

Are Rankings a Useful Transparency Instrument?

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Themes

1. Growing obsession with rankings
2. Do rankings measure what counts?
3. How rankings are reshaping higher education
4. Conclusions



1. Growing obsession with Rankings



Rise of Rankings

- Public calls for greater accountability and scrutiny, pressure for value-for-money, and investor confidence – especially in the current global recession;
- Students have become savvy participants, consumers and customers as the link between HE and career/salary grows;
- Performance assessment of scientific-scholarly research is increasingly important, especially for publicly funded research;
- Greater focus on outputs and performance as mechanism for financing higher education and to actively encourage differentiation;
- Comparing competitiveness of nations and knowledge producing and talent catching capacity of HEIs.



Transparency instrument

- Satisfy a ‘public demand for transparency and information that institutions and government have not been able to meet on their own’ (Usher & Savino, 2006, p38).
 - Cue to consumers re: conversion potential for occupational & graduate school attainment
 - Cue to employers what they can expect from graduates
 - Cue to government/policymakers regarding international standards & economic credibility
 - Cue to public because they are perceived as independent of the sector or individual universities.
- Today, 11 global rankings + more than 45 countries have national rankings.



Most Influential Rankings

- **Global**
 - Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) (2003)
 - *THE* QS World University Rankings (2004)
 - Webometrics (2004)
 - Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for Research Universities (Taiwan) (2007)
- **Regional**
 - AsiaWeek (2000)
 - CHE ExcellenceRanking Graduate Programmes (2007)
- **Single-country**
 - Das CHE-HochschulRanking (Germany) (1980s)
 - *US News and World Report* (US) (1980s)
 - *Sunday Times, Guardian* (UK)
 - *Asahi Shimbun* (Japan) (1994)
- **Business Schools**
 - Financial Times
 - Business Week
- **Graduate Schools**
 - *US News and World Report* Best Graduate Schools



Recent Additions

- Leiden Ranking (Centre for Science and Technology Studies [CWTS] (2008) (<http://www.cwts.nl/ranking/LeidenRankingWebSite.html>)
- World's Best Colleges and Universities (US News and World Report [US] (2008) (<http://www.usnews.com/sections/education/worlds-best-colleges/index.html>)
- Global University Rankings (RatER, Rating of Educational Resources) (2009) (<http://www.globaluniversitiesranking.org/>)
- SCImago Institutions Rankings (SIR): 2009 World Report <http://www.scimagojr.com/index.php>
- QS World University Rankings (from 2010)
- *THE* Thomson Reuters World Ranking of Universities (from 2010)
- U-Multirank (EU, 2011) <http://www.u-multirank.eu/>



2. Do rankings measure what counts?



Problems with Rankings (1)

- No such thing as an objective ranking – because:
 - The evidence is never self-evident
 - Measurements are rarely direct but consist of proxies,
 - Choice of indicators and weightings reflect value-judgements or priorities of rankers.
- Rankings do not measure what people think they measure:
 - Each system measures different things – and are not directly comparable;
 - Measure what is easy and predictable;
 - Concentrate on past performance rather than potential;
 - Emphasis on quantification as proxy for quality.



Problems with Rankings (2)

- Focus on classical definition of knowledge and scientific achievement:
 - Over-reliance on research that is easily measured;
 - Over-emphasis on bio-sciences, with limited accuracy for social science, and no humanities and arts;
 - Emphasis on quantification as proxy for quality.
- Focus on traditional outputs, e.g. peer-publication & citations:
 - Narrowly define s ‘impact’ as that which occurs only between academics;
 - Ignores/undermines engagement, knowledge exchange, technology transfer.
 - Emphasis on short-term outputs .
- Hierarchically orders/stratifies theoretical and conceptual knowledge, and their institutions (see Howard, *Chronicle of HE*, 2008).



Different Ways to Measure Quality

	BEGINNING CHARACTERISTICS	LEARNING INPUTS - STAFF	LEARNING INPUTS - RESOURCES	LEARNING ENVIRONMENT	LEARNING OUTPUTS	FINAL OUTCOMES	RESEARCH	REPUTATION
Melbourne Institute	11.0	3.5	11.0	0	12.6	4.8	40.0	17.1
Shanghai Jiao Tong ARWU	0.0	0.0	0.0	0	10.0	0.0	90.0	0.0
La Repubblica	10.0	44.4	14.6	0	10.0	0.0	20.0	0.0
Rzeczpospolita	8.0	20.5	11.5	0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
Guardian University Guide	28.0	35.0	10.0	0	10.0	17.0	0.0	0.0
Times QS World U Rankings	5.0	25.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	20.0	50.0
Maclean's U Rankings	10.7	20.0	48.3	0	5.0	0.0	0.0	16.0
US News & World Report	15.0	20.0	15.0	0	25.0	0.0	0.0	25.0
Asiaweek	25	28.3	10	0	0	0	16.7	20
Webometrics*	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	50
Usher & Savino, 2006 and Usher and Medow, 2009								

Another Way to Measure Quality

	Overall Rank	Peer Review 40%	Employer 10%	Citations 20%	Student/ Faculty 20%	Int'l Faculty 5%	Int'l Students 5%
Cambridge	2	1	1	42	20	30	40
MIT	9	6	10	5	59	351	44
Cal Tech.	10	23	142	1	66	1	69
UCL	4	22	5	68	15	41	32
Heidelberg	57	52	256	176	94	188	111
LSE	67	54	4	443	220	13	1
NUS	30	19	38	92	329	14	15
Rice	100	193	283	49	67	298	160
DIT	326	493	202	577	53	450	357

Do Rankings Measure Quality?

