

Transcript of 'Ranking Business Schools'

Season 2, Episode 8, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Now Jan, it's been a little while since I've got to talk to you about things like rankings and other stuff that annoys me greatly. So I thought I'll give you the opportunity today that you can do that. Does that sound like fair enough?

Jan: It does sound fair enough because they've popped up again, haven't they? Rankings, benchmarking.

Paul: Rankings and bench, I was gonna call them wrenchings and banchmarkings then, which would be as, [Jan laughs] as far as my mind is concerned, just as sensible.

Um, yes. So, rankings and benchmarking. We're gonna talk them today in the context of sustainability in business and management schools, in particular. Because there's elements to it there that you might not necessarily think are, are applicable.

Jan: Yes. And so there's a lot of, as we'll find out, there is a lot of accreditation and, and ranking of organisations of which the universities are, are also caught in that kind of activity. And some of those rankings and processes include reference to sustainability.

And I guess the idea with rankings and benchmarking that we've talked about before and also accreditations, is that if it has something in it, then it invites those who are being evaluated to think about those issues and maybe say something or do something as a response.

Paul: So to find out about all this, we've got someone who used to share an office with me and who likes to bicker with me as much as you like to bicker with me, Jan. [Jan laughs]

We're joined by Rose White, who is the External Accreditation Manager here in Lancaster University Management School. She deals with all things accreditations and rankings when it comes to LUMS.

Hello, Rose.

Rose: Hello, Paul. It's lovely to see you.

Paul: Yes, we, we should put out that Rose is saying hello to me and not to Jan, because Jan is far, far away from us today.

Jan: [laughs] Indeed.

Paul: Stuck in a foreign land.

Um, Rose, thank you very much for joining us. Can you just first of all, tell us a little bit about what actually it is that you do when it comes to accreditations rankings, and how sustainability fits in a little bit, and then we will get into more detail later.

Rose: Yes, I can. Um, I know this is your favourite subject as well, Paul, so I'm really happy to be here and talk about it with you.

Uh, so my role involves managing LUMS portfolio of accreditations. We have quite a few of them. So that involves things like report writing when we come to audit time. And also just keeping an eye on all the activities that are going on around the School to see that we're still complying with things that we should be complying with.

When we come to rankings time, it involves filling in lots and lots of boxes with numbers, and then sending them off and hoping that we get some lovely results back in due course.

Paul: I need to point out at this point, I've got nothing against accreditations, Jan...

Jan: ...aaah...!

Paul: ...I don't need you to, to, to claim that I have issues with accreditation.

We've talked about various accreditation types in the past, on and off this podcast, such as things such as Fairtrade when it comes to coffee and other type of accreditations that there are, sustainability wise. I've got no problems with them, rankings are where I have an issue.

Jan: Ah, that's a, that's a really interesting distinction and something that I'm sure we'll come back to. That's, that's good to know.

Paul: Particularly, and before we get into this with Rose, I'll, I'll give you two examples. One from the world of academia and one not from the world of academia.

When it comes to university rankings the National Student Survey plays a massive part in how well universities are ranked overall. Oxford and Cambridge do not take part in the National Student Survey. They do not get penalised for that one iota when it comes to the rankings. No one cares. So therefore, what does it mean for the rest of the rankings, and why should anyone care?

The second is not from the world of academia, and is rather from the world of breakdancing, where during the Olympics you may have come across Raygun, the Australian, uh, breakdancing participant who scored precisely zero points in every single one of the competitions she took part in. She finished dead last. She was ridiculed in some parts of social media and loved in others.

Nevertheless, about a month after the Olympics finished, she was ranked the number one breakdancer in the world because she happened to have taken part in one particular competition that other top-ranked breakdancers hadn't taken part in. And because she did, she was rank number one in the world.

How on earth can the person who finished last with zero points at the Olympics be the number one breakdancer in the world?

