# Casualization of Academic Labour at York University

A discussion paper

# Prepared for the York University Faculty Association (YUFA) Membership by the YUFA Subcommittee on Casualization

Members: Nicola Short, Hira Singh, Justin Podur, and Ray Rogers

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#### Our remit

This discussion paper comes out of a motion passed at YUFA's 3 March Special General Meeting:

That YUFA Executive act as soon as possible to strike a subcommittee to produce a discussion paper that places recent labour negotiations and YUFA's upcoming negotiations within the broader context of cuts to the funding of post-secondary education, a significant reduction in hiring for tenure-stream jobs, an increasing reliance on contingent labour, equity issues, increasing class sizes, and expanding workloads, all of which contribute to a general erosion of the quality of education. The subcommittee will call upon leading scholars in the field at York, as well as the ongoing work of existing YUFA committees. The discussion paper will be distributed to members on YUFA-M for discussion and subsequently considered for distribution to the media. Carried.

The motion reflects the recognition that academic institutions have undergone a great deal of relatively rapid reorganization in recent years, which has affected the working conditions and traditional structures of faculty governance in the university. Such changes demand new perspectives and analysis among faculty and their union representation.

University faculty have a role to play in promoting rigorous and meaningful scholarship and pedagogy, and, as a result, in analyzing the performance and governance of the university to ensure that the space to pursue these endeavours is maintained and adequately supported.

It should be noted that despite the striking of this subcommittee by a SGM of YUFA, it is clear that YUFA has only belatedly come to grips with the issue of casualization as it develops bargaining positions. We hope that our discussion paper plays a role in catalyzing both the executive and the membership in taking these issues seriously.

## Background

Since the 1990s, the funding and organization of higher education have resulted in the conditions to which this committee addresses its work: 'a significant reduction in hiring for tenure-stream jobs, an increasing reliance on

contingent labour, ... increasing class sizes, and expanding workloads, all of which contribute to a general erosion of the quality of education.' We characterise this model of funding and organization as 'neoliberal', for the following reasons:

- It is associated with broad, general cut-backs in the public sector, which have led to the reorganization and restructuring of public services and systems (health, education, transportation, etc.)
- The neo-liberal agenda undermines working conditions across a range of sectors, most especially in teaching, and this increased vulnerability has affected universities and poses a direct threat to tenure
- These changes involve an appeal to privatisation and market-based forms of organization, where as much as possible, projects are self-financing through fee-based systems, and/or through the involvement of the private sector, including the commercialisation of university-based research
- Such reorganization also involves a strong emphasis on the justification of (especially non-market based) budgets, and the emergence of systems of evaluation and monitoring of the allocation of resources
- The emergence of private foundations to support university activities that can no longer rely on predictable government support

This reorganization and the logic that structures it have had a number of impacts on higher education:

- Cutbacks for longer-term financial commitments, such as tenure-stream appointments, and increased reliance on less expensive, short-term, precarious or 'casualized' labour
  - Over the last ten years, the number of part-time instructors teaching undergraduate courses has increased 100% as undergraduate enrolment at York has increased 51%. (Tenured or tenurestream teaching undergraduate courses has increased 27%.) (Matthew King, Dept. of Philosophy, York U)
  - o This has a secondary effect of greater workload (in the form of service and administrative obligations) for tenure-stream faculty who in fewer numbers must represent faculty perspectives in a growing bureaucracy (cf: CAUT April 2009 Bargaining Advisory; Modern Language Association Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, 'Standing Still: The Associate Professor Survey' Web publication, 27 April 2009:
    - http://www.mla.org/pdf/cswp\_final042909.pdf, p. 11)
- Increased class sizes
- Decreased base funding for research and research-related expenses
- The introduction of narrow, quantitative measures of the productivity of research that exclude qualitative and theoretical scholarship that undermines opportunities for basic research that does not have an obvious market application
  - As Theresa Shanahan has argued, accountability and quality assurance mechanisms rely on performance indicators that have economic utility, pressuring academics to define quality in terms of the labour market and economic principles, which narrows space for critical reflection, creativity, and democratic ideals.
  - Furthermore, research indicators based on quantification disadvantage arts, social sciences, and humanities, which are York's strongest areas. York is disadvantaging itself by entering competition with other institutions on this basis. (see also Appendix B: OECD Observer Article, 'Breaking Ranks'
    - <a href="http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/2768/Breaking\_ranks.html">http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/2768/Breaking\_ranks.html</a>)

