Introduction

Approximately 17,000 universities in the world have created a highly competitive global environment for education. Globalization, along with student and employee mobility, have forced educational institutions to improve the quality of their education, research and societal engagements and to augment their attractiveness in an international arena (Steiner, Sunstrum and Summalisto 2012). Moreover, changes to funding structures mean that universities have a more commercial focus than previously (Bok 2003). Clearly, the reputation of any university plays a critical role in the extent to which they attract prospective students, quality faculty and international and national funding. The increase in external scrutiny means that universities have had to re-organise and build a distinct identity and reputation in order to compete for the best students, faculty and funding (Steiner, Sunstrum and Summalisto 2012). The concept of reputation, defined as “the opinions that are generally held about someone or something” (Oxford English Dictionary), has received extensive academic attention across different fields including management, marketing and education. As will be discussed here, in an academic context, reputation is a subjective construct based on many factors, such as perceived research quality and the reported excellence of student experience. However, in the last decade, global university ranking systems have played a fundamental role in how a university is judged externally and subsequently been seen to determine a university’s reputation.

Thus, universities have had to adapt to new evaluation and measurement systems (Steiner, Sunstrum and Summalisto 2012) and there is increased demand among many stakeholders for indicators of academic quality. Hence, global university ranking systems have enjoyed increased adoption and validation in practice, and focus and scrutiny in academic research (e.g. Stolz, Hendel and Horn 2010; O’Connell 2012). While research reputation is not measured in all league tables, it is often used as a proxy for assessing research quality. Commentators acknowledge the direct influence of global ranking systems on the international standing and reputation of universities among a range of stakeholders including students, faculty, employers and government (Williams and Van Dyke 2007). Some have highlighted the transformation of current global ranking systems from being benchmarking instruments to policy instruments which are used directly to determine where research funding is allocated nationally and internationally (O’Connell 2012). Consequently, leaders in education have become increasingly concerned about the impact of research rankings and the mounting importance they have on key aspects of academic reputation and success (Wilkins and Hulsman 2012; Locke et al. 2008).

However, rankings are not only controversial because of their impact on reputation and a significant factor in determining reputation, but also the nature of the measurements is a cause of concern. According to Dill and Soo (2005), the reputation of a university is perhaps the most contentious measure used in university league tables and rankings. For example, a large proportion of an individual university's score is based on a subjective reputation survey (Usher and Savino 2007). Selected senior academics are asked to rank order the top 20 higher educational institutions in their region and their discipline. These rank orderings are then compared proportionally to the top ranked institutions globally, and incorporated into weighted aggregations of all indicators. Depending on which ranking system is used, reputation survey data can comprise 15 to 19.5% of a university’s ranking score (Rauhvargers 2011). In spite of this, the concept of “reputation” in the context of university rankings is not well understood. This is the topic of the current study. In regard to terminology, while “research reputation” is the focus of this study, its connection to other related concepts including “academic reputation” and “university reputation” is explored. Furthermore, research reputation is investigated at individual and institutional levels, where the term ‘institution’ acknowledges the range of higher education institutions, including universities. First, however, we review extant literature to delineate current academic definitions and understandings of reputation.

Defining Reputation: Organizational, Academic and Research

Management researchers relate reputation to the overall estimation in which an organisation is held by its constituents, incorporating four key elements, including credibility, trustworthiness, reliability and responsibility (Fombrun 1996). It is “an aggregate composite of all previous transactions over the life of an entity, a historical notion that requires consistency of an entity’s actions over a prolonged time for its formation” (Herbig and Milewicz 1993, 18) and develops through personal and/or mass communication. Organizational reputation can be built or institutionalized through a high status third party or from stakeholders’ evaluations (Rindova et al. 2005). Taking a marketing perspective, there is an ever-increasing pressure for organizations and institutions to manage their corporate brands and develop a favourable reputation among their stakeholders (Van Riel and Fombrun 2007; de Chernatony 1999). By effectively benchmarking reputation (what a corporation is known for based upon past action) to identity (what corporation stands for and wishes to be known for), positive and consistent messages are communicated, long-term stakeholder relationships are fostered and market success is achieved (Roberts and Dowling 1997). Hence, creating, marketing and
maintaining a favourable reputation represents the very means by which an organization develops and flourishes (Van Riel and Fombrun 2007). Reflecting the importance of and rationale for reputation management strategies in business, higher education institutions have increasingly begun to focus on branding, corporate communication and reputation as strategic priorities (Waeraas and Solbakk 2008).

