Can rankings support universities' quest for excellence?

Dr Elizabeth Gadd @LizzieGadd
The rise of rankings
Aren’t they just harmless curiosities?

- Governments invest in ranking-climbing programmes
- Governments merge institutions to ‘win’ at ranking
- Governments use them for decision-making
- Students use them to decide where to study
- Faculty use them to decide where to work
- Where there’s a prize, there’s a game…
Government-run university excellence initiatives

- Taiwan “Development plan for world class universities and research centers of excellence”
- Russia “Academic Excellence Initiative” Project 5-100
- China “Double First Class Initiative” 42 world-class HEIs by 2050
- Japan “Top Global University Project”
University mergers

How France overcame the odds to build a research mega-campus

The huge Paris-Saclay University has earned a top international ranking – but researchers say it’s too soon to judge whether the model is a success.

Barbara Casasus

Rankings tail wags the strategy dog

If the ARC’s research metrics are abolished they will be replaced by commercially-motivated providers of league tables and research metrics – when other nations are working on new ways of assessment

by CAMERON NEYLON and JAMES WILSDON

WA vice-chancellors were knocked for six last week when the state government sprung a structural review on the sector. Its ostensible goal is to test the ground for a merger of four West Australian universities (Curtin, Edith Cowan, Murdoch and UWA) on the basis that a combined behemoth would somehow "rocket up global rankings".
To be eligible for a High Potential Individual (HPI) visa, you must have been awarded a qualification by an eligible university.

Where you studied
The list of eligible universities is based on rankings of universities from around the world.
organisational data on 102 English universities from 2008 to 2017, we find that the rank a university occupies in league tables affects all universities except elite universities, controlling for previous level of financial sustainability and institutional level differences. We further show that this relationship is partly explained by universities’ income from tuition fees. The findings document universities’ financial vulnerability to rankings in quasi-markets of higher education and the reinforcement of elite status as a positional good.
Investment in ranking improvement

Dynamic and vibrant, Durham University Business School is one of Durham University’s four Faculties and is comprised of three research-intensive departments: Accounting, Economics and Finance, and Management and Marketing. Known for its global reputation, its impact on policy and practice and its strong focus on ethics, responsibility and sustainability, the School aims to be a leading European business school with a strong global presence by 2027.

The School currently has 180 academic and teaching staff, with plans and resource commitments to grow to 230 by 2027. The School has a high-quality portfolio of programmes at undergraduate, masters and doctoral level, across all subject areas. The School’s student population is around 4000, across undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes, attracting a talented and diverse student intake (with over 130 nationalities).

Our vision is to lead business thought and practice to improve global wealth and well-being. Our associated mission is to create, share and use knowledge to deliver equitable and sustainable futures around
Gaming…and cheating
Trickle-down effect
CoARA Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment

Core commitments

1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research.
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators.
3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index.
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment.
But shouldn’t universities be accountable?

• Yes!
• But accountable to whom?
• Who appointed the rankings?
• To whom are they accountable?
• Shouldn’t universities be holding the rankings to account?
If you need a league table to tell you what matters, are you really a university?
ARE THEY TRUE?
The research question

- Which is the best university in the world?
- Best at what?
- What are the characteristics of a top university
- …and in what proportion?
Methods

• Indicator validity
• Data quality
• Sensitivity
• Error bars
## Indicator validity

### 3. Indicators and Weights for ARWU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Education</td>
<td>Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals</td>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Faculty</td>
<td>Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals</td>
<td>Award</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Faculty</td>
<td>Highly Cited Researchers</td>
<td>HiCi</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Output</td>
<td>Papers published in Nature and Science*</td>
<td>N&amp;S</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Output</td>
<td>Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index</td>
<td>PUB</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Performance</td>
<td>Per capita academic performance of an institution</td>
<td>PCP</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data quality

Ranking surveys are “unscientific straw polls”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>League table metric</th>
<th>Columbia</th>
<th>Prof Thaddeus’s estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate classes with under 20 students</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
<td>62.7% to 66.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time faculty with PhD or terminal degree</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent faculty that is full-time</td>
<td>96.5%</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student–faculty ratio</td>
<td>6 to 1</td>
<td>11 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial resources per student</td>
<td>$3.1 billion</td>
<td>$289 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six-year graduation percentage</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Bielefeld’s 120-place rise in the ranking was, our analysis showed, clearly caused by one scholar.”
Honest reporting: CWTS Leiden Ranking stability intervals
Reporting

