

When Rankings are Urging “One Size Fits All!”

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Over the last two decades, an increasing trend to classify and rank higher education has set forth. This trend started in the United State of America, with *U.S. News and World Report*, as the first and most prominent university-ranking model for the country. Similar ranking systems spread like wild fire and are being used at a national level in many countries. However, recently these classifications have crossed national borders producing international comparisons identifying “World-Class Universities.” The first one to do this, in 2003, was the Institute of Higher Education of the Jiao Tong University in Shanghai that published the Academic Ranking of World Universities, also commonly referred to as the Shanghai Ranking. This ranking has produced a global impact with a wide spectrum of reaction (Marginson and van der Wende 2007). Soon after, other rankings appeared with some different indicators presenting alternatives, although all of them ponder research as a central feature for higher education. Examples of these are the *Times Higher Education* (2004) and the QS Stars University rankings (2010). Recently, the *U.S. News and World Report* has also created its own version of “World-Class Universities” based on QS Stars’ database.

These rankings were highly publicized, almost instantly, as real measurements of quality (Eff, Klein, and Kyle 2011). The Shanghai Ranking produced a considerable impact on many policy makers around the world (Rauhvargers 2011). This fact was associated with competing in a globalized world where universities look for the best human resources to fuel their economies through new ideas that transfer innovation and create jobs. Many Latin American countries promoted increasing amount of funds through policies that reinforced the

importance of research in its multiple outputs. Moreover, assessment and accrediting agencies are weighing research as a central indicator of quality. Several government assessment policies have underscored research productivity as a defining characteristic for a university that strives for a prominent position in a globalized world (van Raan 2005).

This way, competition has become furious and very much unfair if one looks into the indicators used to rank what is understood as excellence. As it is well documented, definition of quality is hardly standardized as these international rankings promote. Now, can existing rankings be real tools for assessing universities’ quality? What are some of the inconsistencies of actual rankings, and is there any alternative path to rank at all? These are some of the questions this paper seeks to answer.

Challenges of Existing Rankings

These world rankings were highly publicized, almost instantly, as real measurements of quality (Marginson and van der Wende 2007). It is important to remark that rankings and evaluations are different concepts, although they are related. When a university is assessed, it is against a set of benchmarks that an organization, such as an accrediting body, agrees to use as quality control. Universities or academic programs may pass or fail the required indicators. Many of the evaluation indicators are qualitative and are intended to guide institutions in a continuous toward complex views of quality. On the other hand, rankings set quantitative indicators that allow them to compare similar institutions. These benchmarks are combined into an index that allows rank institutions in a scale that normally goes from 0 to 100.

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TABLE 1
CRITERIA AND INDICATORS FOR THE ACADEMIC RANKING OF WORLD UNIVERSITIES (ARWU)

Criteria	Indicator	Code	Weight
Quality of Education	Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	Alumni	10%
Quality of Faculty	Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals (Not included Peace and Literature Prizes)	Award	20%
	Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories (Thompson ISI website)	HiCi	20%
Research Output	Papers published in Nature and Science (With different weights for order and repetition of affiliation)	N&S	20%
	Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-expanded and Social Science Citation Index	PUB	20%
Per Capita Performance	Per capita academic performance of an institution (the weighted scores of the above five indicators divided by the number of full-time equivalent academic staff)	PCP	10%
Total			100%

Source: Shanghai Jiao Tong University's (2011) Institute of Higher Education.

TABLE 2
CRITERIA AND INDICATORS FOR THE *TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION (THE)*

Criteria	Indicator	Description	Weight
Teaching	Teaching reputation	Perceived reputation for teaching from international surveys (16,000-plus responses)	15 %
	Staff to students	This staff-student ratio intends to be a proxy for teaching quality	4.5 %
	Doctorate to bachelor	Institutions with a high density of research students are more knowledge-intensive and it is a marker of a research-led teaching environment valued by undergraduates and postgraduates alike.	2.25 %
	Doctorate awarded	Doctorates awarded by an institution, scaled against its size as measured by the number of academic staff it employs.	6 %
	Univ. income	It indicates the general status of an institution and gives a broad sense of the infrastructure and facilities available to students and staff.	2.25 %
Research	Acad. peer review	University's reputation for research excellence among its peers, based on the 16,000-plus responses to our annual academic reputation survey.	18 %
	Research income	This category also looks at university research income, scaled against staff numbers and normalized for purchasing-power parity.	6 %
	Research volume	Number of papers published in the academic journals indexed by Thomson Reuters per academic, scaled for a university's total size and also normalized for subject. This gives an idea of an institution's ability to get papers published in quality peer-reviewed journals.	6 %
Citations	Research influence	It looks at the role of universities in spreading new knowledge and ideas. The data are drawn from the 12,000 academic journals indexed by Thomson Reuters' Web of Science database and include all indexed journals published from 2006.	30 %
Industry income	Innovation	This category seeks to capture such "knowledge transfer" by looking at how much research income an institution earns from industry, scaled against the number of academic staff it employs.	2.5 %
Int'l Outlook: People	Students: Undergrad and grad	The ability of a university to attract undergraduates and graduates from all over the planet.	2.5 %
	Faculty	Competition for the best faculty from around the globe.	2.5 %
	Int'l research influence	The proportion of a university's total research journal publications that have at least one international co-author and reward higher volumes.	2.5 %
Total			100 %

Source: Times Higher Education (2012).

Although rankings can be useful to determine how well institutions do regionally or even internationally, they are controversial and far from neutral. One may ask, what are the indicators used to rank universities? Tables 1 and 2 show a global view of parameters and their power within the two most important ranking scales.