Academic reputation and university reputation appear to be employed interchangeably in the literature. Studies focusing on academic reputation have found that a university’s reputation is often one of the most important factors for students in college choice. Johnston (1998) reported that an institution’s academic reputation coupled with graduates’ success in obtaining high calibre jobs were key considerations for Canadian students in choosing a university. Similarly, college-bound US high school seniors stated that a good academic reputation played a key decision role and consisted of three factors: exclusivity of institution in terms of academic quality of students and tuition fees, curriculum-related factors such as distinguished faculty and challenging programs, and preparation for career including percentage of graduate employment (Conard and Conard 2000). A more recent Slovenian study showed that six factors were considered by students in assessing academic reputation: faculty’s reputation, academic environment, academic excellence, employment opportunities, staff competence and expertise, and teaching staff and student relationship (Sikosek and Kodrioccarjon 2011). A 2013 study found that academic reputation was ranked second (59%) following course content (78%) by UK students when selecting university (Bekhradnia and Darian, 2013) however the choice list available to students was pre-determined. Higher education institutions in the US and internationally have therefore become highly successful in attracting undergraduate international students both through aggressive recruitment and leveraging a strong academic reputation (Feintuch 2010). With respect to the discipline of education in particular, Roberts (2009) concludes that reputation is defined not by what universities say about themselves but by the unsolicited opinions of respected third parties.

Such opinions on a university’s research reputation have been argued to rest primarily on research publications (Clemens et al., 1995) and this plays a central role in academic research development. In an environment that places significant emphasis on research productivity, the mantra of “publish or perish” pervades universities across geographical location and discipline (De Rond and Miller, 2005). This strategy brings many challenges. According to Jerrams et al. (2008), academic research is increasingly interdisciplinary, inter-institutional and international which poses challenges to support research and scholarship within universities and higher education institutions while also enabling leading researchers to work in internationally recognised research groups and clusters. However, definitions and measures of research reputation and quality also vary by discipline and country, with some focusing upon peer review publications, citations, competitive funding awarded and post graduate completions (Jerrams et al., 2008) but may also include subjective measures such as peer review (Williams and Van Dyke, 2008) which have become integrated into research ranking systems discussed below. Higher education institutions and universities are therefore increasingly challenged to manage what they stand for and how they are perceived and an institution may have many different profiles which must be aligned under one umbrella brand (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2008).

There is also debate about the evaluation of research quality and quantity (Linton et al. 2011) and a proliferation of concrete metrics such as citation counts, journal impact scores, Hirsch Indices, journal reputation studies, and internet citation rates can be used to assess research productivity and hence research reputation. Sociology evaluations, for example, tend to include books as well as journal articles, thus complicating the relation of publication to reputation (Clemens et al. 1995). Within US law faculties, on the other hand, measures such as citations per faculty, productivity of books and articles per faculty as well as subjective reputational surveys are used (Leiter 2000). There is clearly a need for a standardized, high quality publishing structure and research measurement system (Sombatsompop et al. 2011). Ironically, in the UK, the national Research Excellence Framework (REF\footnote{The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). (http://www.ref.ac.uk/)}, of which one focus is research impact, has been accused of decreasing research quality and productivity and adversely affecting UK’s overall research reputation (e.g. Saunders and Wong 2011), although this decrease may also be attributed to management issues of institutions within the REF framework. Moreover, the different criteria and evaluation processes used in research assessment models across the globe have been highlighted by McNay (2010) who noted the drive towards international comparisons of research quality. Thus, there is significant variation and debate across discipline and country in regard to the way in which programs, departments, faculties and universities are assessed. In this context, global university ranking systems and the associated surveys have therefore entered the academic arena.
offering a universal standardized approach to assessing research excellence and reputation of higher education institutions.

