

Are Rankings (Still) Fit for Purpose?



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1 Rankings, Influence and Relevance

Global rankings emerged in the early years of the millennium at a time of increasing globalisation of higher education. Initially touted as a transparency instrument, a source of information about higher education for students, parents and the public, rankings have succeeded by comparing quality and performance internationally. They soon became an indicator of university reputation and status and national competitiveness in a world in which knowledge and talent reign supreme. Over the past decades, there has been a close correspondence between their growing influence and the expansion of their product range in terms of rankings by world region, subject and discipline, reputation and impact.

Despite criticism of their methodologies, choice of indicators and reliability of the data, there has been strong interest from governments and universities who use rankings to inform policy decisions and resource allocation, reinforce strategic ambition and identify priorities and KPIs, and as an aid to re-organisation and benchmarking. Students, especially international students, use rankings to help inform their university choice (Hazelkorn 2015). Today, there are around 20 global rankings, and, at a rough guesstimate, upwards of several hundred other primarily nationally-based rankings (IREG Observatory 2018).

But, can rankings keep pace with or respond to the many challenges we face or the changes we see around us? As the world emerges from the tremendous and sharp social, economic and personal shock due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the challenges affecting higher education and research are more significant now than ever. The crisis has affected both public and private institutions in different ways including a significant loss of income from public sources and tuition, a transformation in the teaching and learning environment and restrictions on academic and researcher

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recruitment and salaries. All this is affecting the student experience and graduate opportunities. Mass higher education is undergoing an existential crisis.

In recognition of the pressures currently being experienced, the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings (WUR)* announced it would postpone changes to its methodology until 2023 (Ross 2020). However, rather than simply making amendments, isn't it time to ask: Are rankings (still) fit for purpose?

2 Promoting Elitism in the Era of Mass Higher Education

Demographic, economic, labour market and technological developments underpin a growing demand for higher education everywhere. The bulk of new employment opportunities into the future will require higher-order cognitive, communication and interpersonal skills, complex problem solving, creativity, fluency of ideas and active learning requiring people to have broad-based skills alongside specialist knowledge. As economic growth advances, countries have no option but to invest in their education and training systems. Worldwide participation in tertiary education has been increasing at a rate of approximately 4% a year since 1995. This growth is reflected in the growing number of accredited universities, rising from around 12,000 in 1997 to 19,700 in 2020 according to IAU's World Higher Education Database (www.whed.net).

As Piketty has written, "it is access to skills and diffusion of knowledge that allow inequality to be reduced both within countries and at the international level" (Piketty 2020, p. 534). Thus, widening access to higher education to under-served groups and to those who have been inactive is essential to meet societal and labour needs as well as stem social inequalities. As people live longer, there is a necessity to expand life-long learning opportunities to cater for re-skilling and up-skilling for those in the labour force or wishing to re-join, this includes women after child-birth or rearing. Significant investment in digital skills is essential to avoid risks of worsening the digital divide. The Covid-19 pandemic is accelerating these inequalities and disadvantages as the crisis deepens (ILO 2020).

Approximately 220m students are currently enrolled in higher education; this number is estimated to reach 660m by 2040 (Calderon et al. 2018, p. 187). However, rankings consider only 5% of the world's universities. The top 100 universities listed by the *Academic Ranking of World Universities (2019)* represent only 1.4% of total students worldwide. What is particularly striking is that the top 20 is dominated by US universities, eleven of which are private. The five institutions with the largest endowments in 2016 were Harvard University (\$36 billion), Yale University (\$25 billion), the University of Texas System (\$24 billion), Stanford University (\$22 billion), and Princeton University (\$22 billion) (Institute of Education Sciences 2019)—amounts which surpass the (higher education) budgets of many countries (CIA, n.d.).

At a time of growing demand for and from higher education, rankings measure the outcomes of historical advantage. Elite universities and nations benefit from accumulated public and/or private wealth and investment over decades if not centuries.

They also benefit from attracting high achieving/socio-economic students who graduate on-time and go-on to have successful careers (Perna et al., (forthcoming 2022)). All these factors are reproduced in the indicators which rankings use and popularise. Taking all resources into account, including endowments, the resources available to the best universities and the rest highlights and perpetuates the inequality gap (Piketty 2020: 537–538). As Cantwell (2017) argues, rankings are a “report card” on disparities in resources and the unevenness in the global production of knowledge, the effect of which is to legitimise such inequities.

3 Measuring Excellence?

Rankings purport to measure excellence. They use a range of indicators, but they predominantly measure research and reputation. This bias is best demonstrated when research and research-dependent indicators are combined: e.g. academic reputation, Ph.D. awards, research income, citation, academic papers, faculty and alumni medals and awards, and internationalisation. There is a close correlation between research performance and reputation. Accordingly, 100% of the total scores for *ARWU* and *THE* are based on research, and 70% for *QS*.

Research is primarily measured by way of citation and publication counts using bibliometric databases: 21,294 journals, books and conference proceedings in Web of Science (n.d.) and 25,100 in SCOPUS (2020). Citation counts rely on the journal impact factor (JIF) developed by Garfield in 1955.

