What are the characteristics of a successful university?

This chapter explores the factors that define institutional success. It considers how the climate in which success can be identified has changed, how we can rank success whether through research performance or through student related measures and what conclusions can be drawn from the published league tables. It looks at contextual factors that need to be taken into account including factors which can disadvantage institutions, and whether alternative criteria can be found to measure institutional performance; along with this it reviews the special position of the post-1992 universities. Issues about the sustainability of performance are explored and the evidence in regard to company success are compared with the position of universities; it argues that performance over time can be self reinforcing in the latter except perhaps in periods of very sharp change where universities may lack adaptability to new pressures. Finally, it sums up the evidence and draws conclusions about the characteristics of institutional success and the factors that generate it.

The historical position

One of the most significant changes in the way we think about universities, from the philosophy that dominated the period from 1945 to 1980 in the UK, is how we identify success. In these years the University Grants Committee (UGC) worked on the principle that universities were equal or, if not actually equal, should for the most part be treated as such. Common salary scales were introduced in the 1950s to ensure that richer universities should not poach staff from poorer institutions. In the 1960s the Robbins Committee sought to diminish the quality gap between Oxbridge and the rest and in the 1970s research student numbers were allocated by the UGC on the basis of equality between less and more research active universities. Also in the 1970s the Universities Central Council for Admissions (UCCA) opposed suggestions that it should publish A level entry scores on a university by
university basis because it did not wish to draw attention to differences in entry levels (Shattock 2001a; Shattock and Berdahl 1984). Few people were deceived by this egalitarian approach, least of all the research councils which were already urging the need for a greater concentration of research in fewer institutions. Indeed, not only did informed opinion accord success to some institutions but it also identified others which were failing or were about to do so: in the late 1970s, rumours abounded as to which institutions were on an alleged government closure list. Mostly these were 1960s new universities – relatively small and campus based – which had suffered from student troubles and were thought to be politically radical. Ironically one of these (Warwick) was later quoted in the media as Mrs Thatcher’s favourite university, and most of them appeared high up in the 1980s research league tables. The failure to admit to differences in levels of institutional performance and to identify data that would illustrate them was damaging because it bred institutional complacency amongst some of the older universities and offered no incentive for improvement. It also encouraged too much reliance on ‘informed’ opinion and offered no assistance to those outside universities such as potential student admission candidates, industrialists seeking to commission research or the public at large who had a legitimate interest in selecting one institution over another.

The first steps towards change

All this was to change in 1981, not as a result of action by the Government except indirectly, but by the UGC. Facing unprecedented budget reductions the Committee chose to impose differential cuts on universities using criteria based on GCE A level entry scores, a broad perception of research quality, unit costs, the distribution of academic staff and their ages, and the relevant student numbers in the different subject areas. Because the UGC was trying to achieve three things at once – protecting science and technology numbers, preserving the unit of resource and correcting previous imbalances in resource allocations – and because London University was still a single unit for recurrent grant purposes, it is not possible to deduce from the UGC’s resource allocation decisions a clear pattern of winners. A list of major losers was, however, immediately obvious: Salford, Bradford, Keele, Aston, UMIST, Stirling and Surrey all of whose budgets were cut by more than 25 per cent over a four year period. Of these, all but UMIST were also required to cut their student numbers by 14 per cent or more. Universities that suffered budget cuts of no more than 15 per cent, and cuts in student numbers of no more than 4 per cent were, on the other hand, relative winners. They included Bath, Cambridge, Durham, East Anglia, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, Loughborough, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield, Southampton, Warwick and York. The next and decisive change took place three years later when the UGC decided, under pressure from the Treasury, to review research quality across the university system and to allocate recurrent grant
for research (R) differentially, and separately, from recurrent grant for teaching (T). This came into effect in 1986. Not surprisingly, none of the biggest losers in the 1981 cuts, except UMIST, did well in this first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (Shattock and Berdahl 1984).

These events were transitional to a new era when institutional differentiation increased as market mechanisms were given freer rein under the Thatcher reforms, but they represented a traumatic period from which some institutions did not recover easily. Twenty years later we are in a much better position to assess university performance than we were then but the quality of performance remains a difficult and inexact process to evaluate and ways of defining success remain elusive. The RAE has shown that it is possible to distinguish between differential levels of research performance on a system-wide basis although arguments remain on methodological points. But in other areas of institutional activity it is more difficult. We feel instinctively we can recognize successful universities when we see them but there has still been little systematic research to identify what their characteristics might be, what criteria we should use to judge them and what factors can be shown to sustain success. Although traditionally universities are both research and teaching institutions, university success is often equated with research reputation alone: the 2003 White Paper, for example, refers, incautiously, to the ‘best’ universities with research reputation apparently in mind even though it is anxious to encourage the concept of teaching universities.

Increasingly, however, there is public pressure to redress the balance and factor the teaching function into any assessment. Newspapers and magazines, with large numbers of parents and potential university students amongst their readers, have been quick to respond to the significant public interest in the provision of ratings of university performance both in the UK and elsewhere. The failure to define university success in the post-war years had an important impact on the way higher education institutions were managed. Competitive outward facing institutions in whatever field, which depend on their reputation and their positioning vis-à-vis their rivals, behave and structure themselves very differently from those that are managed simply to be part of a system. A ship that is part of a centrally managed and directed fleet will have a very different approach to strategy and performance, as readers of the late Patrick O’Brian’s novels will recognize, than one which operates under independent command. The UGC system tended to favour homogeneity rather than institutional distinctiveness and the UGC judged institutional ambition on the basis of the extent to which it matched the needs of the system as a whole. As a consequence, institutional performance was not compared and there was little incentive for institutions to try to outperform one another.