The Present Study

It is important that stakeholders and policymakers have a clear understanding of what reputation surveys measure. Although amongst academics there is an understanding of the construct of academic reputation and specifically research reputation, it is not clear whether the subjective impressions used by academic reviewers when completing ranking surveys are consistent with how research reputation is defined, or, in turn, with how it is understood and used by policy makers. Thus, university strategies and national policies, designed to improve university rankings and the knowledge economy (Marginson 2007), may well be misaligned to the rankings systems which they are designed to influence. Therefore, this study aims to explore the concept of research reputation as a key component of global university rankings to identify how it is currently defined, constituted and assessed. To this end, we carried out a qualitative study, interviewing senior academics similar to those invited to complete reputational surveys. The aim was to explore the relationship between assumptions and actuality in terms of measures of research reputation.

Method

This study aimed to explore senior academics’ concepts of research reputation. A purposive sampling method (Patton 1990) was used to select a group of academic professors across a range of disciplines. Of the eight academics interviewed, six were based at a range of universities in the UK with the remaining two affiliated to other European universities. A profile of the eight academics is provided in Table I. The study received ethical approval from the lead university and, following ethical protocol, each participant was contacted directly before receiving an information sheet outlining the research and a consent form to formally accept the invitation to be involved in the study.

Participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview to discuss their views on research reputation. Interview questions focused on two main areas, (1) the concept of individual “research reputation” and (2) the concept of “institutional reputation” by discipline or institution and region. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in the participant’s place of work, over the phone or by Skype. Each interview lasted no longer than one hour and each was recorded, transcribed and anonymized. Member checks were completed by returning each transcription to the relevant participant to ensure that the interview transcript accurately portrayed the information that was shared, allowing participants to qualify or remove comments before the data analysis stage.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Approaching the study inductively, each of the three authors initially selected and analyzed one interview transcript. Initially each author considered the data in detail using an “open” coding system to develop the initial categories (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Content analysis was used in this initial stage by coding and assigning particular sections of content from each interview to defined categories that were informed by themes evident in the interviews. This allowed the thematic similarities and differences between interviews to be examined. Similar to the constant comparative method of analyzing data, the comments were manually reviewed, repeatedly and continually coded, seeking similarities and differences, groupings, patterns and items of particular significance (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Rubin and Rubin 1995). Once the authors had cross-checked the accuracy of each other’s content analysis with respect to the five categories, the remaining seven interviews were equally shared across the three authors to complete content analysis.

Findings

Perspectives on Research Reputation: Individual and Institutional

Research reputation was described as a multi-faceted concept which can be associated with individual academics, departments, research centres, universities and higher education institutions. A track record of sustained quality research output was described as the cornerstone of a positive research reputation but was easier to “instantiate than it is to generalize” [HF]. An individual academic with a strong research reputation was perceived by all respondents as someone who was published in top tier publications, cited by many,
awarded prestigious grant funding, involved in highly competitive research programmes and projects, attracted good quality research students, influenced and advanced knowledge and impacted on the overall field. Quality research included “reach, rigor, originality and significance” [CD], and implied a steady and sustained level of productivity, including high quality, competent, impactful and reliable publications with real applications. While citations figured, respondents’ perceptions of quality appeared to be based more on the quality of journals published in and competitive international research grants awarded. In debating quality and quantity issues, some respondents distinguished between “being published” and “being prolific” as a basis for appraising research quality and thus reputation. “There are researchers who write a lot but I wouldn’t put them in the top ten” [CD]. Hence, research reputation was perceived to be based more upon quality of research productivity than quantity of output.