Even though the *THE* ranking has added teaching among its indicators, the overall emphasis is on research and its products. In the case of the Shanghai Ranking, most of its benchmarks are highly associated to research as well. Several studies have proved that there are important inconsistencies and subjectivity associated with the way both rankings' criteria are chosen (Archibald and Feldman 2008; Burness 2008; Eckles 2010). In addition, some researchers have questioned the accuracy of some the indicators (van Raan 2005; Huang 2011). Universities may rank very differently depending on indicators and the weight given to each one. This leads to the problem of trying to highlight one model of higher education over others. Rankings are actually reflecting dominant models of tertiary education. Their way of measuring education quality is after a specific higher education pattern. Is this something wrong? Well, not if it is presented as one of several models rather than as "the" model for tertiary education. There are several reasons why it is important to avoid purporting only one dominant higher education model.

First, most of these rankings honor research as the central characteristic for a quality university. All universities should carry on some research, but achieving the most cited and selective journals and have Nobel prizes is a task for well-equipped and funded institutions. This is doable for a particular group of institutions that publish many English journals, have the most advanced labs, a wide range of the best national and international researchers with a strong commitment to the applied sciences. But how many institutions match such a description? Even in the United States, a front-runner in both of the worldwide rankings highlighted in this article, only a reduced group of universities can really compete for a relevant position.

Second, what about different models of education? There are thousands of training institutions that will not

develop a pattern as described by the above two tables. Is that incorrect or falling short? It all depends on the model and purpose of the institution. The for-profit sector is growing like wild fire in many countries. One may question whether they are doing a good job, but it is at least interesting to see how millions are taking this route. Institutions like the for-profit Universidad del Valle de Mexico, are gaining accreditation through the same pattern traditionally given to only private non-profit higher education institutions. What about distance education? For instance, the Virtual University of Monterrey within the Tec on Monterrey, Mexico is offering 16 master's online degree programs and one online-based PhD program. Thousands of students across Latin America are completing master's degrees, without even one on-site visit.

Third, what about other indicators of performance besides research? None of the most prominent rankings take into account community engagement, employees' perceptions, values, learning outcomes, and graduates' impact, to mention a few indicators that could have substantial impact. These are very important components that reflect higher education institution missions. There is no doubt that universities are places preparing people to be successful professionals, who contribute to their disciplines, but they should also strive for training persons with values that impact their communities. Many of the institutions that are not listed on the global rankings contribute in many unclassified ways. For instance, they function as a social "equalizer" giving opportunities to poor and undereducated students improving their chances to become middle class professionals.

Now, here is a question someone may ask: Is it possible to measure some of these extra benchmarks, since they are rather difficult to measure, and combine them into a ranking system? The following section approaches this complex question.

Creating Alternative Models

A ranking system is needed that starts from the assumption that there are multiple models of higher education institutions and that they have various missions

and serve many different kinds of students. To approach this daunting task, it is probably better to start from classifications that would support rankings and give them a solid rationale to set up some kind of “parallel” systems of tertiary education.

Due to the impact rankings have made on many policy makers, an International Ranking Expert Group (IREG) was organized in 2004 and, as part of its activities, in 2006 it announced the Berlin Principles. This is a set of guidelines for reliable rankings that can help measure higher education quality. Correctly interpreted, they can be a useful source of information for funding and policies that advance education. These 10 principles can be summarized as follows:

Purposes and Goals of Rankings

1. Rankings should be one approach, and not the primary approach, to assessing higher education. This will bring balance to decision-making.
2. They should be clear about the group of higher education institutions and purposes a particular ranking is targeting. This helps to take diversity as an important and significant factor.
3. Rankings should also specify linguistic, cultural, economic, and even the historical mixture that may impact an institutional positioning in a ranking.

Design and Weighting of Indicators

4. Rankings should state the methodology used and be clear about data and statistical procedures to ensure transparency and credibility.
5. They should be based more on outcomes and results. This may give a better picture of the quality a university has.
6. Rankings should be consistent with indicators’ weight and avoid changing them.

Collection and Processing of Data

7. Data collection and processing should comply with international ethical standards and be as impartial as possible.
8. Rankings should employ a measure of quality to assure that they are reliable.
9. Link rankings to international organizations that would give credibility.

Presentation of Ranking Results

10. Offer a comprehensive understanding of all indicators employed to develop a ranking, so users would have a clear understanding of how and what is being ranked.

Recently, based on the Berlin Principles, the European Economic Community and UNESCO joined together to fund the Center for Higher Education Development in Germany, that has the mission of creating a comprehensive model to rank German and Dutch-speaking universities. This is a multi-criteria system that uses multiple dimensions and users can customize them following a set of up to 37 indicators that are grouped into nine modules. These indicators are also applied to a wide group of disciplines most universities offer. Since this ranking uses so many indicators, it regroups universities in three levels (low, middle, and high). This gives to prospective students a more comprehensive view of what universities offer.

Final Thought

Most of the existing rankings are heavily based on hard and quantifiable data, such as research productivity. However, most higher education institutions that put a good deal of resources to train professionals are “punished” as less relevant for what is defined as quality. These institutions, for instance, are huge social equalizers that improve not only people’s lives but also regional economies. Advancing research and transferring of ideas is one important task for higher education. But these activities should be weighted among other im-

portant indicators. In other words, different ranking systems will provide a much better opportunity to take into consideration other dimensions of higher education to have multiple characteristics and identities. There is too much at risk with so few dominant ranking options. This can impact negatively on many institutions that are contributing to the advancement of society. These broad principles can be of help to start different types of rankings that would honor the vast diversity of simultaneous systems of tertiary education.

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