In a competitive environment, management needs to be able to define success and ensure that performance is geared to achieving it. Universities are multi-faceted, multi-product organizations which increasingly in the modern era are taking on additional roles, particularly in relation to the knowledge economy and social inclusion, although their core business
remains teaching and research. This broadening of a university’s role, however, represents an important new dimension in university life, at least in Europe, and can be critical to the way universities are now regarded by their local communities and by government. It also has significant implications for the way universities must be managed. Success, however, in this wider role should not be regarded as compensating for shortfalls in academic performance. Indeed there is plenty of evidence to show that success in the core business reinforces performance in the wider role – major science parks, significant industrial partnerships and impact on regional or national economic life are more likely to occur at academically high performing universities than at universities which have low academic ratings.

There is no single scale of values that can rate the value to society of a university that scores exceptionally highly in teaching and research against one that concentrates on a social inclusion agenda. In a mass higher education system it is important that there should be diversity of mission and that universities should be encouraged (and funded) to play to their strengths and to compete where they are best able to succeed. Equal success should not be sought, nor can be achieved, in teaching, research and all the facets of the wider social and economic agenda. In the modern world, however, just as we are entitled to expect that a university which aims to address itself primarily to one or even many aspects of the wider agenda should aim for a good performance in teaching and research, so no university, however distinguished in teaching and research, should ignore it.

How to measure university success?

One could seek to evaluate university success simply by measuring performance against each institution’s stated objectives but experience suggests that mission statements, at least in UK universities, have become marketing tools rather than realistic statements of strategic purpose: the once popular slogan ‘fitness for purpose’ has degenerated under market pressures into rhetoric and exaggeration and is liable to manipulation. As we have seen in the past, reputation good or bad, unsupported by hard evidence, can be self serving and can amount to no more than self advertisement or unsubstantiated rumour, while statistical evidence cannot provide final answers to what are intangible questions, and offers no more than a set of proxies which can serve to measure the success of one institution relative to another in the areas where statistics are available. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) produces a ‘value added scoreboard’ to measure company success but the value added is entirely financial, which would represent only one, and certainly not the most important, of the value added factors applicable for a university. The DTI scoreboard does, however, have one message applicable in the university world, that different sectors score very differently – thus oil, gas and banking score well, while general retailing scores badly, with automotive and food-processing companies coming somewhere in the middle.
(Marsh 2002). Different kinds of universities whether different in the balance of research and teaching or in subject balance may be expected to show different results from measurement which encompasses only a single aspect of their performance.

Mass higher education systems require some way of distinguishing between a hundred or so universities, and assessing their strengths and weaknesses in a way that an elite system appeared not to do. The media have found that the most effective way of doing this is by creating league tables that rank universities according to various criteria. There can be no doubt of the public interest in such assessments, nor that such interest has legitimacy, and any evaluation of university success must take their findings seriously. Indeed, media created university league tables have now become an essential part of the UK higher education marketplace and are integral parts of the higher education culture in the US, Australia and Canada. They are also increasingly published in continental Europe, though mostly on an occasional basis, and therefore offer only snapshot views of the relative placings of institutions rather than registering fluctuations of placings and the rise of some and the fall of others. The Financial Times issues an annual global league table of business schools. But the most significant global comparison, albeit in relation to research only, has been drawn up by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies in Bern which has identified nearly a thousand institutions with outstanding research records in at least one area of scientific research, almost six hundred of which are universities, and has listed a top 50 of which five are in the UK and only one, ETH Zurich, is located in continental Europe while the remainder are in North America (CEST 2002). The UK is particularly active in the production of league tables because of the availability of a comprehensive national statistical database for higher education maintained by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) and created partly to encourage greater transparency in institutional performance.

The measurement of institutional success in research

The RAE, first undertaken in 1986, was repeated in 1989, 1992, 1996 and 2001. It comprises reviews of research by subject fields (which normally cohere with institutional departmental structures) and, since 1989, has allocated a numerical score to each departmental submission offered for review. The points thus scored can be aggregated and an institutional league table created by the averaging of the scores divided by the number of departments in each institution. Each time the RAE has been undertaken there have been small variations in methodology but a consistent theme has been that the numerical score multiplied by the numbers of staff whose research achievements were submitted to the RAE in each disciplinary unit
of assessment should serve as the basis for the calculation of the recurrent
grant to support research to each institution. The most significant and con-
troversial change was the decision in 1992, when the post-1992 universities
joined the Exercise, to allow universities to make a choice as to how many of
their academic staff they should include in it. This left it open to universities
to take a tactical approach to the Exercise, increasingly followed in 1996
and 2001, which balanced the financial advantages of high or low sub-
mission rates with the reputational advantage of achieving high scores
irrespective of however few staff were submitted. This has led to consider-
able discussion inside and outside universities as to whether the scoring,
even when qualified by indicating the proportion of staff submitted,
adequately reflects the results. The change also affected the way the
research league tables were presented. Tomlin is representative of the view
that the omission of staff from a departmental submission changed the basis
of the scoring and he suggested an alternative approach whereby all staff
scored against a national average for each unit of assessment. Interestingly
when he applied this the actual changes of ordering within the top 10
universities were very slight and no new institution was raised into the top
10 list (Tomlin 1998).

Table 1 sets out the placements of the leading 15 universities in the RAE
over each year of assessment adjusted in 1996 for the proportion of staff
whose research performance was submitted for assessment and an average
placement over the full period. The clearest message to be drawn from the
scoring is that research excellence is stable amongst the top ranked institu-

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Table 1  A comparison of research performance based on the RAE results 1986–2001
(top 15 universities only)

Note I am indebted to B.K. Follett for permitting me to use a table he prepared for private use. A
note on the methodology and sources appears as an appendix.
Also that the ranking is relatively reliable since it changes little regardless of changes in method. This suggests that high quality research, once established, tends to reinforce itself.