While research reputation appeared to be based upon tangible, hard metrics such as number of quality publications, citations and grants, it also incorporated soft indicators such as memberships of prestigious research councils and panels, invitations as keynote speakers at international conferences and being perceived as influential in the research discipline, as reflected by the following comment:

“I think reputation for me brings a number of things doesn’t it? It is about somebody who publishes important papers in the field, so papers that get talked about a lot. Somebody who has power so who is seen as a key player and perhaps sits on a REF panel (…) They’ve got some power in terms of shaping the field (…) so there are metrics but it is above and beyond that in some way” [PB]

In the increasingly competitive academic arena, several respondents also agreed that research reputation must incorporate a strong international dimension which can be achieved through membership of international networks, links and research projects, and chairing international conferences. However, the nature and level of research reputation appeared to vary in terms of international impact and recognition and some respondents highlighted those who were internationally renowned for producing research which was truly ground breaking. This level of research impact emanated from research that asks questions “at the cutting edge of knowledge” [CD] which in turn may be acknowledged through international prestigious awards including Nobel Prizes. Hence, some of the highly reputed researchers identified by respondents were well-established “old guard” [PB], who were associated with “stellar research” [KJ] which had significantly shaped their discipline. Some respondents viewed research in the sciences as more “blue skies” [IJ] in nature which may lead to innovation which has significant theoretical and practical impact and may, thus, be more widely recognised and esteemed. Specifically, within the science discipline, one respondent highlighted the multidimensionality of research reputation which was built through academic and research performance in addition to successful industry collaborations and activities:

“…good quality in science is excellent reputation in terms of scientific publications, in terms of research contracts, in terms of level of students that are working in your department, while excellence in terms of collaboration with Industry could be far more about which type of work can directly lead to potential spin-off activities, could lead to potential valorisation, could lead to potential product development (…)” [HL]

Some respondents also highlighted the importance of a strong personal dimension of research reputation which included the academic’s ability to effectively handle his or her position and standing in their research community as well as their reputation:

“I would make a distinction between (…) a person’s standing in a particular scientific discipline and reputation. Standing is where it is earned by production and performance, whereas reputation is how the person handles his position as well as his personality… For me repute is not just based upon the scientific output but more about the person as well” [IJ].

Implied in “production and performance” is also the notion of durability where an individual has an opportunity over time to build and sustain a research reputation. Personal aspects of research reputation therefore related to personality and “softer skills” [RL] where the individual was perceived as a good team player and a strong leader and mentor of colleagues, who motivates young researchers. Personal aspects of research reputation also included being supportive of others in building a culture to enable faculty to produce good quality research, as well as attracting good quality external academics to join his or her team. Such individuals were viewed as paragons and may in reality be rare exceptions in the highly competitive and opportunistic environment of higher education.
At the institution level, research reputation was viewed by respondents as a collective description and included an aggregate of individual activities and achievements, sometimes within specific departments, centres and faculties. Similar to individual research reputation, it was directly related to research output through optimising the type and level of research funding, the number of research active research professors and staff who publish internationally in world-leading publications and the number of PhD completions. An institution’s general research reputation may also be derived from the reputation of a specific discipline base. For example, an institution with a strong reputation in Engineering may also be assumed to have a strong reputation in other related (e.g. Science) or even unrelated disciplines (e.g. Art and Design). It may however, be often built upon research achievements of the past which may not reflect the current reality or may be based primarily on the strengths of some disciplines or departments relative to others which can dilute the strength of the whole:

“I think that some institutions may have a reputation because of one or two great things that happened (…) If you take an institution like ours you’ve got… world leading cancer researchers but the overall reputation [of the University] (…) may be watered down by some of the other departments that are not world leading” [KJ].

Similar to the notion of durability in regard to individual reputation, age of institution was also perceived to be a factor with older institutions sometimes enjoying the advantage of longevity and history which contributed to a positive research reputation as compared with younger institutions. The creation and sustainability of an institution’s research reputation was reflected by others who pointed also to the fragility of reputation which “is extra-ordinarily complex (…) which is very hard to win but very easy to destroy” [II].