Two examples there that both demonstrate why rankings are totally meaningless and pointless. I have many others, but I want to stop.

Jan: Well, um, yeah, he, he hopped off his horse, said, you know, tying it up and going into the saloon. So let's go into the saloon of accreditations, which is a much nicer place to be.

So, Rose, why are business schools accredited and, well what's behind that, that desire to do, to undertake that activity by the people doing the accreditation, and what's behind the desire of the organisations to be accredited?

Rose: Um, so I'm just recovering from Paul's rant. I think he managed 12 minutes before he had to get that off his chest. [Jan laughs]

Um, I think accreditations are an opportunity for business schools to show their expertise in different areas. Some of the accreditations focus on a

particular programme. Some of them are school-wide. It's probably quite a competitive environment, business and management schools, anyway. So I think the personality types probably play quite a large role in why people do it.

I think to understand why, you have to kind of look at why the accreditation bodies were set up in the first place. So we have the Triple Crown, AACSB, which is an American accreditation, it's the oldest one. They were originally set up as a kind of national quality body, and they only really started expanding out into Europe in the 1960s really. But now they have over a thousand members. Accredited members, sorry. They have way more members than that.

So we have AMBA, who was set up to, um, emphasise the importance of an MBA qualification, which was initially seen as a very US-based pursuit. The idea was just to really push the importance of that in Europe, and they were set up in the kind of 60s and 70s.

And then you have EFMD whose real emphasis is about business schools' connection with practice. You know, what's the point of a business school really if it isn't to teach people to connect with business? They're also interesting in this conversation 'cause they've always had a very, very strong focus on sustainability. It's one, been one of their three main pillars from the offset really. So they've been leaders, I think, in that.

Paul: I, I think my favourite of all three of them, just for the acronym is the AACSB, 'cause it stands for the Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business, which just seems like a very comp, has it changed its name?

Rose: It doesn't stand for that anymore, Paul.

Paul: What does it stand for now?

Rose: It doesn't stand for anything because nobody could remember what it stood for! [laughs]

[Jan laughs]

Paul: I can, and I feel I'm very important in this. This is just another reason I don't like rankings. No, they don't even do rankings. They do, uh, accreditation.

No, but I just liked that because I thought that's just a totally nonsensical way of phrasing it, and therefore I loved it. Um, that's...

Rose: ...oh, sorry. We have, I've ruined the one thing you liked about accreditations, Paul, I'm sorry.

Paul: I have nothing against accreditations. It's rankings. We should have got, cleared that by now, Jan?

Jan: So in this, um, because you talk about these audit cycles and I, and I mean, you're involved in every one of them and I've been involved in, in some of them.

So the idea with the audit cycle is that, uh, a, a business and management school would present what it thought it was about, and then somebody would come and test it.

And so with the, with the regard to particularly the sustainability elements, um, within that, how are they represented and then how are they tested?

Rose: Yeah, you're right in that the cycles tend to run every five years, and I guess it's like a sort of external audit would be the kind of the business equivalent.

So AACSB have started to emphasise much more a societal impact dimension to their accreditation, and they're really, really keen that schools can show that's coming through from strategy level. That it's not just a collection of activities that we're all doing, that we can then go, oh, right, if we bundle all this stuff together and then we can call it societal impact. And it's a kind of happy coincidence of really great things that people are doing.

So there's much more emphasis now across the board on how is your school strategy really, um, embedding sustainability activities and activities that make a positive impact on society. How is that embedded in your strategy? And then how does that filter down through all of your areas of activity?

Paul: With the three accreditation bodies that you've mentioned there, do they all have different aspects they want to look at when it comes to sustainability?

Rose: Yes and no. So AACSB is a mission led accreditation. So we tell them what our mission is and then they will judge us against that.

So if we said we regard sustainability as doing the most recycling that we can, and then we have to be able to report to them that we have, you know, completed X percentage of recycling.