Below the top seven institutions greater variations from year to year seem to occur: Edinburgh dropped down the table in 2001 as did Essex in 1996; Bristol fell in 1992 and has not fully recovered its pre-1992 position; Lancaster has moved up the table from a low base in 1986; Manchester and Sussex seem to be slipping down the rankings and must be hoping to recover their positions next time. The scoring method rewards institutions that are highly rated across a significant number of departments and can thus claim a general excellence in research as distinct from universities which have some outstanding research departments but many that are much less successful. The table does not reflect actual funding patterns: a university with a large and research intensive medical school would win a much higher proportion of the total R funding than, for example, an institution with no experimental science departments like the London School of Economics (LSE). It also, and for the same reason, minimizes the gap between the major scientific universities and the rest: the overall depth of scientific capability at Warwick and York, for example, does not equal that of Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College or UCL, or for that matter UMIST, Manchester or Bristol. But what the table does reflect is the extent to which universities, irrespective of size and subject spread, perform well in research across the range of disciplines they profess.

The measurement of other factors in institutional success

Research league tables, while of compelling interest to universities themselves and to the research community, are of less concern to the wider public than evidence about a concern for good teaching and other factors which contribute to universities being attractive to students, and it has been this broader spread of interest that newspapers have concentrated on. The Times offers the longest running and statistically the most respected annual league table, increasingly relying on data made available through HESA, as well as from RAE scores. From 1996, it was able to include Teaching Quality Assessment scores derived from the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) run by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The TQA exercise aimed to assess all departments, discipline by discipline over an eight-year period so that The Times scores could only reflect those departments/disciplines that have actually been assessed. This means that the scoring was not comprehensive. Nevertheless even with this limitation The Times tables offer a defensible approach to assessing university success. Various factors are taken into account: the quality of the student entry represents not simply a quality
rating of the student intake but a proxy measure for student demand for places; staff/student ratios and the level of spending on libraries, computing and on student facilities and support offer a proxy measure for the quality of the student experience; degree classifications and graduate employment rates tell us something about the outcomes of that experience; and TQA and RAE scores add external assessments of teaching and research quality. Each of the student related measures contributes 10 per cent to the final score with TQA scores contributing 25 per cent and RAE scores 15 per cent. It could be argued that research quality and teaching quality should be weighted the same but universities which receive higher recurrent grant as a result of higher RAE scores are able to spend more on some activities than universities scoring less well so that their staff/student ratios will be lower and their library spending probably higher. The relevance of factors taken into account in the table have generated considerable discussion and *The Times* has modified them somewhat over time. The increasing reliability of HESA data, as universities have taken more trouble with the accuracy of their returns, has also meant that *The Times* table, which now relies heavily on this source, has also become more reliable over the period. Table 2, however, represents an average of the league table placings since 1994 when *The Times* first compiled its table. This cumulative figure, although some of the factors have changed, represents a more secure basis for rating institutions than one derived from data in any given year.

Three other newspapers have been publishing league tables since 1998. *The Sunday Times* presents a simple compilation from TQA and RAE scores, staff/student ratios, undergraduate entry, the number of first class honours degrees awarded, drop out rates, and employment figures. *The Financial Times* uses far more data and, for research, gives scores for research income and income from industry, as well as for RAE scores, and also gives scores for the numbers of postgraduates and overseas students. Not surprisingly the *Sunday Times* shows a close proximity in its scoring to *The Times* but the *Financial Times* data changes the order below the top five institutions because it favours universities whose particular subject spread attracts a significant industrial income. Finally *The Daily Telegraph* publishes league tables based solely on TQA scores specifically as a teaching league table, and has gone one step further by dividing them up like the UK Football League into a Premier Division, First Division, and so forth down to a Fourth Division. This is a less reliable table because, as we have seen, it is dependent on which departments/disciplines have been reviewed by the TQA exercise and because as a single factor rating it is more open to distortion, for example, by the higher TQA scores which have been awarded in later years as universities become better practised in preparing for TQA assessments. These tables are included only for comparative purposes and in order to demonstrate the extent to which a common picture seems to emerge from all the processes of performance assessment.
Conclusions to be drawn from the league tables

Table 2 shows the average league table position achieved over the period in which these league tables have been issued. Because it encompasses several methodologies and a wide spread of data it offers a more rounded view of university performance than simply performance in research. The most striking conclusion is that a group of seven universities seem consistently to perform better than the rest, whether in research alone or in the tables which give much greater weight to student related measures. Indeed, if one excises the research component from The Times column, so that the column is primarily devoted to student-related measures alone, only one university from the lower tier, Bristol, would be promoted into this top group. If research quality had been weighted equally with teaching quality the gap between the top group and the rest would have increased. What we see therefore is that in those universities performing at the highest levels in research, research success is paralleled by success in student related measures, including teaching. This would not be so true of the next tier of universities where two universities that performed well in research scored much less well in The Times and other newspaper tables reflecting their lower entry scores, lower completion rates and a less good performance by their students in the employment market. In contradistinction there are four universities...
which score in the top 15 in the student related measures which would have occupied places 18, 19, 21 and 22 in the research table suggesting again that below the top group of seven institutions research excellence and teaching excellence are less well balanced. This contradicts the argument that is sometimes put that quality in research or research prestige alone automatically attracts the best students; research excellence alone does not guarantee overall institutional success. But what Table 2 does suggest is that seven universities can genuinely be identified as successful, and more successful in their core business than other UK universities in absolute terms, because they combine greater success in research and greater success in teaching and student-related measures than the rest of the university system.