Given the reliance on a high degree of soft indicators, personal dimensions, and opinion in appraising an individual or higher educational institution’s research reputation, there was agreement among all respondents that it was a highly subjective and “problematic (…) slippery idea” [KJ]. Perceptions of research reputation were often personally held and, when asked to rank individuals or institutions, one academic’s top five or ten may not be same as another’s. There was also the suggestion by some that research reputation was based on “gut-feeling… [and is] intuitive” [PB]. Knowing key people in different institutions was important as was knowing if the institution was perceived as an “attractive place to be” [PB]. Hence, institutional and individual research reputation does not appear to be a concept that can be measured quantitatively or “just reduced to metrics” [PB]. It can also depend on recognition of a common or shared research perspective between academics, both of which affect how peers view and rate each other (and their institutions) in terms of reputation.

**Communicating Research Reputation**

The ‘branding’ of a university, and the level of dynamism and promotion of a particular niche this entails, was perceived as important. Some respondents noted that allocating resources to branding was a business decision being made more frequently and there was a sense of a “very calculated manipulation of marketing media, all the way through to how people conducted themselves (…) in everyday life in the university” [RL]. Branding was described as being achieved by investing in a specific language or attribute(s) that became synonymous with the university and what it stood for. RL commented that the subtlety by which the reputation rhetoric was continually communicated throughout the university was successful in heightening its reputation, not only to those who were employed by the institution, but those who attended the university for educational and work opportunities, as well as more social functions. In this case, “branding” of this university was primarily down to the investment of time and energy from the university’s vice-chancellor or president. KJ also acknowledged the need for one person, or a small group of people, whose main remit is to increase the university’s reputation but had not yet experienced this in her university:

“If we wanted to build that reputation we’d have to be really single-minded about it and in the time that I’ve been there I would say that none of my (…) line managers have been”.

Some respondents described both formal and informal methods of communicating research reputation. However, in these discussions, they distinguished very clearly and repeatedly between the communication of a “profile” and the communication of a “reputation”, which they considered to be different:

“He’s [colleague at the university] on every bloody website, on every newspaper and actually, you know, in terms of profile, yeah, he’s out there but reputation, high quality research… [?]” [CD].

Developing or maintaining a high media profile for research was sometimes seen as being incongruent with a good research reputation, either at the individual or the institutional level. So, for example, for individual
academics, “anybody who has to actually make a big deal about telling you how good they are really isn’t that good.” [RL]. Moreover, an institution with a strong media campaign to publicise research may be seen by academics as having ‘gloss’ but very little substance. One respondent humorously pointed out, “but it doesn’t help if it’s seen to be with, you know, a fur coat and no knickers as the saying goes” [RL]. It was formal means of communication, such as web, newspapers and other public media, used strategically that were more often associated with a high profile rather than a good research reputation.

Furthermore, it appeared that academics preferred to make up their own minds about reputation rather than passively accept information received from the media. “…when they [academics] are popular, I know from my own reading whether I think they’re good or not. Brown is brilliant and Smith is not.” [HF]. In order to do so, academics actively used formal communications, like information given on departmental webpages, to develop a sense of the research culture and environment at different institutions. When information was provided in this format, it was seen in a positive light, as distinct from profile, “So that’s the difference between profile and reputation. I can go ‘Oh what’s going on with Jones moving there?’, but I can go on the staff [webpage] and go ‘hmmm’…” [CD]. It was seen as a part of a researcher’s job to promote their research, especially by using departmental webpages. It was also a matter of huge frustration for some respondents when the institutional mechanisms and infrastructures do not support academics to provide their peers with this key reputation building information.