- o Increased accountability and research indicators represents an invisible increase in workload, taking away from actual teaching and research. (Theresa Shanahan, "Accountability initiatives in higher education")
- The erosion of the academic budget as a proportion of the university budget and an increase in the proportion of university staff devoted to marketing and fundraising
- A resulting shift of university policy- and decision-making away from traditional arenas of 'collegial self-government' into the hands of administrators and managers (including private-sector-like bonuses and compensation for university administrators and foundations that function as 'off-shore' accounts beyond the scope of accountability to the collegium
  - o This shift away from collegial decision-making is frequently accompanied by accelerated time-frames for decision-making, such that even when consultative measures are employed they lack real democratic participation: pre-formulated measures are rubber stamped by hurried participants who have no independent access to background information on the issues; or such policies are presented as 'faits-accomplis'
- Increasing reliance on tuition fees, which has disproportionately affected low-income students
  - The OECD found that in relation to other industrialized countries private sources of funding provide an above-average share of educational spending in Canada, and that Canadian institutions charge comparatively high tuition fees. (OECD, Education at a Glance 2008 Briefing Note Canada: http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/31/45/41277817.pdf. See also StatsCan documentation: http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/l01/cst01/educ50a-eng.htm.)

Recently, the neoliberal model, in the academy as elsewhere, has come under increasing scrutiny and criticism on a number of grounds:

- Most fundamental is the concern that the effects of restructuring particularly large class sizes,
   casualized instruction and increased workloads for full-time faculty have negatively impacted the quality of education
  - See, for example: Alan Finder, Decline of the Tenure Track Raises Concerns, NYT, November 20, 2007, <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/20/education/20adjunct.html">http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/20/education/20adjunct.html</a> and the recent motion of the Division of Humanities (Appendix A)
- Along with that is a concern that such policies have pursued without meaningful involvement of the faculty, despite the fundamental academic principles of collegial self-government
  - Such principles are further eroded by increased workloads, which preclude democratic participation beyond one's immediate service obligations
- That though such policies have been pursued ostensibly in the name of greater efficiency under conditions of precarious funding, budgetary matters remain un-transparent and it appears that the fiscal discipline imposed on some parts of the university functions to generate subsidies for those dimensions of the university designed or perceived to be more income generating
  - O Universities increasingly appear to be a top-heavy bureaucracy of non- (or formerly-) academic management run by administrators who receive conspicuous pay-rises and bonuses while imposing budgetary and fiscal constraints on the academy, violate principles of collegiality and echo private sector compensation practices that have been discredited by neoliberalism's financial crisis (cf: <a href="http://www.thespec.com/News/BreakingNews/article/396776">http://www.thespec.com/News/BreakingNews/article/396776</a>; <a href="http://yorkisus.org/">http://yorkisus.org/</a>)
- The traditional division between two distinct spheres of 'the academic' and 'the budgetary' no longer exists in practice: administrators of budgetary issues implicitly set academic policies and standards, such

that a new relationship between the faculty and the administration needs to be established to ensure faculty rights over matters academic are upheld and that the interests of scholarship and pedagogy preserved

- Associated with this is a concern that university administrations have not been responsible stewards of the academic mission of the academy: protecting the academic budget at a reasonable standard and lobbying government on behalf of education
- As the division of labour becomes more pronounced and marketing and media departments increasingly well resourced, the question of who represents the University to the public has also become more politicized
- Student dissatisfaction in has been manifest globally: in 2008 and early 2009, there were of university strikes and occupations against the neoliberal turn in education in Canada, Finland, the US, France, Italy, Greece, and India. (Tyler Shipley, 'Demanding the Impossible: Struggles for the Future of Post-Secondary Education', The Bullet (Socialist Project: E-Bulletin No. 215, May 10, 2009)

#### Challenges

The neoliberal model and the conditions of restructuring in the university nevertheless present certain challenges for those concerned with the quality of education, equity and fairness in the university. Some of these apparent tensions and trade-offs include:

- For example, in the present system, a reduction in the intensification of faculty workloads would come from an increased reliance on casualized labour for teaching which, in turn, undermines its value as part of the university's mission
  - Neither onerous full time faculty workloads nor an increased reliance on casualized labor is in the interest of rigorous educational standards and opportunities
- While university funding in part relies on graduate student enrolments, tenure stream positions after graduation are increasingly scarce
  - According to information gathered by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) in 2005, graduate student attrition rates in Ontario rose to between 25% and 50% depending on the faculty and department. (Tyler Shipley)
- The scarcity of university funding has the potential to mask the way the structure or logic of funding might lead to the erosion of the quality of scholarship and teaching
  - o Funding, for example at SSHRC, although nominally increased, is now being channelled into specific arenas such as business studies that affects the prospects for students and research in the traditional social sciences: <a href="http://www.budget.gc.ca/2009/plan/bpc3b-eng.asp#18">http://www.budget.gc.ca/2009/plan/bpc3b-eng.asp#18</a>
- There has been a retreat from addressing equity issues. The income differential that burdens gendered and visible minority groups has been decreasing, but only because salaries are 'levelling down' in the academy (Casey Warman, Frances Woolley and Chris Worswick, "The evolution of male-female wage differentials in Canadian universities:1970 to 2001" Statistics Canada <a href="http://www.econ.queensu.ca/working\_papers/papers/ged\_wp\_1099.pdf">http://www.econ.queensu.ca/working\_papers/papers/ged\_wp\_1099.pdf</a>).

### Principles that should inform YUFA bargaining

- YUFA has a role to play in analyzing governance at York and in resisting policies that compromise the academic mission of the University, including its historical strengths:
  - o YUFA should continue to champion equity issues

- The conventional division of labour for university decision-making has been compromised by neoliberal restructuring: YUFA should challenge developments that erode the faculty's power to protect the integrity of scholarship and pedagogy
- As teaching increasingly becomes casualized with part-time instruction, teaching itself becomes less of a central pillar of the university, valued in terms of job security and resource support
- YUFA should call on the employer to act in good faith to ensure collegial self-government is upheld in all aspects of university governance, including meaningful transparency in administrative decisions and budgetary matters
- The academic remit of the University should be its highest priority in general and material terms: the non-academic budget should be cut before the academic budget is cut
- o As per the implications of the Division of Humanities motions below (Appendix A), the administration should be encouraged to lobby the provincial government for support when the academic mission is under threat
  - In the current economic climate, this means making the case that investment in education is a strategic and productive form of economic stimulus
  - It also means advocating for and protecting York's historical areas of strength, e.g., in the social sciences, which, given York's size and prestige, represent Canadian higher education's strengths in these areas, to all levels of government
- YUFA should pursue greater input into the University communications strategy, so that faculty perspectives on University policies, which are implicit in official pronouncements, are in fact meaningfully represented
- Workload is a key indicator of the extent of neoliberal restructuring and should be central to YUFA's analysis and bargaining strategy
  - This is echoed in the member's survey, which as Arthur Hilliker observed in the SGM, could be considered the primary concern of members, if the interests of near-retirement faculty are controlled for
  - Discussions of workload should be mindful of the casualization trade-off and contextualised in broader strategies to protect the academic standards of the university
  - As workload is central to the tensions in the academy, as much as possible, measures that are introduced to redress problems should be designed such that they do not contribute to increased workloads and class sizes (e.g., small amounts of research funding should not involve onerous applications procedures)
- YUFA should continue to resist narrow measures of research in favour of a more robust, qualitative
  understanding of scholarship and encourage the University to take a position supportive of critical,
  independent scholarship in the Social Sciences and Humanities vis-à-vis funding agencies and the
  government on these matters
- YUFA should keep equity issues central in its strategies and remain mindful of potentially problematic 'trade-offs'
  - In particular, workload issues have many points of contact with equity concerns: YUFA should track or ask the Employer to track the distribution of workload to ensure it is distributed equitably, particularly among pre-tenure cohorts
  - Seeking redress for inequities should not contribute further to workloads: mechanisms should be developed so that equity issues can be addressed pro-actively and as a matter of systemic principle, rather than 'fixed' after the fact with cumbersome anomaly exercises that penalize the victims with more work

 Funding a reasonable faculty complement through reductions in salary is another problematic tradeoff that ought to be resisted

#### Specific recommendations

In the next round of bargaining, YUFA should express these principles by pursuing the following:

- YUFA should recognize that the standard negotiating concerns regarding salary and benefits are no longer
  a sufficient response to the neo-liberal agenda. YUFA should move beyond these concerns to address
  transformations in the York community that undermine collegial self-governance and the quality of
  education
- The Subcommittee recommends a balance between teaching and research, and within teaching, balance between graduate and undergraduate teaching
- The Subcommittee recommends particular focus on equity beyond gender to start a serious conversation on equity as a multidimensional issue
- Work to restore a reasonable faculty complement through a commitment to a basic threshold of 75% tenure-stream Course Directorships
  - As per the CAUT April 2009 Bargaining Advisory: Complement language should state the minimum number of full-time positions, require that all vacated positions shall be filled, ensure that the employer provides periodic reports to the association, and have an appointment process for any unfilled positions.
- A commitment to a university-wide 2.0 maximum teaching load
- A commitment to a return to 1997 class sizes.
- A commitment to a consistent level of basic research support
- A commitment to good-faith, transparent university governance, including a clear process for ensuring such governance that will be made available in plain language to the YUFA membership
- A statement of principle reaffirming the Administration's obligation to protect the University's academic mission, including its historical areas of strength

#### Appendix A: Division of Humanities Motion

Motion 1: Whereas President Shoukri has invited the University community to present ideas to maintain the quality of faculty and students at York; and whereas the President has also announced a review of the University's budget; and whereas the Division of Humanities believes that the interests of students are best met when a preponderance of Course Directorships are held by faculty in the tenure stream; and whereas the Division of Humanities notes the recent decline in tenure-stream hiring and consequent increased reliance on non-tenure-stream Course Directors,

BIRT that the Division of Humanities would support a long-term University Faculty Renewal Campaign with the goal of raising the percentage of tenure-stream Course Directorships in the University to 75%. The Campaign would include the following elements, in this order:

- 1. a budgetary review carried out by a committee made up of representatives from the various stakeholders in the University community to assess the history of the University budget and current budgetary priorities;
- 2. a fund-raising campaign through the York Foundation with the funds targeted specifically towards the hiring of more tenure-stream faculty;

3. a lobbying campaign to press the provincial legislature to increase funding to post-secondary education with a view specifically towards increasing full-time tenure-stream appointments.

Motion 2: The Division of Humanities directs the Chair of the Division to inform other Chairs of units and the Dean about the Division's resolution in favor of a Faculty Renewal Campaign.

Rationale: The Faculty Renewal Campaign is consistent with the remarks made by President Shoukri in his address to Senate on 26 February. He noted that "the state of our affairs here at York is not usual, nor is it sustainable". The President also said "we need the community's ideas on how to maintain the quality of faculty and students as we make tough decisions on the budget." "Our highest priority" he said, "is to protect the quality of the academic experience on campus. That means protecting the quality of our teaching and research, the quality of our faculty, and the quality of our academic resources — libraries, labs, and infrastructure — in a very difficult budgetary situation." President Shoukri also announced "an initiative to help our decision making in the short-term aimed at: Reviewing the current budget allocation model; Identifying the percentage of our budget that is allocated to the academic enterprise and bench-marking it against that of other universities; and Providing alternative models that ensure linking the budget allocations or cuts to our academic priorities." And he told the Senate, "To move forward on protecting and advancing our academic enterprise in this difficult time we need your ideas."

The proposed Faculty Renewal Campaign is consistent with and builds on the President's invitation. It is a positive program to improve our situation, rather than simply an effort to make the best of what we have. Our problems are not simple, and they are not the creation of a few months or even a few years. The solution will also have to be long-term.

The quality of education at York has suffered because of the imbalance in the structure of the faculty complement. Tenure stream appointments give faculty the opportunity to keep up with current research and to contribute to scholarship. This research and scholarship then feeds back into teaching. The quality of instruction and the interests of students are thus best served when a preponderance of courses are directed by tenure stream faculty.

York should establish the goal of a significant increase in the proportion of course directorships held by tenure stream faculty. This goal should be one of the priorities of planning for the university over the next several years. In order to meet this goal, we need significant new tenure-stream hires. These hires would come both from regular hires and from conversions; conversions would of course be managed with full collegial examination of files. But these hires can only come about if there is money to support them.

