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Rankings and Implications for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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Rankings and Implications for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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Pursuing Quality and Excellence

Do Rankings Measure Quality?

Using Rankings Strategically
1. PURSUING QUALITY AND EXCELLENCE
Pursuing Quality

• Quality and excellence are the main drivers impacting on and affecting higher education, nationally and globally;
• Recognition of key role higher education plays within society and as an economic driver;
• Quality assurance provides needed confidence for prospective students and employers;
• Growing necessity to regulate the marketplace;
• Society has a right to know whether its institutions are capable of meeting its expectations: value-for-money and investor-confidence.
Quality is Concern for all Stakeholders

- National geo-political *positioning and pride*;
- Beacon to attract/retain *investment, business and talent*;
- Institutional *reputation and status*;
- Performance *assessment of scientific-scholarly research*;
- Graduate *capability and opportunities*;
- Link between qualification and *career opportunities and life-style*;
- Value-for-money and return-on-(public) *investment*;
- Growing importance of *global networks*. 
What is Quality?

- No internationally agreed definition of education quality;
- No objective or value-free set of indicators;
- Rather context is important:
  - Which university is best depends upon who is asking the question, what question is being asked and the purpose;
  - Different societies have different priorities, and higher education systems produce different results depending upon what is measured, and the purpose.
Transparency Instruments

- Accreditation
- Benchmarking
- Classification
- College Guides and Social Networking
- QA, Evaluation and Assessment
- Qualifications Frameworks
- Rankings and Ratings
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Postgraduate Research
Find information on starting a postgraduate research degree and search for information on research quality and activity.
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2. DO RANKINGS MEASURE QUALITY?
Why Rankings

- Rankings appear to be a simple and easy way to measure and compare performance and productivity;
- 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);
- Global rankings reflect the realization that in a global knowledge economy, national pre-eminence is no longer enough;
How Rankings Work

• Compare institutions by using a range of indicators:
  – Indicators are chosen by the designers of each system;
  – Different indicators are weighted differently.

• Final score aggregated to single digit in descending order;

• Each indicator is considered independently from each other - with no consideration as to context, history, mission, etc.
Most Influential Rankings Today

- **Academic Ranking of World Universities** (Shanghai Jiao Tong University), 2003;
- **Webometrics** (Spanish National Research Council), 2003;
- **Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for Research Universities** (HEEACT), 2007;
- **Leiden Ranking** (Centre for Science & Technology Studies, U Leiden), 2008;
- **SCImago Institutional Rankings**, 2009;
- Russian **Global University Rankings**, 2009;
- Turkish **University Ranking by Academic Performance** (URAP) 2009;
- **Top University Rankings** (QS), 2010;
- **World University Ranking** (Times Higher Education/Thomson Reuters), 2010;
- **U-Multirank** (European Commission) 2014.
What Rankings Measure

Rankings Measure

• Bio- and medical sciences Research
• Publications in *Nature* and *Science*
• Student and Faculty Characteristics (e.g. productivity, entry criteria, faculty/student ratio)
• Internationalization
• Reputation – amongst peers, employers, students

Rankings Do Not Measure

• Teaching and Learning, incl. "added value", impact of research on teaching
• Arts, Humanities and Social Science Research
• Technology/Knowledge Transfer
• Impact and Benefit of Research
• Regional or Civic Engagement
• Student Experience
What Global Rankings tell Us

Because age and size matters, there is a super-league of large, well-endowed, comprehensive universities, usually with medical schools and in English-language countries.
Do Rankings Measure What Counts? (1)

1. **Measuring Student Entry Levels:**
   - Use national test scores etc. as proxy for educational quality;
   - But entry scores simply reflect socioeconomic advantage – and say nothing about quality of higher educational experience itself.

2. **Measuring Faculty/Student Ratio:**
   - Used as proxy for teaching quality;
   - But different meanings for different disciplines and types of learning environments, and for public and private institutions and systems;
   - Says more about the funding or efficiency level than teaching.
3. **Measuring Resources:**
   – Used as proxy for quality of the learning environment, e.g. size of the budget or the library collection;
   – But expenditure per student penalizes developing countries and new HEIs;
   – Provides "little or no information about how often and how beneficially students use these resources".