Formal communications were also a source of information that indirectly fed into the perception of an institution’s research reputation. For example, adverts for PhD studentships conveyed a message to a wide audience of a vibrant postgraduate research community, seen as a vital part of research reputation. Adverts pertaining to funded research or PhD posts were seen as particularly helpful, “I guess which (…). I think does help create an image so we, you know we, we’re able to advertise PhD posts that are funded by…” [SF]. Similarly, adverts for faculty positions were also a means of communicating research reputation, although perhaps less indirectly and more strategically, “So if I look at, you know ads for some of the major London universities they will always say something like, ‘Our Professors publish in...’ and then they will name the leading American journals.” [KJ]. Furthermore, being seen externally to make good or stellar appointments would influence reputation as reflected by the comment: “So it may build… bringing in stars will certainly build your reputation to a certain extent because people will say about the star: Oh he/she is at [name of university] say, so in that sense the stars matter.” [HF].

Email lists were also helpful in spreading news about key appointments, seminars and relevant institutional changes. However, some respondents recognised that indirect communications were more instrumental in promoting a research reputation than strategic media campaigns:

“the way... that reputation gets communicated is really quite interesting because it’s... it’s through, typically not through running the big TV ad that tells you that, you know .... but through all sorts of subtle things, you know. So it’s... it’s actually probably more effective...drip fed... through different media.” [RL].

Informal communications, however, seemed to be most instrumental in determining a research reputation. An institution’s research reputation may also be communicated primarily through word of mouth and may be based on “ideas that are spread between people rather than written formally about” [RL]. Hence, academics’ perceptions and opinions play a key role in creating and promoting subjective notions of research reputation. While critical mass was seen as a key component of reputation, this information was implicitly conveyed, through numbers of people from one institution seen to be attending the same conference and presenting research. It also seemed that if one or several individuals from a given department were known to others and perceived to have good research reputations, then the department would share in the individual’s reputation.

“You see people from those universities at conferences you go to, people you know. I think it’s a lot of word of mouth and so on. You know somebody in the department who you think is good and that gives you a feel for whether the rest of the department is average or better or not.” [HF].

Other means of informally communicating a department or institutional reputation were members visiting other departments on sabbatical, in external or PhD examiner roles, or accreditation panels. Essentially, these standard academic activities were seen by the majority of respondents as a valid form of reputation building communication:
“...and they need to continually be... be built, and it’s about... it’s about people, I think, it’s about people and it’s about activities and continually demonstrating, you know, those activities. So in a university with poor research reputation you just wouldn’t have any of the things would you?...” [CD].

This demonstrates how the most trusted and strongly weighted evidence for research reputation is communicated implicitly through the visibility and extent of academic activities.

**Managing and Enabling Research Reputation**

The relationship between individual, department and institution was inextricably linked as regards cultivating and managing an institution’s research reputation. The reputation of universities was, in many cases, perceived to be related to specific areas of work or research that the university was internationally renowned for, supporting the link between a group of individuals, the department(s) they reside in and the institution. Moreover, an individual was considered to contribute to reputation as part of a research community and not by operating as a sole researcher:

> “it [an institution] is a collective thing so clearly it can’t be built on one person’s work (...) what’s implied then is that there’s some kind of critical mass [RL] and ‘on the individual level it isn’t necessary to be in a good department, but for a department to have a good reputation there must be a critical mass’” [HF].

A critical mass was seen by some as important due to the vulnerability of research reputation because of people movement:

> ‘there is something about having a critical mass but of course that means that a research reputation of an institution can shift over time ... at the end of the day research reputation can disappear over-night as individuals disappear and go on to another university’ (CD).

Department level strategies and support structures were seen by others as important in terms of retaining staff and to contribute to the institution’s research reputation. Increasing pressure to retain or increase student numbers, and increased teaching and administration workloads, were seen as incompatible with developing research reputation. Contribution to reputation does not seem to be valued in the context of workload such that research groups could be nationally or internationally renowned but ‘counted for peanuts’ (CD) in the institution in which they reside.

Respondents were quite clear on how best individual faculty could contribute to an institution’s research reputation. This included making it easy to access information on faculty members and being more proactive in promoting research outputs. A required level of accountability and visibility was seen as an essential consideration for all academic staff, including sharing their research and engaging with other academics through academic social networking and exploiting internet search facilities, e.g., Google scholar.

