The Obsession with Rankings in Tertiary Education: Implications for Public Policy

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Which Are The Best Universities?

Are the best universities those which best match the criteria established by the different rankings OR those that help the majority of students earn the credentials for sustainability living and employment?

Are the best universities those that contribute to new scientific discoveries and highly trained PhDs OR those that “emphasize the obligations students have to serve their communities and the nation at large”?

Are the best universities those that reinforce an elite knowledge society (where progress depends on the cutting-edge knowledge of the few) OR those that help build-up a mass knowledge society (where progress depends on the “wisdom of the many”)?
Themes

1. Putting Rankings In Context
2. Ranking Higher Education: Advantages and Disadvantages
3. What the Research Tells Us
4. Implications for Policy
1. Putting Rankings in Context
Policy Context

• Globalisation and knowledge society
  – Knowledge is key “factor in international competitiveness”
  – Importance of talent – and hence HE – for knowledge-intensive economies;
• Competition between HEIs for students, faculty, finance, researchers
  – Internationalisation of higher education
• Trend towards market-steering governance mechanisms
  – Increased emphasis on accountability/quality assurance
  – Growing need to (re)regulate market
• Increasing desire for comparative or benchmarking data
  – “Consumer” information for students/parents, and government;
  – Dissatisfaction with robustness of traditional collegial mechanisms.
Evolution Of Rankings

• Global Rankings emerged in 2003 –
  – Part of US academic system for 100 years but today popularity is worldwide;
  – Significant force impacting and influencing policymakers and the academy;

• Four phases:
  – Phase 1 (1900 -1950s) Sub-National/Elite Rankings
  – Phase 3 (2003-) Global Rankings
  – Phase 4 (2008-) Supra-national Rankings

• Today, 10 major global rankings and 150+ national/specialist rankings.
Global Rankings
(red = government sponsored)

• Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China), 2003
• **Webometrics (Spanish National Research Council, Spain), 2004**
• National Taiwan University Rankings (formerly Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for Research Universities, HEEACT), 2007
• Leiden Ranking (Centre for Science & Technology Studies, University of Leiden), 2008
• SCImago Journal and Country Rank (SJR) (Spain), 2009
• University Ranking by Academic Performance (URAP) (Informatics Institute of Middle East Technical University, Turkey), 2009
• QS World University Rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds, UK), 2010
• THE World University Ranking (Times Higher Education, UK), 2010
• **U-Multirank (European Commission, Brussels), 2014**
• Best Global Universities rankings (USNWR, US), 2014
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTIONAL</th>
<th>DISCIPLINE/ SUB-CATEGORIES</th>
<th>SPECIALIST</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• University Ranking System (Bulgaria)</td>
<td>• Dataquest (India)</td>
<td>• CollegeNET Social Mobility Index Ranking (US)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CHE-HochschulRanking (Germany)</td>
<td>• India Today (India)</td>
<td>• Georgetown Public Policy Review Placement Efficiency Ranking (US)</td>
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<td>• Expert University Ranking (Russia)</td>
<td>• Outlook (India)</td>
<td>• Metroversities (US)</td>
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<td>• Good University Guide (Australia)</td>
<td>• Le Nouvel Observateur (France)</td>
<td>• New York Times Most Economically Diverse Top Colleges (US)</td>
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<td>• Guardian University Guide (UK)</td>
<td>• National Research Council Ranking of Doctoral Programmes (US)</td>
<td>• Online Study Australia Online University Ranking List (Australia)</td>
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<td>• University Rankings of Islamic Countries (Iran)</td>
<td>• Toplawschools.com (US)</td>
<td>• Princeton Review (US)</td>
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<td>• Higher Education Commission Rankings (Pakistan)</td>
<td>• American Universities Admission Programme: Undergraduate American Universities Rankings for International Students (US)</td>
<td>• Saviours of Our Cities (US)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• National Rankings of Best Universities (Kazakhstan)</td>
<td>• US News and World Report (USNWR) Top Med Schools (US)</td>
<td>• Social Mobility Index (CollegeNet and Payscale, US)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• La Repubblica Grande Guida Università (Italy)</td>
<td>• WPROST MBA (Poland)</td>
<td>• Washington Monthly College Guide (US)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Maclean’s On Campus (Canada)</td>
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<td>• Washington Monthly Ranking of Community Colleges (US)</td>
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<td>• National Rankings of Best Universities (Kazakhstan)</td>
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<td>• Netbig Chinese University Ranking (China)</td>
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<td>• Nigeria Universities Commission Ranking (OHEC (Thailand)</td>
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<td>• Perspektywy University Ranking (Poland)</td>
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<td>• Ranking U-Sapiens (Colombia)</td>
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<td>• Sunday Times Good University Guide (Ireland)</td>
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<td>• Times Higher Education University Guide (UK)</td>
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<td>• Top 200 University Rankings (Ukraine)</td>
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<td>• URANK-rank (Sweden)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• US News and World Report (USNWR) College Rankings (US)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2. Ranking Higher Education: Advantages and Disadvantages
Who Uses Rankings