4. **Measuring Education Outputs:**
   – Focus on students who complete/graduate within the determined time-frame as a good measure of quality;
   – Educational performance is influenced by many factors, including socio-economic profile of the student population.
5. **Measuring Research Productivity:**
   - Counting peer publications and citations is most common method;
   - But,
     - Main beneficiaries are physical, life, and medical sciences;
     - Emphasis on international peer-reviewed articles can ignore national/regionally important research;
     - English language bias disadvantages countries where English is NOT native language;
     - Ignores social and economic value and benefit of research via knowledge and technology transfer.
6. **Measuring Reputation:**
   – Survey of academic peers, students, or industry stakeholders;
   – But:
     - Reputational surveys are subjective and self-perpetuating;
     - Benefits older institutions in developed countries and global cities with which there is an easy identification;
     - Not possible to assess teaching quality, especially at the international level, via reputational surveys;
     - Overestimation "related to good performance in the past, whereas underestimation may be a problem for new institutions without long traditions".
Alternative Rankings

• **Multidimensional Rankings**: user-driven whereby each individual or stakeholder group can rank according to his/her own preferences according to different characteristics, e.g. *U-Multirank*.

• **System-level Rankings** assess quality, impact and benefit of HE system as-a-whole using broad set of indicators, e.g. investment, access and participation rates, contribution of higher education and research to society, internationalisation, government policy and regulation, e.g. *Universitas 21, Lisbon Council*. 
Performance profiles (institutional level)
3. USING RANKINGS STRATEGICALLY
Why Compare Higher Education?

- Good quality, international comparative information is essential to underpin strategic leadership and decision-making at the national and institutional level;
- Enable countries/universities to gain a greater understanding of their own situation by learning from/sharing experience and “good practice”.
- Comparable information on HEIs, teaching & research makes it easier for students and researchers to make informed choices on where and what to study and where to work;
- Improved data-based or evidence-based decision-making can prompt discussions about what constitutes success and encourage benchmarking to identify and share best practices.
Rankings’ Legacy

• Rankings **purport** to measure higher education quality, but
  – Focus on *limited set of attributes* for which (internationally) comparable data is available
  – Assumes the indicator is a meaningful measure of quality
• **Nonetheless**, they have succeeded in:
  – Acting as a wake-up call about the *value of higher education*
  – Placing consideration of HE quality within *wider comparative and international framework*
  – Challenging self-perceptions. No more self-declaration
• With the onslaught of global rankings, the **HE world has become more competitive and multi-polar.**
Unintended Consequences

• Used to set national priorities and institutional strategies:
  – There are 15,000+ HEIs worldwide. But rankings concentrate on the top 100 or less than 1%;
  – Focus on “world-class university” rather than “world class system” can undermine national or regionally strategic priorities and capacity for the knowledge society;
  – Disproportionate emphasis on research can undermine teaching and learning;

• Other uses:
  – Accreditation and classification of HEIs;
  – Immigration and scholarship criteria;
Dos and Don’ts

Don’t
• Change national policies or institutional priorities to conform to rankings;
• Use rankings to inform resource allocation decisions;
• Manipulate your data in order to rise in the rankings.

Do:
• Ensure national policy and institutional priorities meet societal needs;
• Provide good information to underpin strategic decision-making and to stakeholders;
• Use rankings only as part of an overall quality assurance, assessment or benchmarking system and not as a stand-alone evaluation tool;
• Ensure policymakers, the public and the media understand the limitations of rankings.
Because rankings incentivise behaviour...

• Governments should stop obsessing about global rankings and the top 1% – they risk subverting other policy objectives in order to conform to indicators designed by others for other purposes. It is an abdication of national sovereignty;

• Quality is based more on what institutions do – rather than what they are called;

• Profiling and benchmarking should be used to improve the capacity and quality of the whole system – not simply reward the achievements of elites and flagship institutions.
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Discussion

• How much attention should universities or their governments pay to rankings?
• How can rankings aid strategic thinking?
• What kind of information should a university provide to its various stakeholders?
• If the current rankings are inappropriate, which other formats or transparency instruments might be more useful?
• Which indicators would be most/more helpful for measuring higher education quality or your university in particular?