Are Universities Better Off Without Rankings?

Jamil Salmi

1 Introduction

The advent of international rankings almost twenty years ago—pioneered by the first Academic Ranking of World Universities by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003—changed the university landscape in an irreversible way. Today, the creation of world-class universities has become part of the political agenda in many countries.

Much progress has been achieved in the past twenty years. It would appear that the global rankings have indeed played a positive role in boosting academic excellence. But, is it progress in the right direction? How can we reconcile advances in research power with lack of progress in tackling mankind's major challenges, such as hunger, poverty, disease, and environmental decay? Have the top-ranked universities become more inclusive or elitist? Are societies using the vast knowledge generated by world-class universities to make choices based on scientific evidence and rational political debate? Are the leading universities contributing to the construction of ethical and democratic societies?

2 Impact of Rankings on Policies and Behaviours

2.1 *National Level*

When Vladimir Putin was re-elected as president of Russia in 2012, one of his first declarations was a call to transform the country's universities into world-class institutions, with the specific goal of having five Russian universities in the top 100.

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These kinds of initiatives are characteristic of the influence that the global rankings have had on the political scene of many countries in the past two decades, especially in East Asia and Europe.

Perhaps less beneficial have been policy decisions narrowly focused on the rankings. In Brazil, for instance, the *Science without Borders* program to send thousands of students to the best universities in the world was restricted to the top 100 universities globally. The global rankings have also influenced national decisions about university partnerships and immigration visas.

2.2 Institutional Level

The sway of international rankings has perhaps been even stronger at the institutional level. A major positive development has been widespread reliance on the rankings for strategic planning and quality improvement purposes.

Less helpful are the shortcuts that universities have sometimes elected to take in their quest to rise quickly in the rankings without necessarily building capacity in a genuine manner. Some universities approach academics in other institutions to encourage them to provide positive feedback through the reputation surveys conducted by some of the global rankings such as THE and QS. Others have entered into contractual relationships with commercial rankers with the expectation of boosting their standing in the respective rankings.

3 Performance of World-Class Universities After Twenty Years of Shanghai Ranking

Analysing the evolution of the WCU concentration index over the years gives a precise picture of progress and decline. Figures 1 and 2 calculate the WCU concentration index as the number of universities each country places among the top 100 globally relative to its population (using the Logarithmic value of the population).

The most significant change is the progress made by small countries. While five out of the seven leading countries in 2004 were large countries (US, UK, Japan, Germany and France), the picture had changed substantially by 2019, with four small population countries among the top six (Australia, Switzerland, Netherlands and Canada). Despite two rounds of excellence initiatives, Germany moved down from third to seventh position, and France came down from seventh to tenth. By contrast, Australia climbed in an impressive manner from tenth to third. The USA and the UK lost eight universities altogether. Japan moved down from fifth to eleventh.

Finally, it is instructive to look at which universities have most improved and most regressed in the ranking over the 16-year span. While there has hardly been any change among the top 20 universities in the world, the highest jumps were

Fig. 1 WCU Concentration Index (2004). *Source* ARWU and World Population Data

Fig. 2 WCU Concentration Index (2019). *Source* ARWU and World Population Data

achieved by four top Chinese universities, Singapore’s Nanyang Polytechnic, and several Australian universities. Substantial progress was also achieved by two Swiss universities, two Danish universities, two US institutions, two Belgian universities, and one university each from Israel and The Netherlands. The great majority of universities that have lost significant numbers of places are from the United States.

It is difficult to assess in a conclusive way the extent to which past and present excellence initiatives explain the success or demise of individual universities. The availability of additional resources is certainly a positive factor. Perhaps more important is the crucial role of governance in explaining the success of world-class universities.