The campaign proposes to address these financial needs in three stages. The first stage would be a review of the budget, in order to determine the proper balance of allocation of financial resources. The President has announced a review of the budget. This proposal proposes that this review should be transparent and should be carried out by a committee with representatives from all University stakeholders – the administration, faculty and other employees, and students. The trust of the entire university community can be earned only through the representation of the entire community. This committee must also be given the ability to look at the history of University budget over a period of at least ten or twenty years, so that changes in the funding models can be tracked.

The second stage would be a long-term fund-raising campaign specifically targeted towards the hiring of new tenure-stream faculty. This campaign would specifically state the that goal of the campaign is an increase in course directorships held by tenure-stream faculty in order to improve the quality of education for our students.

The third stage would be a lobbying campaign to press the legislature for increased funding for Universities. This lobbying campaign would point out that the University has done its part, through budgetary reform and through fundraising, and that it is now time for the legislature to do its part. The lobbying campaign would also emphasize the achievements of York University, but it should not take a narrow view of the value of higher education for society.

This proposal is intended to bring the various elements of the University community together in a positive program designed to improve the quality of education at York. It recognizes that proposals need to address the question of funding, and while it includes a budgetary review with the possibility of some budgetary reallocation, it does not assume that there are hidden resources. And the efforts of the University to examine its budget and to engage in fundraising provide the basis for lobbying at the political level.

Appendix B: OECD Observer Article, 'Breaking Ranks'

University league tables are fashionable, but should not be taken as accurate measures of the quality of education. The OECD is investigating other tools to measure performance, policymakers and educators heard at a recent conference. <a href="http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/2768/Breaking\_ranks.html">http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/2768/Breaking\_ranks.html</a>.

Rumour has it that the two biggest fans of university league tables are vice-chancellors and mothers in China. Do league tables accurately measure what they claim to measure? Or are they, as their critics claim, simplistic and damaging?

Excellence is the quarry. The trouble is, excellence only seems to appear in the top ranks. Surely no university can be "world class" in every aspect. Franz Van Vught of the European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities put the problem succinctly at a recent conference called "Higher education: quality, relevance and impact" held at the OECD in Paris (see references). He said that if only 3% of universities out of 17,000 worldwide can be considered "world class", it cannot mean that the rest are failures.

Exhortations to become world class have tucked universities into a Procrustean bed of indicators. Presidents anxiously cut back programmes, reorient their university's mission, swell application numbers to tighten student selectivity, and seek mergers with higher-ranking institutions—conversely, those higher up jealously guard their hard-won reputations and shy away from collaborating with anyone but their peers. Deep excisions may be made into the social sciences and humanities to leave more room for the natural sciences and research. Speaking at the biennial conference of the OECD's Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) in September, Ellen Hazelkorn of the Dublin Institute of Technology, cited a respondent to an international survey which said that "the easiest way to boost rankings is to kill the Humanities". Clearly not a realistic proposition, though another survey told her that "reputation, unfortunately, is always based on research, and research attracts the best talent".

Research is considered the most salient example of a nation's intellectual resources, economic strength and global competitiveness. It is no surprise then that real research rather than just teaching and studying for exams figures highly in two of the world's most influential league tables. The Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJT) gives research a thumping 40% weighting, and includes the number of faculty publications and citations in journals. The Times Higher Education rank gives research 20%. But the Shanghai rank also attributes another 40% to faculty who have won Field Medals and Nobel Prizes. This is a bit distorting, since not every university or college focuses on maths or science, and even if they do, there is no clear evidence that having a Nobel Prize winner on campus now, still less

having had one fifty or more years ago, helps students learn. The Shanghai survey cautions against using its tables as an overall assessment of a university's performance. But that, of course, is exactly what people and the headline-hungry media do.

Short of hiring a Nobel Prize winner, what can a university do to improve its standing in these rankings, assuming they should try? Alas, the best way to gain prestige is to already have it.

The old schools like Harvard and Oxford are consistently in the top ten. Their mythic status draws the highest-calibre students and faculty, and guarantees generous endowments. Does reputation give them an unfair advantage and make them hard to dislodge?

Not necessarily. Other established universities as old or older than Oxford, such as Freiburg in Germany, figure much lower in the Shanghai top 100, while Italy's Bologna, one of the oldest of all, does not even figure.