- Each ranking system uses different indicators with different weightings – hence each has a different concept of quality;
- Different ranking systems ‘provide consistent data for some institutions and inconsistent ones for others’ (Usher and Medow, 2009, p13);
- Emphasis on research distorts and undermines other aspects of higher education: teaching and learning, engagement, knowledge exchange and technology transfer;
- Rankings measure the benefits of age, size and money. They benefit large institutions and countries which have more researchers and hence more output.



3. How rankings are reshaping higher education



Changes within HE

- 2002 Association of Governing Boards study
 - 51% university presidents had attempted to improve their rankings;
 - 50% used rankings as internal benchmarks;
 - 35% announced the results in press releases or on the web.
 - 4% established a task force or committee to address rankings,
 - 20% ignored them (Levin, 2002, 12, 14-15).
- 2006 International survey
 - 63% HE leaders took strategic, organisational, managerial or academic action;
 - 50% use rankings for publicity press releases, official presentations, and on web;
 - 50% monitor performance of peer institutions worldwide;
 - 40% considered an HEI's rank prior to entering into discussion with them;
 - 8% took no action.



Impact on HE systems and HEIs

- Re-structuring of HE system and prioritisation of some universities :
 - France, Germany, Russia, Spain, China, Korea – among many others – have launched initiatives to create ‘world class’ universities which can achieve high rankings;
 - Size matters: mergers and acquisitions, w/ emphasis on critical mass;
 - Emphasis on elite education, and attracting international talent .
- Shaping HEI reputation – nationally and globally:
 - Resources are shifting to areas that shape prestige, with a resulting negative effect on social equity;
 - Emphasis on research in narrowest sense and away from teaching/research-informed teaching;
 - English language programming, esp. at postgraduate level.



Student Choice & Institutional Selection

- Privileges high achievers and international mobile talent – pg students significantly influenced by rankings;
 - Rankings = 6th most important factor for UK students in 2009 (HEFCE, 2008, p14);
 - Reputation most significant factor in i-Graduate survey of student choice (2010);
- Applicant behaviour and institutional selection conditioned by rankings:
 - Small changes can shift applicant rates and student choices;
 - Preference for choosing students which enhance institutional profile:
 - High achieving full-time students;
 - Less focus on widening participation or part-time students;
 - Emphasis on traditional students who complete within 'norm';
 - Use scholarships to attract talent rather than support merit.



Impact on Stakeholders

- Academic Partnerships:
 - 40% respondents said rankings integral to decision-making about international collaboration, academic programmes, research or student exchanges
 - 57% thought rankings influencing willingness of other HEIs to partner with them.
 - 34% respondents said rankings influencing willingness of other HEIs to support their institution's membership of academic or professional organisations.
- Employers have implicit rankings based on own experience which is self-perpetuating
- UK study shows employers favour graduates from more highly ranked HEIs
 - 25% of graduate recruiters interviewed 'cited league tables as their main source of information about quality and standards' (University of Sussex, 2006, 87, 80, also 87-92).



4. Conclusions



Positive and Perverse Effects

- Cross-national/jurisdictional comparisons are inevitable by-product of globalization and will intensify in the future;
- Creating sense of urgency and accelerating modernisation agenda;
 - Driving up institutional performance and providing some public accountability and transparency;
 - Pushing HE to focus on quality and accurate data collection/benchmarking.
- Reshaping HE by aligning national and institutional priorities – education and research – to indicators:
 - Distorting the focus of HE away from research-informed teaching towards research, in the narrowest sense;
 - Driving wedge between mass and elite HE institutions ;
- Challenging government, HEIs and the public to (re)think HE, and how and what should be measured.



Conclusion (1)

- Rankings are manifestation of globalization and marketization of HE. They have gained popularity because they (appear to) gauge world class status, provide comparative information and accountability, and measure global competitiveness – in a simple, user-friendly format;
- Rankings measure reputation – thus creating a circle of reinforcing and self-perpetuating benefit. Stakeholders who are influenced by reputation rather than rankings reflect similar influences.
- Policymaking by numbers:
- Quantification of performance has become a powerful tool because it gives the ‘appearance of scientific objectivity’ (Ehrenberg, 2001, p. 1);
- Absence of internationally comparable definitions and data means all rankings suffer from the same defects and distortions.



Conclusion (2)

- Public policy imperative is being lost in the (self-interest) belief that elite research universities have a bigger impact on society and the economy. This is known as the ‘Sheriff of Nottingham’ model (Currie, *Nature* 09):
 - Evidence suggests it is the total level of investment that is vital – there is no advantage to funding the brightest stars vs. funding the firmament;
 - But even in relation to scientific research, rankings do great damage – inducing HE and governments to adopt simplistic solutions and skew research agendas and policies to become what is measured.
- Growing tendency to measure outputs to ensure value-for-money, especially in ‘bad times’. History of rankings shows measuring the wrong things can produce distortions. The choice of indicators (and weightings) is therefore critical.



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<http://www.oecd.org/edu/imhe/rankings>