Taking account of contextual factors

One of the difficulties about measuring success is how to assess the special factors or particular advantages that institutions may have. In any assessment of performance universities do not all start from the same position. Cambridge and Luton may both be universities but historically, locationally and financially their positions could hardly be more different. What then are the contextual factors that contribute to success? The first is the association of the age of the university with research prestige. In an interesting piece of research Gueno suggests that only 8 per cent of Europe’s most research intensive universities were founded in the post-war period. He divides European universities into clusters according to their research performance: of the top cluster of 64 universities he finds that the majority had their roots in the Middle Ages; while the bottom cluster of 192 institutions is ‘strongly polarized towards the post-war universities’. He explains this concentration of research in the oldest universities as an example of the Matthew effect:

A good scientist is usually attracted by centres and universities of excellence where he or she finds the human and physical capital that permits development of high level research. This improves both the quality of the individual and the general quality of the institution and consequently attracts new research funds and capable researchers. In this situation there are two inter-related circles.

(Gueno 1998: 265)

Merton similarly argues that those institutions that attract more of certain resources at one point develop a lead over their peers when competing for resources in the future so that over the years they accumulate a magnetic power in attracting outstanding talent and hosting the most significant research (Merton 1988). If we look at the application of Gueno’s findings to the UK the picture is rather less clear: three of the top seven universities can be dated from the Middle Ages, and two further date from the nineteenth century and are in London, but two date from the 1960s. If we analyse the top 15 we find three mediaeval, seven dating from the nineteenth century
and five from the post-1960s era. A particular factor which affects the position of Oxford and Cambridge is the hereditary wealth of the colleges. Exempted from the enforced sale of monastic lands under Henry VIII the two institutions and their colleges retain historic endowments and buildings which give much greater force to the Matthew effect and which attract academics to Oxbridge and retain them there in a way that age and history, of themselves, could not have done. The Financial Times has estimated that the wealth of the colleges alone adds 456 staff at Oxford and 363 at Cambridge and some £3.8m and £3.2m respectively on spending on libraries to the universities’ own contributions (Kelly 2001). Significantly, it is not possible to point to any parallel in the UK to the case of New York University which in only a decade between the mid 1980s and 1990s raised itself from being a medium performing institution into the top tier of US universities by fundraising (the stated aim was $1bn), recruiting world class faculty and raising entrance standards (Fombrun 1996).

The biggest surprise is the absence from the list of so many of the civic universities, founded in the nineteenth century in major industrial cities, and dominant institutions in the post-war period. None appear in the top seven, only three are in the top 15 and several languish a long way down the tables. Nevertheless, in the wider European context, Gueno’s argument has great strength: older institutions can have a halo effect based on historic reputations which attract the best staff and the best students and it is the interaction of these two constituents which can create an outstanding intellectual community, generate leading research, produce excellently trained students and provide continued self-reinforcing success. Perhaps more importantly, such institutions have established over time a working environment, certain ways of doing things, an operational structure and an organizational culture which has stood the test of time and which does not need to be reinvented to cope with sharp changes in the external environment. But age is not a guarantee in itself: the tables quoted above do not list two Scottish universities with mediaeval origins which have fallen a long way below the top 20 in the rankings. On the other hand, while none of the new post-1992 universities appears in the top 50 in any league table, research or media led, five universities founded in the 1960s appear in the top 15 for research.

Further contextual points are explored by Tight (1999) who draws analogies between university and football league tables, the first suggesting that location in large centres of population appears to offer considerable advantages and the second that elites tend to be self perpetuating. As regards the first, the data in Tables 1 and 2 offer support in regard to institutions based in London and the major provincial cities, but do not apply in the same way to Cambridge, Warwick, York, Sussex, Essex, Lancaster or Durham. The second raises interesting points because, as Tight explains, while some ‘small town’ football clubs have performed exceptionally well for short periods, often supported by exceptional resources, they have not been able to maintain that level of performance for very long. This might raise questions about the ability of some of the universities in the list being able to sustain their
performance over long periods. These points are confirmed and extended by Kerr (1991) who identifies the following locations in the US – leading centres of the professions, growing centres of economic activity, larger cities rather than small towns, rich communities, areas with effective and committed political leadership and areas of great natural beauty and good climate – as being particularly likely to see the development of outstanding research universities. While these locational points are more pertinent to the US than to the UK, location in a capital city (Imperial, LSE, UCL), in places of architectural or historical beauty (Oxbridge, Edinburgh and York), in an advantaged position from the point of view of transport access (Warwick), or having been endowed with a good coherent site with space for growth (Warwick and York) are all factors which contribute to, even if they do not determine, success. By the same token a bad location in an unfashionable town distant both from industry and from centres of social life, or in a town with a reputation for ugliness or lack of amenities, can be a disincentive to attracting good staff or students.