The presence and promotion of active research labs, with significant numbers of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows, and a steady stream of quality publications, was conveyed as an opportunity to bring people in, and provide them with a positive, challenging and worthwhile experience that would in turn encourage them to stay and contribute to the work and reputation of the lab and university. It was important to secure grants for building and maintaining teams that could continue to contribute through quality publications and, by association, continue to heighten the university’s or institution’s reputation.

Presenting at conferences and holding network events were other opportunities to increase the exposure of a university. While a number of suggestions were made on how individual faculty could collectively contribute to an institution’s reputation, some respondents were quite clear in noting that they believed, ‘the reputation of the institution should rely on (...) the sum of its parts’ [KJ] and that ‘the individual again is almost creating the institutional reputation’ [PB]. Hence, creating and managing a research reputation appeared to rest upon both individual and team strategies supported by the institution.

Finally, recruiting more experienced faculty as well as developing existing and junior staff was seen as a factor in reputation building. For example, the notion of buying in more experienced faculty was seen to increase the reputation of a discipline (what KJ termed ‘building a field’), and by association the university, but with some caveats. ‘Bringing in stars will certainly build your reputation to a certain extent’ [HF] but they must
bring with them research strategies on how they intend to contribute to the research reputation not only of the discipline but the university. In practice however, ‘stars’ were viewed as sometimes problematic as ‘they rarely stay... and there is a tendency to have quite an instrumental relationship with the organisation’ [PB]

There was also concern among some respondents that while buying in more experienced faculty may be an option, one must also consider the support given to existing staff and more junior appointments:

‘you’ve also got to have some mechanism for building up the people you’ve already got and bringing in people at a junior level and making bloody sure that when you bring them in you don’t bring them in because they’ve got potential and then overload them with all sorts of other things so they never fulfill that potential’ [HF].

While there was some uneasiness in ‘buying reputation by buying individuals’ [CD], this was not to deny instances where universities had deliberately supported one particular field of research through prime funding and appointment of research professors in order to improve reputation. However, one interesting consideration was the relationship between raising the “profile” of a university and the “reputation” of a university through buying in experienced researchers, who can be ‘key political players in the field (...) operate in a resource scarce environment. Can work and network politically within Europe and internationally (...) within the university, position that group [which they have been employed to direct] as the up and coming group’ [CD]. CD explained that is was not until after the establishment of such a “profile” that the individual would then be in a position to contribute to the “reputation” of the university. As research reputation takes time to build, it perhaps limits the expectation of those bought in to heighten and sustain reputation of their institutions.

**Discussion**

While global university ranking systems have entered the academic arena offering a universal standardised approach to assessing reputation of higher education institutions, it appears that the concept of “reputation” in the context of university rankings is not well understood. This study aimed to explore research reputation as a key component of global university rankings to identify how it is currently defined, constituted and assessed. In doing this it is clear that there is a relationship (intended or not) between academic reputation and research reputation, an inextricable link between individual reputation and institutional reputation and that the measurement of research reputation is often flawed and subjective.

It is apparent that research reputation is based more upon quality of research productivity than quantity of output. This challenges the mantra of ‘publish or perish’ that, in some instances, encourages research productivity at the expense of considering the quality of the outlets academics are targeting for their work. The relationship between individual, department and institution is closely linked as regards cultivating and managing an institution’s research reputation, with reputation at each level being conditioned positively or negatively by reputation at the other levels. If creating, managing and contributing to a research reputation is to rest upon individual and department or team strategies supported by the institution, then there needs to be a shared rhetoric and understanding throughout the university of the targets to be striven for as regards the quantity and quality of publications.