Reputations may be based partly on assumption. In its peer review weighting, the Times Higher Education queries some 200,000 academics worldwide via email, asking them to name what they feel are the top thirty institutions. With no clear indicators as to what they should evaluate, compounded by the fact that the Times Higher Education is published in English-speaking countries and that the average response rate is 1%, it is hardly a surprise when British institutions come out on top. Also, it depends on what is being measured: while neither Shanghai nor Times rate French universities that highly, in the FT 2007 European Business Schools rankings six of the top 10 are French. Incidentally, the Financial Times offers quite a range of rankings of business schools, MBAs and the like, as much to earn revenue from the "infotainment" business as anything else.

There seems to be a whimsical element in the rankings. A university high in the ranks one year may suddenly plummet forty or more places in the next. Is this possible? If so, what is to prevent it from rising fifty places the following year? Nothing, one may say. Also, there may be very little difference between institutions placed many tens of places apart, while small changes in the underlying factors have dramatic impacts. So why pay attention to rankings at all? To underline the point, the 2008 Times Higher Education survey just published as we write, reduced Britain's rankings quite markedly across the board, leading to more gloomy headlines about the state of the country.

To squeeze out of such indicators, some universities are turning the tables upside down, using their lower position as a marketing strategy. Student mobility is higher than ever before in history. In most OECD countries, the international student body is about 6.7% of the total; in Australian universities it is 19.3%, and in some as high as 50%.

One of the biggest problems with rankings is not the accuracy of the data, but how that data is used, and to whom it is applied. Another is that a good deal of data has never been collected, how students are progressing in the classroom for instance, or levels of students who leave compared to when they joined. This makes it hard to build a full picture of university performance. The most serious omission is that certain data leaves out what for many people is the very reason universities exist: actual coursework.

Indicators such as "teacher/student ratio" are too feeble to tell us much about learning outcomes, nor anything about a teacher's ability to teach. The Centre for Higher Education in Germany (CHE) publishes a variety of data from which students can construct their own rankings, according to their needs. The CHE does not stamp them with a number but places them in categories of "good", "medium" or "bad", and lists them alphabetically. Universities in one category are of comparable quality, whereas those in different categories show a marked

contrast in performance. Unlike rankings, this method prevents trivial differences from creating the false impression that one university is clearly better than another.

Rankings also overlook the "value added" component of degree programmes. As might be expected, top universities draw A+ students and turn out A+ graduates. But what of universities that accept B students and produce A-level graduates? The added value of the B-student's degree programme would be considerably higher.

The OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) study aims at determining whether it is possible to make meaningful statements about the education provided in universities in different countries, taking into account different "strands" of competence: skill in a chosen discipline, and generic skills such as critical thinking or the ability to apply knowledge practically. If successful, AHELO will provide institutions with analysis to help them improve their own performance, and will provide data that will help students assess the suitability of the institution for their own needs.

Relevance is important. Is a degree programme relevant if it fails to prepare a student for the job market or demonstrates no obvious social impact? In a world increasingly nervous about shrinking job opportunities and faced with other challenges, the relevance of a degree is paramount, and the OECD conference discussed this point at some length. But while some may argue say, that natural sciences are more relevant than social history, as Robert Berdahl, President of the Association of American Universities, pointed out, the problems of contemporary society—migration, ageing, climate change, the legacy of colonialism and religious extremism—cannot be solved by the natural sciences alone. Nor is judging what is relevant just a matter for any one generation to decide. Look at the nuclear industry, which is back in favour as a source of energy, yet is faced with skill shortages because of years of unpopularity when students chose other subjects. Or what about today's stock market crash, which appears to be rewriting the rules of economic orthodoxy by the day?

But rankings are not going to go away. After all, they can provoke useful questions, such as "why exactly are we not in the top group?", or indeed, "how can we maintain this lead?". Governments and universities will still use them, as fierce competition between universities induces copycat behaviour unless policy encourages diversity. Whether they serve as an accurate guide to higher education is therefore strictly academic.

Even people that do not like rankings cannot always resist them. Take this story, related by a woman from Germany at the IMHE conference. When she asked the vice-chancellor of a university in Bavaria whether he would like his university to be included in a league table, his response was a firm "no". But then, when the woman succeeded in reassuring him that the university would not be included, he asked–just out of curiosity–where it would have been ranked compared to the others. LT

#### References

- \* Presentations from the OECD conference organised by the Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) on 8-10 September: "Higher education: quality, relevance and impact" can be found at www.oecd.org/edu/imhegeneralconference2008
  - \* For information on AHELO see www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo

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