Factors which disadvantage institutions

Location is only one of the factors which can disadvantage an institution: by far the most important disadvantage seems, on the evidence of the 1960s and afterwards, to lie in a university’s origins, whether it was created as a wholly new institution or whether it was awarded university status as an existing institution. In the former category we have Warwick, York, Essex, Lancaster and Sussex, all ranked in the highest quartile. In the latter, we have two categories of institution, the former Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) and the former polytechnics and Scottish Central Institutions. Of these two groups, the CATs were created universities contemporaneously with the establishment of the wholly new foundations (then called the New Universities). Twenty years later some of the ex-CATs (Salford, Aston and Bradford) featured, as we have seen, amongst the institutions whose budgets were most severely cut in 1981. Nearly 40 years from foundation they mostly feature in the bottom 10 per cent of the pre-1992 universities in the league tables and, most extraordinarily, bearing in mind their description as technological universities, they rank 66th, 60th and 50th in terms of the league table of industrial funding for research (HESA 2000). The post-1992 universities comprise the second group. It is wholly unsurprising, taking the former CATs as a parallel, that these latter universities should make up a lower tier in the league tables, only ten years after their change of status. The fact that this took place at a time of very sharp reductions in the unit of resource and that they had not been previously subject to the discipline or incentive of the RAE before their transfer created two further serious disadvantages making it difficult for them to compete with the pre-1992 universities and effectively disqualifying them from access to any significant recurrent grant for success in the RAE thus permanently handicapping their development.
The real distinction to be drawn between the wholly new foundations and those that have transferred from non-university to university status is that the former, while they had a slow build up, had from the beginning the ability to recruit staff motivated to the challenge of creating a university, and selected for the purpose, as well as having the freedom to design their own buildings and their own campus for full university status. In the latter, the institutions were staffed by people recruited for rather different tasks, most of whom were not recruited to do research, and had little inclination towards or capacity for it, and buildings and sites inappropriate to the new mission were inherited. The evidence is that these problems take at least a generation to sort out. Of the former CATs, Bath, Surrey (both of whom moved to new sites in the 1960s) and Loughborough are now well up the tables. In the longer term, therefore, these disadvantages do not seem to represent a permanent disability for all institutions and there is no reason to suppose that the performance of the more successful ex-CATs will not in time be paralleled by some of the former polytechnics. We should not, however, underestimate the sustained management challenge that this will involve and the length of time it may take. The 1991 White Paper tacitly assumed that if a level playing field in terms of recurrent finance could be provided that covered pre-1992 universities and former polytechnics the market would enable the latter, or at least some of them, to compete on equal terms with the existing universities. But, the Government did not take account of the existing universities' inherited resources of staff, location, physical assets and established markets. In the marketized conditions of the 1990s these resources encouraged a widening rather than a narrowing of the gap at the extremes of the system so that we now have a greater disparity of such resources, and hence of positioning, than existed in 1992.

Alternative criteria for measuring success

The criteria for success as identified in the league tables represents the conventional and traditional ways in which university success is measured in the UK. If we were to look at some other countries where there is a much more clearly specified differentiation by mission we would find these measures to be inappropriate for various categories or groups of institutions. In the US the liberal arts college sector would score very well in all the league tables except in research, as would the very different Fachhochschulen in Germany, and the again very different Grandes Écoles in France. The UK has no real equivalent of the US community college although the growth of higher education in further education colleges is beginning to change the picture, but the community colleges, while a very important sector in the US, would do very poorly in the UK higher education league tables. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has made a significant effort to create a broader set of performance indicators intended to recognize aspects of institutions' social functions such as student recruitment from
neighbourhoods with low age participation rates, from mature adults or from state rather than private schools, and have sought to measure institutional ‘learning efficiency’ by measuring completion rates (HEFCE 1999). These tend to produce predictable results: those universities which had the lowest drop out rates were those that were the most selective in terms of A level scores. But if these figures were adapted with benchmark averages for social/economic factors in the intake the league table lists could be almost reversed: the Financial Times (1 April 1999), using this data, put Northumbria at the top of its league table and Oxford at nearly the bottom. What the HEFCE indicators emphasized was that the conventional models do not tell the whole story and that there was a need to find ways to measure diversity. The Funding Council’s attempt to offer an alternative is valuable but since it used data sets from only two years, and will no doubt refine its methodology over time, it would be premature to seek to integrate it with the existing tables. The decision embodied in the 2003 White Paper to increase recurrent grant in respect to the admission of students from disadvantaged backgrounds goes some way towards redressing the operational imbalance between research intensive universities drawing on a national catchment of socially advantaged students, and non-research based institutions attracting mostly local students, but is unlikely to change a ranking based on public esteem. Moreover, the creation of the Office of Fair Access is likely to disadvantage the latter institutions by encouraging the former to compete for students in their traditional markets.

While some of the top seven universities in Table 2 would not finish high up in the benchmarking averages for widening participation from socially disadvantaged groups because their academic reputation makes entry at the undergraduate level so competitive, if a league table could be constructed on the basis of the full spread of the wider agenda referred to above it is likely that their position would be not unlike that achieved in their core business. Thirteen of the top 20 universities have developed successful science/research parks or incubator facilities, and all but LSE (for obvious disciplinary related reasons) have strong records of industrial research collaboration. Fourteen run major performing arts facilities or galleries with national reputations. All 20 universities make major contributions to lifelong learning/continuing education (Oxford and Cambridge were the pioneers of university extra-mural studies in the nineteenth century).

If we look specifically at the top seven universities Cambridge could reasonably claim to be the only one which has had an economic impact on its region comparable to Stanford’s and the concentration of universities and colleges in the Boston area, and only LSE and UCL (for disciplinary and locational reasons) do not have very successful science/industrial park developments. According to the Financial Times, Cambridge contributes £8.8bn to the national gross domestic product (Kelly 2002). Cambridge and Oxford’s science parks are said to be the most successful in the UK with Warwick’s in third place (Kelly 2002). York has led the Science City Initiative in a city not previously associated with science and technology. Four of the
top seven are amongst the top six universities with the highest concentration of industrial funded research in the UK, the other two being Nottingham and Cranfield. Four of them have performing arts facilities of major regional importance. Five of them are in the group of universities providing the largest lifelong learning/continuing education programmes. Not surprisingly in view of their academic reputation they compete extremely successfully in the overseas student market, particularly at the postgraduate level, and are therefore assured of a secure income from this source. Indeed a characteristic of all these institutions is their ability to generate non-government funding to support academic and other developments. What this evidence strongly suggests is that there is a coherence between success in the core business of teaching and research and success in the wider social and economic agenda: academic success becomes a reinforcing factor in success in the wider agenda. In some cases, of course, longevity, a more favourable resource base, and location have played an important part but some of these factors could be found at other institutions. What seems to be true is that these institutions combine academic excellence with an energy in other activities. While many activities are self reinforcing there is evidence that these universities have displayed what Keynes called in another context ‘animal spirits’. This energy cannot be measured but has undoubtedly been one of the components that has driven them forward. But, wrote Keynes, ‘If the animal spirits are dimmed and spontaneous optimism falters . . . enterprise will fade and die’ (Keynes 1936).