Students, public opinion and government are biggest users of rankings & more likely to be negatively influenced

- Domestic undergraduate students
- Internationally mobile students and faculty
- Postgraduate students
- Government/Policymakers
- Academic partners and academic organisations
- Employers
- Sponsors, philanthropists and private investors
- Industrial partners
- The public and public opinion
- Ranking agencies/organisations
What People Want To Know

• Teaching and learning: environment and quality;
• Fields of specialisation/department: level of intensity, expertise, quality and competence;
• Faculty quality: qualifications, expertise and track-record, research,
• Efficiency level: how much output vis-a-vis funding;
• Graduate expectations: career, salary and lifestyle;
• Employability of graduates: trends and competences;
• Research capacity of HEI & research team;
• Research infrastructure: level of use and efficiency;
• Performance benchmarked regionally, nationally & internationally;
• Attraction capacity and internationalisation;
• Etc.
Advantages

• Provide **simple, quick and easy way** to measure/compare HE performance and “quality”;

• Place HE within **wider comparative and international framework**;
  – Inform student choice and stakeholder opinion;
  – Beacon to attract/retain mobile capital and talent;
  – Performance assessment of scientific-scholarly research;
  – Signal of what to expect upon graduation and from graduates;
  – **Value-for-money and return-on-(public) investment**;

• Accountability tool, esp. in societies/for HEIs where QA culture/practices weak or immature;

• **Heighten attention to quality and drive-up performance**:
  – Accelerate “modernisation” agenda;
  – **Emphasize institutional strategic decision-making and data collection/analysis.**
Disadvantages

- Measure/compare “whole institutions” in different context using same indicators;
  - Undermines mission diversity, and ignores diversity of student cohort;
  - Many of indicators are measures of wealth and not educational quality;
  - Rankings focus too narrowly on elite universities and research;
  - Drives isomorphism/norming around single model of HE or quality/excellence;
- Academic quality is complex and not easily reduced to quantification;
  - Use of proxy variables can misrepresent and lead to unintended consequences;
  - Difficulty obtaining meaningful indicators and (international) comparative data;
- Hierarchical system leads to simplistic comparisons: whereas, statistical differences are insignificant;
- Indicators can encourage perverse behaviour – over-emphasis on small set of indicators.
What Rankings Measure

Global Rankings Measure

• Physical, Life, 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

Global 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
Do Rankings Measure What Counts? (1)

1. **Measuring Student Entry Levels/National Test Scores:**
   - Proxy for educational quality;
   
   **BUT:**
   
   - Entry scores reflect socioeconomic advantage – and say nothing about quality of higher educational experience itself.

2. **Measuring Faculty/Student Ratio:**
   - 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:
   – Proxy for quality of 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/Completion and Graduation Rates:
   – Proxy for quality of learning environment;

BUT:
   – 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 via reputational surveys;
- Response rate is uneven and episodic.
## Global Rankings Weightings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Beginning Characteristics</th>
<th>Learning Inputs – Faculty</th>
<th>Learning Inputs – Resources</th>
<th>Learning Environment</th>
<th>Learning Outputs</th>
<th>Final Outcomes</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Reputation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARWU (China)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Global (USNWR, US)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nat’ Taiwan U. (NTU)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>QS (UK)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>70</td>
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<td>SCImago (Spain)</td>
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<td>THE (UK)</td>
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<td>69.75</td>
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<td>THE-QS (UK)</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URAP (Turkey)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB. U-Multirank is not included; it has individual indicators but they cannot be combined into composites or a weighting.
# National Rankings Weightings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginning Characteristics</th>
<th>Learning Inputs – Faculty</th>
<th>Learning Inputs – Resources</th>
<th>Learning Environment</th>
<th>Learning Outputs</th>
<th>Final Outcomes</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Reputation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guardian University Guide (UK)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>La Repubblica Grande Guida (Italy)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maclean’s (Canada)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Rankings, Kazakhstan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netbig (China)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspektywy/ Rzeczpospolita Uniwersytet Europe (Poland)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Times (Ireland)</td>
<td>28.571</td>
<td>28.571</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28.571</td>
<td>14.286</td>
<td>14.286</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>USNWR College Rankings (US)</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. What the Research Tells Us
Institutional Reaction: Some Findings