EFMD, whose EQUIS accreditation, the schoolwide accreditation we hold, they have a set of standards. They're a bit more prescriptive on that front that they would be expecting us to adhere to. But again, it's about alignment with our own strategy and what we say we're doing. I think that's the point that people are bothered about, that we are managing ourselves to deliver those activities and that it's no longer seen as a, as an, a sort of, well, yeah, I guess happy coincidence that it's happening by accident. What are you doing to specifically drive it and make it happen, and how can you show the impact of that?

Paul: Mm-hmm. Let me ask you this, with regards to accreditations, who actually pays attention to them?

I would like to think that it's not just only business schools care about them because they want them and they're the only people that pays attention. I'd like to think our audience is more than just people from business schools as well.

Therefore, who is it who's paying attention to the accreditations when, when it comes to looking at it and saying, oh, good that's a good university, it's got X accreditation, Y accreditation?

Rose: This is where I start feeling like I'm sort of the defender of the accreditation industry. I think accreditation as a benefit is a much subtler sell than a ranking.

So I think it's much harder to explain to people what the benefit of those accreditations are without going into a load of the detail behind it as, as we've just been doing.

So I think the Triple Crown badge has got prestige among certainly the business school community.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Rose Um, I, it is used by students as a kind of hygiene factor now because it has become quite common. Faculty will sometimes use it as a, you know, if you're a triple accredited school, okay I know that'll be a good school. It's an easy tick.

I'm filling because I'm not entirely convinced as to how far the, the benefit of that badge stretches out beyond that...

Paul: ...mm-hmm.

Rose: Some employers...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Rose: ...big employers will be more aware of it than, you know, maybe an SME type employer...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Rose: ...because it is quite niche. And sometimes it's quite hard to explain.

Paul: No, that, that's interesting to know that it's, yeah, they're obviously, the business school community is the main hub for caring about it, but, there it does go a little bit beyond that in certain directions.

Which leads me to the question I was gonna ask, and I know Jan wants to ask the question as well. Does the sustainability aspects of these accreditations now start to carry weight within that same business school community?

Rose: Oh yeah, definitely. I think so.

It's in every conversation. It's in every seminar. You have to answer questions about it, especially in an EQUIS report, in every single chapter you have to mention sustainability aspects of your activity.

So it's, it is everywhere, and it's on so many communications I get now from, from every external body. It, it really is much more in the conversation than it was, I would say, even 10 years ago...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Rose: ...that's how long I've been doing it, way too long! [Paul laughs]

Jan: That really leads to my question because, um, and just 'cause it's the two of you here, you know, don't, don't take this the wrong way, but, but I think between the two of you, you know the most about the, the, the Management School.

Because you're promoting the work, if you're in Paul's role. And if you're in Rose's role and you see these, you know, drawing together of big pictures of, of the whole institution and how it plays out.

So I wonder, particularly from your, that viewpoint Rose that you have, how has LUMS's, um, propensity and the, uh, and ability to address sustainability

changed over time? And are there any like real highlights that you can pick out in what's been going on?

Rose: Loving the fact you think Paul and I know the most about LUMS. That's probably really offended some people...

Paul: ...you're definitely correct for me though, Jan, yes, yeah, I do. And just to be clear, LUMS is Lancaster University Management School. We sometimes just call it that because that's what everyone calls it.

Although I had one colleague who thought it was pronounced 'looms' for a while [Jan laughs] and I, I, I did take to that, but it made no sense.

Rose: No, I think one of the big things that has changed is that we are much, much better at recognising the importance of some of the activities we do, the importance of recording it, of advertising it.

So it might be as simple as, on your course pages, have you actually written that you teach about modern slavery, or do you just know that you teach it when you're in the classroom, but it's not explicitly out there to people.

So I think we've got much better at realising that we have to, we have to tell people that we're doing it. Because we have always done quite a lot of it, but sometimes been very hard to get the examples. So I found it much easier now to get some really great examples.