The position of the post-1992 universities

For reasons already explained it would have been inconceivable that any of the post-1992 universities could have appeared even as high as the top 25 in one of the conventionally based league tables by 2001. It could be argued that this offers their managements the challenge to play a greater role than would otherwise be the case in propelling their institutions up a league table where teaching is the primary function to be measured, and where the establishment of nodes of research development is largely a matter for institutional selection and investment. Table 3 uses the same data provided by The Times league tables to examine the progress of the post-1992 institutions in order to discover whether differences are emerging in their performance. This data thus measures the post-1992 universities in a framework more appropriate to the pre-1992 universities and does not take account of important social functions such as access and widening participation, urban renewal, or the provision of economic services.

The identification of a leading group of post-1992 universities is much less secure and reliable than for the universities in Table 2. Comparing data year on year there are more variations in placings, suggesting that changes in statistical definitions or in the data collected may be responsible, and that the gap between the top quartile and the bottom quartile is smaller. More
interesting, however, is that the gap between the pre-1992 and the post-1992 universities is being eroded to the extent that from 1998 onwards one or more post-1992 universities are listed above two or more of the pre-1992 universities. It is evident from the *Times Guide* giving results for 2001 (O’Leary *et al.* 2002) that this trend is continuing. Where the differences show up between the bottom 10 per cent of the pre-1992 and the top group of the post-1992 universities is in relation to RAE scores and student entry grades where the post-1992 universities score less well than the pre-1992 universities, and in the TQA scores where they score better than the lowest group of pre-1992 universities. The statistical gap between the top seven universities and the best of the post-1992 universities remains large but the evidence suggests that if RAE scores were removed the middle ground is less differentiated now than in 1994 when *The Times* began its league table assessments. It is important to note, however, that the lower you move down the table the more that differences in location and in mission render comparisons inappropriate. The data also suggests that there are sharp differences in levels of performance within the post-1992 universities: some institutions have fallen steeply from the top 15 places to the bottom 15, while there are others that have remained consistently in the bottom 10 per cent or so. The positions of this latter group do not, however, necessarily calibrate with social inclusion benchmarking, though they are influenced by it. It is clear that contextual factors such as their origins, location and inherited facilities may have played a very large part in constraining institutional performance.

**Table 3** A comparison of the performance of the top 15 post-1992 universities compiled from *The Times Good University Guides for 1994–2002*

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Sustainability of performance

Because university league tables are of recent origin they tell us very little about sustainability. The 1986 RAE assessed research over the period from 1981 to 1986 so it is possible to argue that we have data covering 20 years for research alone. Clark Kerr has shown that in the US over nearly 80 years from 1906 to 1982 only three institutions dropped out of the top 15 universities, ranked reputationally in respect to their graduate schools (Kerr 1991). A significant and perhaps distorting feature in the US data, so far as Europe is concerned, is that nine of the top 15 were private universities with large endowments, and all 15 had significant alumni funding, so that sustaining high ratings may owe as much to the availability of an exceptional resource base, as to the existence of a self-reinforcing academic community. In the UK this exceptional funding strength applies only in Oxford and Cambridge where collegiate endowments and alumni support put the two universities into a different position from any other UK university. Only Edinburgh could be regarded as having remotely comparable advantages. Perhaps more encouraging is that while the Carnegie classification of Research I and Research II universities in 1973 included only 52 universities in category I and 40 in category II in 1994, the number had grown to 89 in category I and had fallen to 37 in category II (McCormack 2002) suggesting, rather like the UK research ratings, that research performance has a strong tendency to be both self sustaining and self reinforcing.

In a labour intensive industry it can be argued that university strengths lie chiefly in the quality of staff they employ. All UK universities have the same legal rights to appoint whoever they choose within broadly the same salary ranges so the differentiation comes about from universities’ ability to attract staff of the highest quality. Universities wanting to push themselves up the tables from a low base may have to offer additional inducements – lower teaching loads, research facilities, support staff – to attract staff from universities with better reputations or higher standing in the particular field. Universities have a similar freedom to attract the best students but students’ views are influenced by reputation of a public kind but also by the informal grapevine as to the kind of institution they are. Students are also influenced by the historical statistical evidence of how competitive a university’s entry standards are. Neither the research nor the institutional teaching environment is controlled (although it is certainly monitored) by the state or by any other outside body so that organizationally the level of performance rests primarily in the hands of the autonomous institutions themselves. As we have seen, age, location and origins may play an important part – even, in the case of the latter, a determining part – but no one factor represents the whole story: the quality of institutional performance remains significantly a matter for the organization itself. As competition nationally and internationally increases these organizational factors are likely to increase in importance and it is therefore worth considering what the study of other organizations has to tell us about how performance can be sustained.
Perhaps the first, and in one sense the most reassuring, piece of information is that there is very little agreement about what constitutes sustainable success. Peters and Waterman identified 43 of the world’s outstanding companies in *In Search of Excellence* (1982) and drew lessons from their mode of operation as to what made them outstanding companies. Sixteen years later, however, three quarters had disappeared or were in a seriously weakened position (Doyle 1999). The average life expectancy of a multinational company in the *Fortune* 500 is only between 40 and 50 years; a third of those listed in 1970 in the *Fortune* 500 were merged or broken up a quarter of a century later (De Geus 1997). Only one of the 12 largest US business firms in 1900 still existed in 2000 but all the largest public and private universities in 1900 exist and thrive in 2000 (Birnbaum 2000). In the UK, of the 30 largest manufacturing companies in 1955 only 11 have survived as independent companies (and one of these, Ford, is American) and some of the survivors are much smaller (Owen 2000).