Among the various governance dimensions, leadership and the mode of selection of university heads are crucial. Denmark and Finland, for instance, have moved from

a popular election process to a professional selection led by independent university boards. Analysing the leadership selection modalities for the top 100 universities in the Shanghai ARWU ranking over time shows that the number of top 100 universities whose leader is selected through a professional search increased from 71 to 77 between 2004 and 2019, while the number of ranked universities with some form of popular election went down from 28 to 18.

By contrast, the number of top-ranked universities from France and Germany, two countries where the Excellence Initiative did not include significant changes in the governance arrangements went down from seven to four, and four to three, respectively, over the last sixteen years.

4 Missing Dimensions of Academic Excellence

Many¹ researchers have documented how, under the guise of measuring research output in various forms, the rankings are mainly selling international visibility, losing key facets of a university's mission in the process.

4.1 Equity

In the search for academic excellence, many top universities have become more selective, which bears the risk of keeping talented students from low-income / low cultural capital families away. The Ivy League universities are the most selective universities in the United States, admitting one out of every 10–15 candidates. Table 1, which contrasts the proportion of Pell Grants beneficiaries enrolled in selective and less selective top US universities, offers concrete evidence of the lack of inclusion of many world-class universities.²

The socio-economic distribution of students at leading public universities in California shows clearly that achieving world-class status is not incompatible with being more inclusive. UCLA and UC-Berkeley are ranked eleventh and fifth in the world in the 2019 Shanghai ranking while having one of the highest proportions of low-income students among US research-intensive universities.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, policymakers and researchers have observed for many years the non-abating elitist nature of the top universities. Among the 132 universities operating in the United Kingdom, the bottom ten in terms of social equality at admissions were Cambridge (worst case), St Andrews, Bristol, Oxford, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, University College London, Durham, Robert Gordon, and the

¹ This section builds on earlier work by Pierre de Maret (Emeritus Rector of the Free University of Brussels) and the author. See (de Maret et al. 2018).

² Pell Grants are the main federal financial-assistance program for low-income students in the United States.

Table 1 Proportion of low-income students at top US universities

More Inclusive Universities	Proportion of Pell Grant recipients (%)	Less inclusive universities	Proportion of Pell Grant recipients (%)
University of California-Los Angeles	35.9	Stanford University	15.6
University of California-Berkeley	31.4	University of Pennsylvania	14.4
University of Southern California	23.4	Duke University	14.0
Ohio State University-Columbus	22.4	Northwestern University	14.0
New York University	21.5	Harvard University	13.0
Columbia University	21.4	Yale University	11.9
University of Missouri-Columbia	21.4	California Institute of Technology	11.3
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	21.3	University of Notre Dame	11.2

Source Carnevale and Van Der Werf (2017)

London School of Economics (Study International 2018). Five of these are among the top 100 universities in the Shanghai ranking.

By contrast, the Nordic countries are able to place universities in the top 100 with admission systems that are much more open than those of US and UK universities.

4.2 Truth

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the importance of relying on scientific evidence to drive public policy and save human lives. In the post-truth world, building up and spreading critical thinking are absolutely essential. Universities have the responsibility to teach how to distinguish real evidence from fabricated information. The former British Minister for Higher Education David Lammy observed that in “the age of populism” academics have a duty to “stand brave and tall and communicate quite strongly the dangers that could lie ahead for the global world” (Times Higher Education 2019).

Truth-seeking skills, the foundation of a genuine liberal arts education, should be at the core of every curriculum. World-class universities should lead in upholding the academic tradition of free and fair debate that has been undermined by relativism and political correctness. A good example of such practice is the yearly Lorne-Trottier Public Science Symposium Series, launched by McGill University in 2016, to communicate science responsibly to the public in these troubled times.

An important challenge in that respect is the growing tension between the search for excellence and constraints to full academic freedom, which has traditionally been regarded as a fundamental characteristic of universities. Several excellence initiatives have been launched in countries with limited democracy—China, Hungary, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Vietnam to name a few—and it remains to be seen whether top universities can operate with sustained outstanding results where academic freedom is restricted.