And you know, obviously things like this podcast are a great source for me of, I didn't know that person was doing that. You know, the modern slavery example is, 'cause when I listened to Linda's podcast, which I think was one of your earliest ones about modern slavery, you know, that sort of, that really sticks in your mind and then you can revisit it, and it takes you off down a little trail.

So I think as well one of the highlights for me probably, this might give Paul PTSD, uh, [laughs] was our last, our last EQUIS report when actually, you know, Jan, you came with us and we had a writing retreat and we really thought about how we write sustainability and ethics and responsibility. How we'd write that through the whole report as a holistic school-wide approach, as opposed to you know, here is one chapter where we sort of list some examples of things that we do.

It was, how is this spread throughout the school? How is it in our behaviours and our values and our culture? And it, you know, it was great just to have the

space to do that. And then obviously I go back to the office and say, Paul, I've got 10 chapters will you help me proofread them all, and make them make sense? And then he's really delighted with me.

Paul: Mmm, yeah. In, in case anyone wonders why me and Rose get along so well, such requests, um, definitely top of the list.

What, a lot of what Rose has said will tie in with a future episode we'll be doing with Marian Iszatt-White, who's been a previous guest as well on this podcast, but we'll be having back for a second time, when we're talking about a project she calls B-School to ESG-School, and a lot of that has been mapping and understanding where we actually have a lot of these things taught within our programmes and how hard it is, much as you've said, it might have improved and got better in the last year or two.

With these accreditations, Rose, do you feel that they, there is a way that they fit in with wider issues of sustainability in business? Does a business school being accredited and being proven to have sustainability credentials maybe affect the kind of people who come through it and end up to go on and work in business? Does it affect maybe the businesses who want to come and work with that business school, or any other ways you could think of?

Rose: So when you asked me to come on this podcast, I did do a bit of research into some of these sorts of questions, 'cause I had a horrible feeling that you were going to ask me.

So research that's been carried out over the last few years that students who come to schools who hold these accreditations, they are influenced by their time at those schools and it carries on with them throughout their careers and affects the types of, of job choices that they make.

So there isn't a lot of research into this area, but I think it definitely does make a difference and it will continue to make a difference because people won't want to go and study somewhere that looks like it doesn't care and it's, you know, really important to people, increasingly, that the organisations they work for, I think care about the people and about their environment.

So as much as anything, it's about staying ahead of the game, I guess, if you want to be commercial about it. It's about staying ahead of the game, um, and doing it for those reasons, as well as obviously doing it for the right reason, which is that we should.

Jan: I think it also then comes back to the University as, uh, you know, the University as a charity, but broadly speaking, also as a business or an enterprise of some sort.

And so some of the things that are within the control of the University, like percentage of renewable energy, how, you know, how water is conserved and treated, um, um, how biodiversity happens, suppliers, all of those different dimensions of sustainability will infuse into the institutional parts of an accreditation process. So if your university is doing nothing, then I think it'd be much harder to complete some of that material.

So I think it's sort of a, quite a, you know, it's a, hopefully a positive dance between the Management School that's pursuing this agenda and accreditations and, and possibly rankings, although they're probably done to you rather than being pursued, and the, the institution itself and its business activities and how it does things. If they marry up, then that has to be, I think, a good thing of some sort.

Rose: I, definitely, and I think as part of these accreditation assessments we go through, we get visited, um, by Deans of other business schools. So they come here, they meet people, they talk to different groups of people. They speak to our students and our staff.

And feedback that we've had consistently for the last 15 years really, about, it's a positive, about the community at Lancaster and in LUMS. And last time they came, they could really see that the themes of responsibility and sustainability that were coming through with our research.

And I know Jan, you talked to one of our panel members about some of the research that you were doing. You're my star turn on accreditation panels. [Jan laughs] And, and you know, they, but they really get the sense of it from people. You know, it has to be lived and it has to be authentic, 'cause you can't put 10 people in a room and tell them what to say for an hour because it just, it, it just won't happen.