Universities can, therefore, take comfort from Gueno and Kerr that their actual survival rate has so far been much greater. But even in a state dominated system such as the UK’s there have been some significant fluctuations in positioning. The university scene was dominated in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s by the civic universities founded in the nineteenth century (Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, Birmingham, Bristol, Newcastle and Queen’s Belfast), by the University of London, and by the major Scottish universities – Edinburgh, Glasgow, St. Andrews and Aberdeen – all mediaeval foundations. It would have been inconceivable, if league tables had been drawn up in 1970, that this group of universities would not have occupied the upper quartile of the table, after Oxbridge. The position of these universities now is noted above. In the past, Oxbridge and London were referred to as ‘the golden triangle’ but the University of London has now been fragmented with Imperial, LSE and UCL emerging in the leading group of universities in their own right while some other University of London colleges are ranked much further down the list. In Scotland, Edinburgh alone survives in the leading group of UK universities although St. Andrews, in the 1970s part of a larger institution with Dundee, is not far behind.

A study of corporate history offers some telling comparisons about the factors which affect the sustainability of success. Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) emphasize five interrelated factors as representing key attributes for successful companies: organizational coherence; the ability to assess the environment; translating that assessment into leading, rather than following, change; linking strategic and operational change; and recognizing human resources as assets and liabilities in the process. Increasingly, as the speed of change has accelerated with globalization, adaptability to a changing environment is seen as a crucial characteristic of successful organizations. Universities are no different and Sporn (1999) in *Adaptive University Structures* identifies five major changes to which they must adjust: the restructuring of the economy, the changing role of the state, shifting demographics, new technologies and increasing globalization.
Corporate history also offers some cautionary lessons about failure. Grinyer, Mayes and McKiernan (1998) suggest that the commonest reasons for corporate failure are: failure to respond to a more competitive market; lack of product market focus; not being close enough to the customer; and the tendency of top management to repeat behaviour that has been successful in the past or to lapse into inertia. Ghoshal and Bartlett (1993) on the other hand, isolate pride in past achievement – becoming so wedded to the strategic logic and organizational capability that produced previous success that they have lost the ability to re-evaluate and revise their strategy – as the most common cause of corporate decline. Failure to adapt also lies at the heart of some of the university institutional sagas of decline referred to above.

In order to adapt to change, however, universities, like companies, need organizational structures which are sufficiently flexible to respond to external stimuli. In many ways the ‘tightly coupled within and loosely coupled between’ structure which is said to be characteristic of university organization (Weick 1976) is well adapted to do this, and this may be one of the reasons why universities have enjoyed such institutional longevity. But we should not assume that such structures extend in the same form and in the same flexibility right through the higher education sector: the tightly managed top-down structures of many less successful UK universities, represent a significant departure from that tradition as does the increase of ‘executive control’ in many Australian universities (Marginson and Considine 2000). This represents a sharp contrast with the bottom heavy collegial structures described as characteristic of professional bureaucracies (Mintzberg 1979) and may tend to close off one of the strengths of the traditional university structure.

A number of studies, in addition to In Search of Excellence, have examined corporate histories over extended timescales to analyse the sources of their success. Thus Collins and Porras (1994) analysed 20 pre-1950s ‘visionary’ companies that had sustained their vigour and success into the 1980s and identified as key attributes a strong organizational culture built around a core ideology and sense of purpose, together with the willingness to make occasional and exceptional bold commitments. They did not find a demand for charismatic leadership as a necessary requirement for success but noted that companies successful over a long period seemed to rely much more on ‘a stronger organizational orientation’ than their competitors. While all the companies emphasized the importance of change and ‘a relentless drive for progress’ they did not change their core beliefs in the face of environmental changes.

The essence of the visionary company comes in the translation of its core ideology and its own unique drive for progress into the very fabric of the organisation – into goals, strategies, tactics, policies, processes, cultural practices, management behaviours, building layouts, pay systems, accounting systems, job design – into everything that the company does.

(Collins and Porras 1994: 201)
Collins, in a later study, takes the view that the secret of long term corporate performance is ‘disciplined people who engage in disciplined thought, which results in disciplined action’ (Collins 2001: 142). De Geus undertook a similar analysis and identified sensitivity to the environment, cohesion and a strong sense of identity, tolerance of experimentation and a conservative approach to finance as key components of success:

Case histories repeatedly showed that strong employee links were essential for survival amid change. This cohesion meant that managers were typically chosen for advancement from within.

(De Geus 1997: 6)

Ghoshal and Bartlett emphasize the importance of motivation. They quote 3M where ‘By the 1990s the entrepreneurial initiative of generations of “ordinary people” had created a portfolio of 100 core technologies in 3,900 profit centres clustered under 47 product divisions’ (Ghoshal and Bartlett 1993: 43). Yet despite its size 3M continued to generate 30 per cent of its sales from products introduced in the previous five years. Ghoshal and Bartlett identify the need for flat structures, information decentralization and the acceptance of ‘constructive confrontation’ where central policies can be challenged from below. They note that successful companies have an internally generated sense of energy, an organizational flexibility which can manage the inherent tensions surrounding change, and an institutional ambition to be the best: ‘Few people’, they say ‘want to work for an organisation that wants to be average’ (Ghoshal and Bartlett 1993: 130). Finally, Kay in The Foundations of Corporate Success (1993) argues the importance of what he calls company architecture in corporate success – the system of relationships within the firm and between the firm and its customers and suppliers. This architecture of relationships, he suggests, will substitute for more intrusive mechanisms for imposing cooperation, coordination and commitment. ‘Architecture does not create extraordinary organisations by collecting extraordinary people. It does so by enabling very ordinary people to perform in extraordinary ways’ (Kay 1993: 69).