- 83% HEIs unhappy with their rank compared with 58 percent in 2006;
- 32% HEIs want to be first nationally compared with 19 percent in 2006;
- 29% HEIs want to be in the top 5% internationally compared with 24 percent in 2006;

- Overwhelming majority HEIs use rankings to inform strategic decisions, set targets or shape priorities, and inform decisions about international partnerships;
- 84% HEIs use rankings to monitor peer institutions in their own country, and ~77% monitor peers worldwide;
- 84% HEIs have a formal internal mechanism to review their institution’s rank, and 40% - this is led by Vice Chancellor, President or Rector;
Groups Most Influenced By Rankings

- Prospective students: 78%
- Prospective researchers: 66%
- Partner or prospective partner institutions: 65%
- Ministry or authority in charge of higher education: 63%
- Prospective teaching staff: 58%
- Parents: 52%
- Benefactors, sponsors, investors: 50%
- Funding bodies or similar organisations: 50%
- Employers: 48%
- Alumni: 39%
- Regional/local authorities or similar agencies: 39%
- None of these: 5%

N = 171. The results do not add up to 100% as respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies.
# Reasons For Monitoring Other Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for monitoring other institutions</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark purposes (compare yourself to other institutions) at national level</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark purposes at international level</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing/maintaining national collaborations</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing/maintaining international collaborations</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing/maintaining staff exchange</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing/maintaining student exchange</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 137. The results do not add up to 100% as respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies.
How Rankings Affect Reputation?

- No impact: 5%
- In a generally positive way: 25%
- In a generally negative way: 7%
- I don't know, I could not tell: 63%

N = 171
Rankings For Marketing Or Publicity

- Yes, always: 30%
- Occasionally: 20%
- Only if the position has changed from previous editions: 4%
- No: 46%

N = 171
Student Reaction: Some Findings

- **80% undergraduate and postgraduate** (taught and research) students have a **high interest in rankings**, with no real difference between undergraduate and postgraduate students (i-graduate, 2014);
- **High achieving and high socio-economic students** are most likely to make choices based on non-financial factors, e.g. reputation and rankings;
- **International students continue to rate reputation and position** in rankings as key determinants in their choice of institution, programme and country;
- **Strong correlation between rankings, perceptions of quality, institutional reputation and choice of destination**, at the national and institutional level;
Students Most Influenced by Rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Other (professional studies, lifelong learning provision...)</th>
<th>Entering doctoral level</th>
<th>Entering Master level</th>
<th>Entering Bachelor level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International non-European students</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European students</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National students</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local students</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 133. The results do not add up to 100% as respondents to this question could indicate multiple replies.
### Top 10 Factors Influencing Student Choice, 2010 and 2014

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<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Reputation (value in my career) of a qualification from this university</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reputation of this Institution</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Quality of research</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Reputation of the education system in this country</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Personal safety and security</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cost of education (tuition fees)</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Specific programme title</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Cost of living</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Earning potential of my chosen degree from this Institution</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Position in ranking/league tables</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: © International Graduate Insight Group Ltd. (i-graduate), 2014*

NB. For 2010 figures, “n/a” means the “Factor” listed for 2014 did not feature in the top ten most important factors in 2010.
4. Implications for Policy
Why Assess Higher Education?

- **Cross-national comparisons are inevitable** by-product of globalization and will intensify in the future;
- Systems and HEIs must be accountable and responsible – whether dependent on public or private funding;
- Measuring HE performance and productivity, student learning outcomes etc. is **unquestionably important**;
- 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”;
- Provide **assurances to the public** about the contribution of HE to society and economy.
Rankings-led Strategy

• Quality traditionally assessed via “self-regulating” QA and peer-review, but:
  – QA can be difficult to compare internationally;
  – Interest in going beyond measuring and evaluating quality to linking performance and productivity to resource allocation.