So I think it's always really reassuring to me that the reports always say that that comes through when they meet people, you know, that they care about the place and that they're invested in what we're trying to do in terms of those kind of responsible ethics and sustainability themes.

Jan: And I suspect those panel members, because I know that, um, you have to be, you know, selected and, and, you know, accredited perhaps to, to do that work. They must see everything from across the globe. So, so they must also have a really good sense of how sustainability, you know, is rising up through the agenda, is being infused through, um, educational establishments and through those, those management degrees.

Paul: I'm taking back everything I said about not having a problem with accreditations, because something you've just said reminds me of benchmarking the benchmarkers. You've just suggested that in order to sit on the accreditation panel, you need to have been accredited.

That's getting beyond the levels of ridiculous.

Jan: But that's two times accreditation. Two times accreditation doesn't need more benchmark...

Paul: ...yeah, but who, as I said at the time, who's accrediting the accreditors?

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: So that's, it's, yeah, that's, it's...

Jan: ...oh, I'm sorry. I fell at the last hurdle, Rose. We tripped over and...

Rose: ...it was going so well, Jan, it was going so well. [Jan laughs]

Paul: Yeah. As far as accreditations go, I was on board and now you've said that!

Jan: So if we leave accreditations behind for the moment and move on to...

Paul: ...I'll check out now, yeah. I, I'll see you later, I don't wanna get into any fights about rankings, but go on.

Jan: And the other thing we've seen is, is sort of like the growth of rankings and rankings uh, well in general have grown and we sort of live in an audit society in all sorts of ways. But rankings that are focused specifically on, um, sustainability matters also come to the fore.

So like People and Planet and there, there's lots of other examples. How would you char, well, what do you make of them? We're not gonna ask Paul, 'cause

we know he, he doesn't like them. But how does, how do you, how do you interact with them in your role, within the, the Management School?

Rose: Um, so business and management schools love a ranking. We will rank anything if, you know, if we can provide some evidence for it, it'll get ranked.

So, um, I have relationships with, um, people, you know, The Financial Times, QS is a very, very big ranking at the moment globally for universities and for business and management schools.

And then as you said, there are very, there are specific rankings, which will just look at sustainability issues. So you've mentioned one, there's also things like Corporate Knights MBA, where they're just, you know, really looking at an MBA through the lens of social responsibility.

But there's definitely been a massive shift in the methodologies of those rankings to incorporate sustainability factors. And some of those I know are not popular because they're pretty blunt, you know, if they're about carbon measurements. And I know people think, you know sustainability's much more than how much carbon you are churning out or not churning out.

But I guess my counter to that is, you have to start somewhere and you have to be able to measure it, if you want to rank it. Paul's taking deep breaths now. But it's, [laughs] it, I, I guess my argument would be it's better to have something in there, even if it's not perfect, than to ignore the issue because we can't agree on how we want to measure it.

Paul: What scale are these things measured on? As in, are we being ranked as a management school? Some of the rankings that we are part of mark programmes within the Management School, specifically. Some of the mark subject areas, some of them mark the Management School, some of them mark the whole University. What kind of level is it where sustainability considerations really come into play?

Rose: They're really at University level. I mean, you often have an option to say, is this a, you know, a business or management school target? But the reality is this is institutionally driven, a lot of it. You know, if you're part of a big organisation, you can't, you can't sort of micromanage your tiny patch, you know, have we turned the heating down by three degrees? You know. No, because somebody in Facilities controls it.

So we, we sometimes have a choice as to what we want to submit, but for us, that will always be an institutional number.

Jan: So when we've been thinking about accreditations and rankings, in your mind, how do they differ from each other?

Rose: I think, as we were discussing before, an accreditation is, um, it's a much more nuanced and probably more sophisticated presentation of, of what you're doing, um, it's holistic. It will look at all aspects of your business from, you know, your strategy, your finance, your people. It will look at how all those things hang together as a whole against their set of standards and against your own mission.