Not all these findings are relevant to sustaining university success but a great many of them are. Universities rely much less on a core ideology than some of the companies quoted – indeed it could be argued that the strength of a university is the presence of conflicting approaches to ideology – but some do develop organizational cultures, ‘a strong sense of identity’, which
are strongly supportive of institutional progress, speed of decision-making and internal and external competitiveness. As in business, charismatic leadership is much less important in universities than the development of an organizational orientation which accepts that external environmental change must be responded to. Universities can find common ground also in the decentralization of information and the promotion of ‘constructive confrontation’ where central university decision-making bodies can be challenged over resource allocation policies or on strategic decision making in general: shared information makes policy making easier; challenges to central policy decisions within a self-confident academic community can invigorate policy discussion and result in redefinition of policy involving significant numbers of the academic community in the debate. Two of the studies refer to some company environments being able to inspire ‘ordinary people’ to perform better than their competitors: a similar characteristic can be found in some universities.

If we look at the universities that head the league tables, particularly those in the top seven that perform outstandingly both in research related and teaching related activities, the qualities referred to of a strong organizational culture, a strongly competitive approach both internally and externally, an adaptability to the environment without changing fundamental identity, a willingness to take bold decisions, a conservative approach to finance in general and an open collegial approach to decision making which does not flinch from ‘constructive confrontation’ are all present. None have depended on charismatic leadership and when it has been tried it has generally proved to be counter productive. In particular three of them at least, in different ways, have the capacity or organizational culture which persuades ‘ordinary people to behave in extraordinary ways’ so that the institution ‘punches above its weight’: LSE because it has survived what could have been a debilitating financial downturn in the late 1980s and 1990s and exploited to the full its intellectual profile by becoming a genuinely international institution; and Warwick and York because, following quite different pathways, they have reached the top rank without the advantages of age, reputation or endowment and through all the vicissitudes of state funding of the 1970s and 1980s. These capacities and culture are not evident, or at least are much less evident, in universities much lower down the list.

Perhaps these qualities are sufficient in themselves to make success sustainable. Clark Kerr, however, offers a warning that while in the US there has been great continuity in the make up of the leading group of universities there have also been some change in periods of ‘great transformation’, the most recent in the US being the period between 1960 and 1980 when large increases in federal spending on research took place. He suggests that the period from 1990 to 2010 might be a similar period of transformation (Kerr 1991). If we were looking at UK parallels, the period between 1980 and 2000 when competition and market forces were first unleashed on the university system might be a similar period of transformation. Some institutions
adapted much better than others to these changes but such a change in the environment may not be permanent and may be replaced by a further ‘great transformation’. Our list of the most successful universities may prove to be as fragile as the companies cited in so many business texts.

On the other hand, there is evidence of a continuous upwards movement in university performance in spite of the vicissitudes in funding policies. In the 1930s it was common room gossip that serious research would be restricted to Oxbridge and one or two colleges in London. C.P. Snow, in a novel published in 1934, puts into the mouth of one of his characters: ‘Universities will get more and more specialised in this generation. We shall concentrate on original work . . . in a few centres . . . the minor universities will cease to exist as research institutions’ (Snow 1934: 79), yet 30 years later in 1964, Nottingham, Leicester and Reading, which would have fallen into that category, were competing vigorously with the civic universities and the next wave of new universities, including Warwick, York, Essex and Sussex, were ‘minor universities’ struggling to develop research reputations. We can expect that in 30 years’ time our list of successful universities will be longer and that it will contain the names of some institutions that are well below the horizon of success suggested by the current league tables.

**Defining university success**

This chapter has identified that those UK universities which can be identified as the most successful, using quantitative evidence, are the most successful separately in research-related and in teaching-related activities: excellence in both goes hand in hand. It also suggests that there are strong links between academic success and success in broadening the university’s role in a wider economic and social agenda. Those universities with the highest levels of performance in the core business of teaching and research are generally also leading players in extending their role in society as a whole. It establishes that we can say with some confidence that there are some universities that are more successful than others and that like other organizations, notably companies, there are factors that can be identified which can sustain success.

The evidence amongst the top group of universities of continued success over 20 years in the RAE suggests that academic success can be self-reinforcing. US evidence supports this. In the US the trend has on the whole been upward in that the number of institutions joining the highest Carnegie classification of Research University I has actually increased rather than that there has been a widespread changing of places. The 2001 RAE showed a similar trend – the grade average score for all staff in the university ranked 20th in 2001 would have placed it 10th in 1996. All the tables highlight institutions which appear to have developed an upward curve of performance suggesting that success is dependent on creating a momentum in which
success reinforces success rather than that isolated actions or changes of direction can overnight alter the quality of performance.

As we have seen there are no absolutes in making a university successful. There are examples of universities founded in the Middle Ages which do not rank high in the RAE league table, universities with good locations which do not attract students, universities which had the advantage of being wholly new foundations gifted with large campuses which have overtaken most of their seniors while others have failed to do so and there are old civic universities in large industrial cities which have slipped from previous positions of eminence. On the other hand there are former CATs on a rising curve of success, universities in isolated and impoverished parts of the country which are nevertheless extremely attractive to students and former polytechnics closing in on pre-1992 universities in some of the league tables. Universities with historic advantages can fail to exploit them while universities lacking such advantages can raise their performance to overtake them. Why are there such variations in performance, especially surprising in what has historically been a state funded higher education system? It is a contention of this book that, while there may be significant advantages or disadvantages to be derived from environment or historical inheritance that may help to position institutions, management in its broadest sense represents an integral and perhaps in some cases a determining factor in achieving institutional success. Succeeding chapters will seek to explain those elements of institutional management which contribute most to creating and sustaining successful universities.