An institution’s research reputation is viewed as a collective description and includes an aggregate of highly respected individual activities and achievements, a strong international dimension and a longevity and history associated with older universities. The highly subjective nature of determining research reputation challenges the extent to which the quantitative surveys conducted as part of the global university ranking systems can in fact provide an accurate picture of research reputation across all universities and higher education institutions for all disciplines. However, the fact that the subjective, somewhat fuzzy, nature of research reputation has been quantified is not a critical flaw, so long as users of the rankings systems have a clear understanding of the nature of the construct being measured. We question whether this consistency of understanding exists, which is critically important for those involved in planning higher education policy and research strategies at national or institutional level.

While developing or maintaining a high media profile for research is sometimes seen as being incongruent with a good research reputation, either at the individual or the institutional level, a distinction is made between the communication of a “profile” and the communication of a “reputation”. A “profile” of an individual or higher education institution is related to the degree of deliberately targeted public exposure and visibility while informal communications appear to be most instrumental in determining a research “reputation”. Interestingly, it is noted that it is not until after the establishment of a “profile” that the individual would then be
in a position to contribute to the “reputation” of the institution, acknowledging that the most trusted and strongly weighted evidence for research reputation is communicated implicitly through the visibility and extent of academic activities. Hence, a key challenge for a higher education institution is to carefully manage perceptions of what it is, what it stands for and what it will be known for in order to create a precise and consistent reputation to all its stakeholders (Waeraas and Solbak 2008).

To this end, while branding continues to have strategic promotional importance, reputation management is now widely acknowledged by education marketers as being a more appropriate concept for developing a positive image for higher education institutions than the process of ‘branding’ (Roberts 2009). As Roberts (2009, 5) explains, ‘Of course all education institutes are and have a portfolio of brands, but how they are positioned in stakeholders’ minds is much more a product of reputation (intrinsic, authentic actions, experiences) than it is the product of managed brand communications”.

These findings have elucidated our understanding of the meaning of the subjective reputation data which feed into rankings systems, which are themselves so influential in determining reputational perception (Williams and Van Dyke 2007). One strength of this research is the qualitative, non-hypothesis driven, methodological approach, which is consistent with the complexity of reputation and its experiential rather than quantitative nature. There are also limitations to this research which should be acknowledged. Participants were senior academics of long standing, with well-respected research profiles within their respective disciplines, spanning sciences, engineering, business, and humanities. In spite of this, none of our participants had been invited to complete a rankings survey during their careers. This raises the possibility that their views and experiences may be dissimilar to those who have completed rankings surveys. While we acknowledge this as a possibility, it does not seem likely.

Moreover, given that this study was based on eight informants from a range of disciplines and institutions, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research in terms of the analysis of findings and conclusions drawn. We do not claim these results to be generalizable to the wider population either across discipline or institution. We would, however, like to emphasise two key points. First, the qualitative methodology and in-depth analysis used here, with its inherent limitations, was consistent with the research questions and the extent state of the knowledge about the definition of research reputation. Finally, these limitations could be argued to be tempered by the rigor with which the study was conducted in terms of sampling, data collection, analysis and conclusions allowing for the reliability of the study, albeit based upon small sample sizes to be maximised (Bock and Sargeant, 2002).

In light of such limitations, this study still raises particular questions that would direct significant and worthwhile development of the research reputation discourse. These include considering the extent to which reputation varies by discipline and / or groups of disciplines, the extent to which reputation works differently across different categories of institutions (e.g., old or new universities) and the way in which end users, i.e., potential students and funding agencies, understand reputation. In conclusion, the concept of research reputation in the context of higher education appears to be complex and subjective. Layers of complexity and subjectivity arise through individual academics, departments, universities and policy makers being unable to buy into a shared rhetoric and understanding of reputation. This only heightens the disconnect between those who contribute to completing the ranking surveys, academics’ understanding of reputation and those whose remit it is to interpret and use the ranking data to produce league tables of higher institutions.

References


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1 ‘fur coat and no knickers’ is a phrase that is used to denote instances where someone or something has a superficially positive appearance (i.e., the fur coat) but is actually concealing a lack of substance and a level of disregard (i.e., no knickers)