Whereas a ranking will be a much more, uh, you know, binary. So how many students do you have here? What percentage of these are in these categories? You know, there's, there's no room to explain, well, we have these many students and this is the demographic, because of these reasons. You just have to tell them.

Jan: Yeah.

Rose: So, you know, it's a much more, it's a much more black and white approach.

Jan: And one of the other things that we take part in, and I know that you've been central to as well, is the Principles for Responsible Management Education. So our listeners who might not have heard of that particular programme would, would, I'm sure like to find out a bit more about it.

Rose: Yes so this Principles of Responsible Management Education, which I can now refer to as PRIME. Uh, this is a United Nations, um, initiative, which is really about, again, encouraging business and management schools to think about how they're educating their students in a way that when they leave, they leave their programme, they're gonna go out into the world and make a positive difference. And about how we make partnerships, which will also, you know, enhance those behaviours.

They've moved to a slightly different model of reporting, again, interestingly, from a very freeform reporting approach, which allowed you to tell your story pretty much however you wanted, to a much more data-driven sort of formulaic reporting. So that's only in its first year. So it'll be interesting to see if that, that will allow them, I think, to compare progress that schools are making

across the world much more easily than a, a nice, you know, qualitative, descriptive report.

Paul: Do you think this is building towards them, not necessarily ranking you in a list from one to a hundred, but maybe giving you levels of recognition for how well you do it?

For similar things such as something called Athena Swan, which recognises gender equality across an institution you can get gold, silver, and bronze. Do you think that that maybe is moving towards that way? You get different categorisations of your PRIME?

Rose: Quite possibly. PRIME have actually just gone into partnership with a ratings organisation called the Positive Impact Ratings. I don't know if you feel the same about ratings as you do about rankings?

Paul: Potato, potato, tomato, tomato. [Rose laughs] It's the same thing no matter how you try to dress it up.

Rose: [laughing] Sorry. So the positive impact ratings are a student led rating based on a set of questions the students get asked about areas of University business and how well they perceive we are doing in those areas.

You know, about governance and, I can only remember those most boring one, that says something about me, doesn't it, governance! And you know, the teaching and the opportunities that they have.

So PRIME and Positive Impact Ratings have actually just formed a partnership. So you could argue that PRIME are already moving in that direction of, of being in the kind of ratings or, or rankings game. So...

Paul: What I'm interested in, which do you think business schools care about more, rankings or accreditations?

Rose: Oh, that's, that's an interesting one. I think the accreditations have almost become a baseline now. So you certainly have to have accreditations to get into some rankings. So the industry is sort of driving itself really, because in order to get ranked, you have to be accredited.

I think for some programmes, things like The Financial Times rankings still have a lot of prestige and will possibly outgun an accreditation. And I think also probably for people choosing courses, honestly, a ranking is a much, much easier way to quickly sift through courses.

Um, maybe I'm just a realist. I, I think if, you know, if you are faced with 17,000 business schools in the world, you've gotta narrow that down in some way. So a really easy quick way to do it is to go onto a big rankings website, like QS, other rankings are available. And you know, you can look down a list, see who's good in inverted commas, and start narrowing down your list.

Paul looks deeply unimpressed with me, Jan.

[Jan laughs]

Paul: I'm deeply unimpressed with the way the world works.

Jan: [laughs] I think it's, he's more deeply unimpressed with the world I think.

So, so let, let's, let's leave that aside for the moment and ask you, you personally, are you one, you're a Pentland Centre member. Um, you've been a Pentland Centre member from whenever you know, it was, it was possible to be so, which, which I, I really appreciate and I, I really, you know, enjoy your membership of our Centre and what you bring to it.

But for you why, what's motivating you in around sustainability?

Rose: I, I've been thinking about this question a lot 'cause you know, I'm not the most naturally optimistic person in the world, as you probably know. I mean...