• Rankings have filled gap:
Many governments and institutions have adopted a rankings-led strategy:
  – Restructure HE/research systems/HEIs to create “world-class” or flagship universities;
  – Embed indicators in strategic planning, and use to measure performance and reward success;
  – Use indicators for scholarships, and to target collaboration and professionals;
  – Re-orientation in research priorities towards "reputational" disciplines,
  – Etc.
What Are You Trying To Achieve?

• Is the aim to create **World-class universities or a World class system** –
  – Should the aim be to *improve* the capacity and quality of the whole system OR *reward* the achievements of elite flagship institutions?
  – Should resources be directed to the few universities which perform best against rankings OR should national policy avoid distortions in resource allocation and ensure resources meet the needs of the wider tertiary education sector?
• Does a rankings-led strategy strengthen national competitiveness OR undermine national sovereignty?
• Should you use indicators chosen by rankings organisation OR develop indicators which meet the strategic requirements of your country or institution?
• Should HE data be collected and monetised by commercial organisations or by an independent international organisation?
Beware Unintended Consequences (1)

• Prestige and reputation become dominant drivers of the “system” leading to steep(er) hierarchy – rather than pursuance of equity and diversity;

• Quality is a complex concept:
  – Many indicators measure wealth/socio-economic advantage, and privilege the most resource-intensive institutions/students;

• Concentrating resources and research activity may be counter-productive and undermine national economic capacity
  – Widens privilege gap, affecting other HEIs and their students, but may also threaten the cities and regions in which they reside, exaggerating long-standing inequality issues;
  – No evidence more concentrated national systems generate higher citation impact;
  – Financial costs can be very high – and threaten other policy goals.
Obsession with Elites

- ~18,000 HEIs worldwide (as per WHED data).
- 196m worldwide enrolments 2012 (WB)
  - 20m HE students in EU28 (20.5m w/ Switzerland)
- Rankings as top 100 = 0.5% HEIs or 0.4% students worldwide
- Obsession with rankings is skewing our understanding of student cohort;
Beware Unintended Consequences (2)

• Rankings affect/reorient research priorities and practices:
  – Emphasis on global impact may undermine regionally relevant activity/outcomes;
  – Measures past performance rather than potential;
  – Fails to capture activity across the full research-innovation eco-system;
• Because rankings incentivise behaviour, what is measured is critical. Can’t control how others will use the rankings.
  – Is it best to go ahead with imperfect indicators or wait until perfect?
Dos and Don’ts

Don’t

• Use rankings as a stand-alone evaluation tool;
• Use rankings to inform policy or resource allocation decisions;
• Incentivise perverse behaviour by the choice of indicators;
• Direct resources to a few elite universities and neglect the needs of the wider tertiary education sector and society.

Do:

• Ensure rankings are aligned with national values and objectives, have a clear purpose;
• Recognize diversity of HEIs, and take different missions and goals into account;
• Ensure indicators are fit-for-purpose, and measure outcomes in preference to inputs whenever possible;
• Understand the limitations of rankings, and the unintended consequences.
Higher Education Policy Research Unit (HEPRU)

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Specifics Actions: Rankings-led Strategy

- Restructuring of national systems;
- Reshaping of national priorities;
- Refocusing of institutional priorities;
- Reorganising the HEI, institutional departments and hierarchy of disciplines;
- Emphasis on research vs. teaching; postgraduate vs. undergraduate – with implications for the academic profession;
- Changes in research practice: language, publication, orientation, basic/applied, etc.
- Influence on stakeholders – students, governments, business/employers, investors, public, etc.
Alternative Rankings

• Multi-dimensional Rankings/Banding
  – U-Multirank (EU)
  – CHE-HochschulRanking (Germany)

• System-level Rankings
  – Lisbon Council (Brussels)
  – Universitas 21 (Australia)

• Measuring Value to Community, Value-for-Money
  – Washington Monthly (US)
  – Postsecondary Institution Rating System (US Government)
Alternatives To Rankings

- Institutional profiling
  - U-Map (EU)
  - HE Performance Evaluation Framework (Ireland, Norway, Australia)
- Assessment of Learning Outcomes
  - Survey of Student Engagement (US + Canada, Australia, China, South Africa, New Zealand, Ireland)
  - Degree Qualifications Profile (Lumina Foundation, US)
  - AHELO: Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (OECD)
  - Learning Gain (Germany, Australia, Brazil, Colombia Canada, China, Russia, US, UK)
  - Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) (US)
- Open/On-line and Social Media
  - UniStats (UK), MyUniversity (Australia)
  - Rate-my-Professor