Adrian Barnett, Elizabeth Gadd, University League
Tables have no Legs to Stand on, *Significance*, Volume 19, Issue 4, August 2022, Pages 4–7, https://doi.org/10.1111/1740-9713.01663

Figure 2: Total citation counts from 1,225 universities plus-and-minus an assumed 10% error.
ARE THEY FAIR?
Characteristics of a highly-ranked HEI

• Old
• Large
• Wealthy
• Research-intensive
• Science-focussed
• English-speaking
• ‘Global North’
Location of journals used in THE & QS Rankings

Arianna Becerril-García, Responsible Research Assessment Conference, GRC, November 2020
Location of top 20 HEIs in THE World Ranking
Location of top 20 HEIs in *THE* Impact Ranking
Countries in which high potential individuals can be found according the UK government

World-class Universities? Interrogating the Biases and Coloniality of Global University Rankings

UNU-IIGH Briefing Paper, February 2023
Yale, Harvard and UC Berkeley law schools withdraw from US News rankings

Both law schools say US News & World Report's annual rankings are in conflict with commitments to diversity and affordability.

Students at Harvard Law school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yale and Harvard appear to be the first to opt out of the US News rankings. Photograph: Steven Senne/AP

In the most dramatic rebuke of the US News & World Report's colleges and universities rankings to date, Yale and Harvard announced on Wednesday they will stop participating in the magazine's law school rankings, citing frustrations with the list's methodology.

Harvard Leads an Exodus of Medical Schools Withdrawing from US News Rankings

The nation's top-ranked medical schools have stated they will no longer participate in annual rankings with U.S. News, citing methodological and philosophical frustrations.

By Alexandra Tamasian-Pappady — 01/24/23 6:37pm

Harvard Medical School was the first to withdraw from med school rankings. (Photo by David L. Ryan/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)
“Universities with frequent QS-related contracts had an increase of 0.75 standard deviations (~140 positions) in QS World University Rankings … over five years, regardless of changes in the institutional quality.”
About The World 100

The World 100 is focused on improving and maintaining the reputation, communications, strategy, crisis, marketing, and international partnerships of the world’s best universities via our Reputation Network, consultancy, research, events and more.

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Imagine a game of football in which a referee is also the coach of one of the teams playing. Crazy, right? You know what's crazier? The audience believing that a fair game is possible.
ARE THEY HELPFUL?
Do they help students?

- Rankings offer no/poor assessments of teaching quality
The streetlight effect

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This is where you lost your wallet?

No, I lost it in the park, but this is where the light is.
Do they help students?

• Students aren’t looking for a good place to study…
• Students are looking for a good place to put on their CV
“Post-secondary education has become a competition for prestige. And rankings...have become the primary signifiers of prestige.”

Professor Colin Diver, “Breaking Ranks”
False signifiers of prestige

- Rankings for universities
- Journal Impact Factors for journals
- H-indices for faculty

- It’s not the indicators but the prestige economy that’s the problem
Do they help the sector to do better?

- Better or best?
- Diversity or homogeneity?
- Inspiring winners or making losers out of everyone?
- Encouraging collaboration or competition?
Perhaps the better question is, who stands most to benefit from university rankings?

- The rankers
- The highly ranked
How do we tackle the prestige economy?

• Redefine prestige
  – New definitions need to displace legacy definitions

• Educate that ‘excellence’ cannot be counted
  – Seek better ways of recognising quality
What can institutions do?

- **Accepting** the rankings is an unacceptable position for the thinking university.
- **Rejecting** the rankings amounts to financial and reputational suicide
- “If you’re not part of the **solution**, you’re part of the problem”
1. Sign the Agreement on Advancing Research Assessment

..and join the Coalition on Reforming Research Assessment (CoARA)
2. Sign up to More Than Our Rank

“The European University Association (EUA) is pleased to provide its support to the INORMS “More Than Our Rank” initiative...EUA believes that the initiative will have an important role in drawing attention to the broad diversity of practices and activities that should be part of a responsible assessment system.”

https://inorms.net/more-than-our-rank/
3. Support initiatives to provide better forms of university assessment

“Profiles not rankings”
4. Hold the university rankings to account

Thanks for listening

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- https://inorms.net/activities/research-evaluation-group/