Paul: ...fits in well with this podcast, that's for sure, yeah...

[Jan and Rose laugh]

Rose: ...I was thinking, Jan's going...

Paul: ...me and Jan are just driving each other to misery every week. That's, that's the only reason we turn up anymore, now.

Rose: I was thinking Jan's gonna ask me what gives me hope for the future, and it's a rainy, dark Thursday afternoon, and I might say there's a bottle of wine in the fridge that gives me hope.

Um, I think personally, I've, I've always liked the outdoors. I love my gardening. I have my allotment, as you know, Jan. So I think I've seen personally the difference in the climate, how that has affected my ability to just do the things that I enjoy doing.

You know, it's really hard to grow a courgette now, because the weather is so weird. So you didn't think a podcast was going to go down this route?

[Jan and Rose laugh]

Paul: I'm writing it down. It's harder to grow courgettes now.

Jan: Well, we, we know that 'cause we, we were doing some sharing of allotment duties. I have to say that I'm particularly hopeless. Um, but, but you know, potatoes rotted in the ground this year and onions never got a chance. So it's, it is quite...

Paul: ...tomatoes didn't grow quickly enough so they developed too hard a and thick a skin.

Jan: Ah, right.

Rose: Mine were quite good, but they were in a greenhouse.

Paul: I see, we don't have a greenhouse. There you go.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Can we stop talking about gardening? Rose, can you get back to the point?

Jan: [laughs] Yeah. No, gardening can give you hope. I think green things always give us hope.

Rose: Yeah. And I do see, I see as well that, you know, my children are both in primary school. It's very much a part of their lives and it's part of a conversation that it would never have been, you know, when Paul and I were at school, 'cause we are that old now...

Paul: ...mm-hmm.

Rose: Um, so it's, it's definitely, it's in the consciousness so much more and that, you know, I think that's really, really encouraging. You know, that, that people have it in their decision-making processes. You know, do I need this? Can I afford it? And also I now think things like, oh, where was it made? How was it made? How far has it travelled to get here? And what am I going to do with it when I have either finished using it or it's worn out?

And I think people think all those things a lot more now. And, and hopefully that leads to a bit less waste in the world.

Paul: Well, Rose White, thank you very much for coming in and putting up with me, and enjoying your time with Jan for the last half an hour or so. It's been really great to have you here talking about subjects on which we are all passionate in one way or another.

Rose: Well, thank you, Paul. It's been lovely. And thank you for staying in the room while I talked about rankings. I really appreciate it.

Paul: It took a lot of effort.

[Theme music]

Jan: Well, I think we were lucky to get through that without you having a, having a, a hernia, Paul. 'Cause I just know how much you, you dislike, um, rankings and those kind of activities.

And in some ways I'm, I'm with you and, and what came through of some of the things that, uh, Rose talked about is the sort of ephemeral nature of some of the benefits that might be there. They certainly take a lot of work.

I think though there is a possibility that the process is more important than the outcome. So actually going through and thinking about these things might lead to more sustainability in business activities, um, with within a, a business or a management school.

And then the other thing, which I find I, I find it quite hard to sort of imagine, but what, what the educational experience and the way we construct sustainability in business and in an educational context would look like if there were no rankings.

And so, I mean, I feel very uncomfortable about rankings, uh, as well, but I wonder what that the world would look like without them. And I, I don't know the answer to that, but you might have some sense of what you think that world might look like.

Paul: I would say using another, sporting example, Belgium would not have been ranked as the number one football team in the world for X number of weeks on end, despite the fact that they've never won a major international tournament.

That's what a world would look like without rankings, it would make a lot more sense.

Jan: Ah.

Paul: I don't think I'll ever come round to rankings. It, I think we shout about them too much. I think that there's such a big deal made about them for universities.

When I came to university, I had no clue what the ranking of my university was. I knew that I'd come here. It felt like a good university. The people who were leading the course that I wanted to go on seemed like good people, and it seemed like a good choice for me to do.

