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RANKINGS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE: DO RANKINGS MEASURE QUALITY?

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The growing influence of academic rankings

Over the last decade, rankings have become a significant force impacting on and influencing higher education, students and parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders. While they have been part of U.S. academic system for 100 years, global rankings are a more recent phenomenon.

The arrival of global rankings coincided with the intensification of competition in the international economy and increasing cross-border student mobility. They have also fulfilled an information deficit. While there are various evaluation and benchmarking instruments around, there has been growing dissatisfaction with the robustness of these tools. By placing higher education institutions (HEIs) within a wider international and comparative framework, rankings have managed to say something about quality in a simple, accessible and provocative way.

Today, there are ten major global rankings. The most well-known are: *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China), *QS World University Rankings* (Quacquarelli Symonds, UK), *THE World University Ranking* (Times Higher Education, UK), and *U-Multirank* (European Commission, Brussels). *U.S. News and World Report Best Colleges* has been around since the mid-1980s, and recently launched its global version, *Best Global Universities Rankings*.

Around the world, there are over 150 country-based or specialist rankings – and the number is growing. This includes rankings which measure and compare performance at the institutional and discipline level, and those which focus on societal impact, value-for-money and affordability, environmental awareness, etc. Some rankings specialize on regional comparisons for Asia, Latin America or Middle East and North Africa countries. There are also a small number of system-level rankings. With some exceptions, most rankings are commercial operations.

What are Rankings?

Rankings work by comparing HEIs using a range of indicators, which are usually weighted according to priority. There is no such thing as an objective ranking; the choice of indicators and their weightings reflect the value judgements of the ranking organisation. Each indicator is considered independently from each other with no consideration as to context, history, mission, etc. The final score is aggregated to a single digit in descending order, often referred to as a “league table.”

Rankings are used to inform student choice and stakeholder opinion, and to assess the performance of scientific-scholarly research. Research has shown that students, public opinion and government are the biggest users of rankings. For a government, doing well in rankings can heighten a country’s status, and help attract foreign-direct investment and talented students and professionals. Because of these consequences, rankings have become inculcated into higher education strategic decision-making and institutional research.

While rankings are widely used they are also broadly critiqued. One of the main criticisms is that rankings use the same set of indicators to measure HEIs operating in very different national settings and meeting a diverse set of needs. This undermines mission distinctiveness, ignores diversity amongst the student cohort, and promotes a single model of higher education excellence. Rankings are a hierarchical system, signalling some HEIs or disciplines are more important than others. But, academic quality is not easily reduced to measures of quantification.

Do Rankings Measure Quality?

Rankings purport to measure and compare higher education performance and “quality.” But, determining “which university is best” depends upon who is asking and why. After-all, there are over 18,000 HEIs worldwide, but rankings focus predominantly on the top 100 or less than 0.5 percent.

Global rankings usually focus on bio- and medical science research; student and faculty characteristics (e.g. research productivity, entry criteria, faculty/student ratio); internationalization; and reputation amongst peers, employers and students. They do not include measures of teaching and learning; arts, humanities and social science research; regional or civic engagement; and the student experience. National rankings are broader in scope because of the existence of and access to an array of data sources.

To get around problems of inadequate data, rankings use proxies. But, this can easily lead to simplistic comparisons and conclusions. A few examples:

- Student entry scores are often used to gauge the quality of the student, but research has shown that entry scores simply reflect socioeconomic advantage and say nothing about quality of the higher educational experience itself. Student completion or graduation rates are similarly influenced by student profile characteristics.
- The faculty/student ratio is regularly used as a proxy for teaching quality. But, evidence on the impact of class size on student performance is mixed, and the data is open to "gaming." There are differences across disciplines and types of learning environments, and for public and private institutions and systems. Ultimately, the faculty/student ratio may say more about the funding or efficiency level than the quality of teaching.
- The size of the budget or the library is often considered a proxy for the quality of the learning environment. But this provides little information about how these resources are used or how students benefit. At a time of massive expansion in higher education provision around the world and increasing use of digital resources, measuring expenditure can penalize developing countries and newer HEIs.
- Reputational surveys are increasingly used to garner world-wide opinion, but responses are very subjective and the response rate is very low. They benefit older institutions in developed countries and global cities with which there is easy identification. It is not possible to assess institutional or teaching quality in this way.

Rankings and Quality Assurance

Over the last decade, there has been an explosion in what are euphemistically called transparency and accountability instruments and tools, operating in tandem but differing with respect to purpose, policy orientation and user. Rankings are part of this trend but they differ substantially from quality assurance (QA).

Quality assurance derives from a strong ethos of institutional autonomy. QA relies upon peer review conducted at the institutional or sub-institutional level. It embraces a strong commitment to quality improvement and enhancement rather than measurement.

Today, traditional "self-regulating" aspects of academic QA are coming under scrutiny. From an external perspective, the language used in the reports can be difficult to interpret and institutional performance is not easily comparable, especially internationally. There is also a growing public interest in going beyond simply measuring and evaluating quality to linking performance and productivity to resource allocation. Accordingly, there has been a tendency to integrate rankings with other QA processes or to use them for benchmarking, accreditation and/or exposing poor performance.

What's Next?

Quality and excellence are key differentiators in the national and global market. Whether we like rankings or not, they have succeeded in drawing attention to how we assess and compare HEIs and what these assessments mean in terms of quality. In a globalized world, students, graduates and employers, and society overall, require confidence.

The depth of the global economic crisis has focused attention on the capacity of HEIs to meet the needs of national economies, and to respond to concerns about graduate employability and affordability. Drawing on the Bologna experience, there has been a noticeable shift to measuring teaching and learning outcomes that allow us to judge whether graduates have the threshold qualities we expect. Institutional and country-based evaluations are rapidly being overtaken by international efforts. Rankings initially filled this gap but they focus too narrowly on elite universities and research.

Alternatives such as *U-Multirank* and *U21 Ranking of National Higher Education Systems* embrace a greater diversity of HEIs, and look at the over all capacity of higher education to bring benefit to society, respectively. On-line country-level profiling tools are being developed to provide quick comparative data on university performance and productivity. In the United States, the *Postsecondary Institution Rating System* (PIRS) aims to link access, affordability and outcomes. With the exception of the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER), several commercial initiatives are busy monetising higher education data. Social media sites may morph into a *TripAdvisor*-like service.

In the early days, the emphasis was on quality assurance and student choice; today, the ground is shifting between autonomy and accountability, and between steering and regulation. In response, two actions are essential. i) Higher education should become more actively engaged in the global conversation about quality, and identify meaningful measures which can demonstrate value and contribution. ii) Higher Education, along with key stakeholders, should agree upon a common international database to be held by a not-for-profit international organisation.

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