There has been growing concern that exceptional attention to high-impact journals and impact factors is distorting research practice, with accusations of over/mis-interpretation, misconduct and manipulation (Biagioli and Lippman 2020). Research may be frequently cited because of topicality or to dispute an argument. There are differences according to disciplinary practice: the physical, life and medical sciences publish frequently with multiple authors whereas the social sciences, humanities and arts tend to have single authors and publish in a range of formats or produce artefacts, and engineering focuses on conference proceedings and prototypes. JIF can mean other important publications are ignored while new research fields or ideas which challenge orthodoxy can find it difficult to get published.

These concerns have been highlighted in the *San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment* (DORA 2012) and the *Leiden Manifesto* (Hicks et al. 2015)—attracting many thousands of individual and institutional supporters. Dutch universities and funding agencies and the Chinese government have renounced usage of citation counts for academic assessment, appointment and promotion (Creus 2020; VSNU et al. 2019; te Roller 2020). To evaluate research performance, best practice suggests always using quantitative indicators and data in conjunction with qualitative methods, such as peer review (Expert Group on Assessment of University-Based Research 2010; Wilsdon et al. 2015).

Recent years has seen a big move to embrace open science. Open science is the movement to ensure research and its dissemination is accessible to everyone in

society, amateur or professional, rather than blocked by subscription journals and behind paywalls. Open Science presents a challenge to JIF.

The debate around what constitutes “excellence” has broadened to include emphasis on societal impact and engagement. To paraphrase John F Kennedy, it’s not only what universities do for themselves that counts but the overall benefits they bring to their communities and citizens. But measuring impact is very complex; too often there is a tendency to focus only on commercialisation of research through patents and licensing and to ignore wider societal impact and civic engagement, the contribution to public discourse or public behaviour, helping build sustainable communities, etc.

Jumping on this bandwagon, *Times Higher Education* (Times Higher Education 2019) launched an impact ranking to measure activity aligned with the seventeen UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDG). However, research activity accounts for 27% of each SDG against which data is submitted. In addition, each university is required to submit evidence. Not only is gathering this material a lot of work, but it is unlikely *THE* can control or validate the accuracy and comparability of the information provided. Anyone with experience of evaluating large scale projects will understand the magnitude of the work involved and the necessary integrity and transparency of the process.

In addition, the evaluation is carried out behind closed-doors. Submissions provide a lucrative treasure trove of institutional data which remains behind a paywall. This exposes one of the biggest developments of recent years—the monetisation of university data by commercial rankings and publishing organisations (Hazelkorn 2020).

Finally, global rankings, such as THE and QS, measure the proportion of international students as a proxy for quality. However, international mobility is heavily influenced by factors attributed to reputation and status. There is a “correlation between the position of universities in international university rankings and their attractiveness to international students” (OECD 2015: 357). Over the years, universities have significantly expanded their percentage of international students and accordingly, the income earned. The pandemic exposes profound difficulties associated with over-dependence on international students.

4 Are Rankings Still Fit for Purpose?

The world around us is changing, and the issues impacting on and expected of higher education are changing also. Are rankings still relevant?

Rankings suffer from a fundamental problem. They use indicators based on their own value-judgement. There is no such thing as an objective ranking. Measurements are also indirect and consist primarily of proxies.

Teaching is the essential mission of most universities, but rankings focus overwhelmingly on research and research-related activities. This is because there is considerable difficulty measuring and comparing results across diverse countries, insti-

tutions, and students. It is also misplaced to think we can measure teaching, at scale, distinct from the outcomes of learning (Altbach and Hazelkorn 2018).

In contrast, bibliometric data is relatively easy to capture. JIF data is readily available. This explains the over-emphasis on research. Reliance on such data helps us understand the increasingly close corporate integration between rankings, the publishing industry and big data (Fyfe et al. 2017; Posada 2018). It also helps us understand levels of publisher resistance around open science protocols currently being discussed and promoted by many countries and organisations. Ultimately, open science challenges a primary data source used by rankings.

The overemphasis on performance of a small number of elite universities is based on the misperception that national performance is an outcome of individual institutional performance. Yet, there is little evidence that the high achievement of a few elite universities trickle down to the overwhelming majority of the population who attend the majority of institutions. Is the policy objective to have a higher education system which serves elites (where progress depends on the cutting-edge knowledge of the chosen few) or to empower a mass knowledge society (where progress depends on the “wisdom of the many”)?

The big assumption underpinning rankings is that the indicators are meaningful measures for quality. But, the questions being asked about rankings are similar to, for example, those being asked about the meaningfulness of GDP or the stock-market with regard to the quality of life or economic sustainability for society as a whole (Coclanis 2019). Rather than student learning outcomes, equity and diversity or the contribution to society/the economy or civic engagement, prestige and reputation have become the dominant drivers of policy and decision-making. There is little evidence that rankings have any meaningful impact on improving quality. And, there is no correlation between rising in the rankings and making a significant contribution to society or the public good.

These shortcomings are magnified by current events and the severity of the challenges now facing almost every country. Amendment is not possible because the methodology and underpinning assumptions are flawed. Indeed, what meaningful information can come from ranking the top universities at time of a global pandemic and world recession?

Whatever arguments were used initially to say rankings were improving public information for students and others, no such argument can be made now. Are ranking (still) fit for purpose—the answer is No.

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