I knew what the grade requirements were. So that's where I got my idea of what kind of university it was from going there and visiting and knowing it, and from seeing what the grade requirements were. If they wanted four Fs, then you think, yeah, maybe that's not the best university in the world. So I'm not really there, and I don't think I ever will be there, on rankings.

I know that after I graduated in History from here, about three or four years later, we were ranked in the top five, possibly even number one in the UK, Lancaster University for History. It didn't change my life one iota...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...apart from occasionally, me and my friends who came here and studied History, making ourselves so much better than all of our friends who came here and didn't study History saying, well, your department isn't ranked number one in the UK, it made no demonstrable difference...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...to my life. And I just, I can never get rankings. I can never understand the, the need for them.

Accreditations, I have no problem with. I'd like to think that was, I made that clear, I have no issue with accreditations. That's actually assessing what you are doing. It's coming and doing individual assessments of what you are doing. Analysing it based upon what you as an organisation want to be doing, your mission is, your vision is, and how you're applying that with your actual actions.

Applying that to certain set parameters in some ways, but not ranking you and saying, well, you do this better than that place and this worse than that place. But just saying, yes, actually you're doing what you're meant to be doing, and you are therefore worth, worthy of accreditation.

Jan: And I think, um, uh, uh, yeah, I'm absolutely with you on, you know, the vast majority of those points, but I don't think we're gonna lose, lose that ranking obsession.

And, um, Mike Power, who's a, you know, very, um, influential and, um, insightful accounting academic from the London School of Economics, uh, wrote a book many years ago, uh, called The Audit Society. And the extent to which as a society, we go down a, a rankings measurement kind of, uh, audit process because we no longer have the time or the patience or maybe have the, the faith in our ability to make the evaluation that you do, 'cause evaluation is different from a ranking, in choosing what you might do at what university, et cetera.

So there is something about the audit society that we are caught within. And in some ways, you know, it spins harder and harder and I think, I think the thing I find unappealing about some of these things is the extent to which, rather than treating them with scepticism, people sort of, you know, show off. Well showing off is never much fun anyway, but, but this allows, you know, people to show off a bit more, which is always a bit unedifying.

Paul: Yeah, it's a bit similar to the gamification of society and how so much nowadays is like seen as let's, if we want someone to do something, let's make it into a game. Let's put them in a table so they can rank it. Let's say for language learning, Duolingo, you get points for completing a lesson and you're put in a table and you compare yourself to other people who are learning lessons, and then you can climb up and down tables and such. And there's so many other similar examples, yet people are obsessed with numbers and standings.

And I do love some good statistics and then analysis of statistics and stuff. But yeah, I'm afraid that that will never go away for the rankings either.

Jan: Yeah. That being said, I think Rose does a fantastic job at making sure that that part of our organisational life works okay.

Paul: Yes, and obviously in charge of all the accreditations, which I don't envy her because I think that that's a never-ending process. You finish one accreditation...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...and you start another. And it's interesting to know how much more sustainability has been built into these, and sustainability factors have been built into the accreditations. Even if at a rankings level, it's dealt with more at the University side rather than, uh, individual subjects or Management School level. But within accreditations, sustainability is obviously becoming more and more of a key issue.

Jan: Yeah. No, that was, that was a very, um, encouraging thing from chatting with her. But who are we chatting to next?

Paul: Well, next week, Jan, we're going somewhere completely different. And I have nothing against the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry. I have no, no gripes with them at all, [Jan laughs] which is fortunate 'cause we'll be joined by Emma Zwiebler, who is the CEO of the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry.

We're gonna be talking about how brands fit into the bigger picture of sustainability and positive change.

Jan: Brilliant. And, um, the, the Federation is a, um, an industry body, so it's a really nice glimpse at the kind of work and kind of activities an industry body does as well.

Paul: Well, until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]