4.3 *Ethics*

Another central question is the extent to which world-class universities promote ethical behaviours in the way they operate as institutions and in their relationship with the outside world. This starts with upholding high principles within the university community itself to prevent and punish academic dishonesty with respect to fraud in examinations and research, as well as any form of sexual violence, discrimination, harassment and bullying. A second aspect that the rankings are not well-designed to assess is whether the graduates are well prepared ethically, besides their general education and professional training. For instance, after the 2007–2008 financial crisis triggered by the subprime mortgage crisis, itself caused by the unregulated use of derivatives, many voices challenged the lack of emphasis on corporate responsibility in the programs of business schools.

Third, world-class universities must avoid conflicts of interest in their dealings with the political and business world to preserve their intellectual independence. This requires transparency in setting and applying strict rules regarding which donors they are willing to accept fundraising contributions. The University of Hong Kong, for example, has traditionally shied away from receiving any donations from companies manufacturing arms and tobacco products. By contrast, both Harvard and MIT have been criticised in recent years for their financial ties with the Government of Saudi Arabia.

Lastly, in recent years, universities in Australia, South Africa, the UK and the USA have re-examined their past with a critical eye and acknowledged their close association with ugly moments in their country's history, such as slavery, apartheid or discrimination towards native population groups.

4.4 *Commitment*

The main aspect that the global rankings identify well is the ability of world-class universities to conduct excellent 'blue sky' research. But, the high publication count does not measure whether universities engage actively with society and the economy to help solve real problems. The search for global visibility often pushes world-class

universities to collaborate with other highly-ranked institutions in other corners of the world instead of engaging closely with their local community (Hazelkorn 2020).

While the rankings are not constructed to take this relevance dimension into consideration, an exception is the new THE impact ranking, which is based on submissions made by interested universities about their contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. Comparing the list of top 100 universities in this new ranking and with those in the Shanghai ranking shows that none of the top 20 world-class universities appear in the impact ranking, most likely because they did not show any inclination to participate. In total only 12 among the Shanghai top 100 are in the top 100 THE impact ranking.

4.5 Sustainability

The last important dimension to consider is the extent to which world-class universities operate in an environmentally-responsible manner. The University of Indonesia produces a sustainability ranking (Greenmetric ranking) based on a number of factors including the carbon footprint of each institution linked to its electricity consumption, water usage, waste management, and education and research activities in the field of climate change (UI Greenmetric n.d.). Only five universities appearing in the Shanghai top 100 ranking are also included in the Greenmetric ranking.

Finally, a growing number of universities have divested their endowment funds from investment in fossil fuel firms after sustained student campaigns. Half the UK universities have moved in that direction in the past six years. The movement has been slower in the United States.

5 Conclusion

The 2003 irruption of the Shanghai ranking has had a profound and long-lasting impact on governments and universities. Many countries have financed ambitious investment programs to upgrade their universities, in some cases even creating new institutions with the explicit aim of achieving world-class status.

Universities, in turn, have eagerly joined this new form of “brain race”. Too often, the rankings have become the new milestones guiding institutional strategic plans. While many universities all over the world have indeed improved their research performance over the past decade, there are signs that the kind of academic excellence promoted by the rankings is often side-tracking universities from contributing to progress in several crucial dimensions of human life.

The pandemic, the resulting economic crisis and the explosions of social frustration at the deeply ingrained structural racism in the United States make it all the more urgent and imperative to look at the missing dimensions in the definition of academic excellence fuelled by the global rankings. The Shanghai principles launched

in 2017 were an attempt in this direction, as a reminder to world-class university leaders of the social responsibility of their institutions (De Maret and Salmi 2018). Echoing the key principles promoted by IAU (ethics, social responsibility, academic freedom, autonomy), these Shanghai principles focus on social inclusion, scientific truth, ethical values, responsible research, and global solidarity as moral pillars for world-class universities.

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