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Book Review

Downing, K., Loock, P.J., & Gravett, S. *The Impact of Higher Education Ranking Systems on Universities*. London: Routledge, 2021. 146 pp. €96. ISBN 9780367433406.

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University ranking is a buzzword that attracts both national and global attention. From the outset of *The Impact of Higher Education Ranking Systems on Universities*, the book's central theme revolves around this buzzword. The author`s concern is not with whether universities should be ranked, but instead the methodology adopted by the Big Three higher education ranking systems (Academic Ranking of World Universities [ARWU], Quacquarelli Symonds [QS], and Times Higher Education [THE]) is the subject of scrutiny. The book affirms that rankings are here to stay. With an emphasis on tangible output, the book portrays ranking as a benchmark of excellence. Downing et al. analyze through a critical lens: the Big Three ranking systems, the fine points of the adopted methodology, the weighing of the different indicators, and recent amendments undertaken, to offer insights into the contemporary globalized higher education arena through the neoliberal reforms, market principles, and forces of internationalization in higher education. In a word, the book contends that some higher education institutions are reshaping their vision and mission in an attempt to acquire the status of world-class universities.

The book is a worthwhile read for research scholars as it contributes to the literature on international comparisons of higher education institutions, including the methodological issues and concerns of university rankings. It comprises nine chapters. The first three chapters (1-3) delve into the backdrop that gave rise to institutional rankings, tracing the history of the Big Three ranking systems. These early chapters detail not only the criticisms of the ranking systems but also their benefits for the institutions' stakeholders. The following three chapters (4-6) discuss each of the Big Three ranking systems (ARWU, QS, and THE) in detail. The last three chapters (7-9) depict the challenges that developed and developing nations face because of the influence rankings exert on them. The policy briefs, mainly in the context of the US and the UK, form part of the discussion. In essence, the book offers a comprehensive understanding of the global higher education context which has reinforced the rankings debate and led to measuring the performance of institutions. Emphasis on academic performance has shifted the discussion from access and equity, to pursuing academic excellence to achieve a higher ranking. However, the book does warn against over-reliance on rankings.

Chapter 1 is a critique of rankings as a quantitative measurement. Researchers have claimed that universities came into being due to social need based changes in their countries, and rankings based on standard measurement would undermine the purpose behind their establishment. Standardization betrays the idea that different institutions have their own visions, identities, contexts, pedagogical philosophies, and in some cases, unique, national needs. The quality of education should not be homogenized by being subjected to a standard measure; however, there is an inevitable danger of isomorphism. The question of whether ranking leads to homogenization or catalyzes competition remains unattended by the authors.

Chapter 2 contextually informs the transformation[1] in the higher education landscape. With neoliberal forces impacting colleges and universities, there is a shift from input to output based funding. Drawing from the discussion regarding the changes in the global higher education arena, in my own country the recently introduced National Education Policy (Government of India, 2020) in India, calls for implementing performance-and /target-based funding, referred to as the Institutional Development Plan[2] (IDP), which has led to the restructuring of institutional autonomy (Government of India, 2019). In light of the corporatization of higher education, the chapter highlights how before the advent of ranking systems, the quest for knowledge and values like academic freedom of thought were encouraged. The growth of self-financing institutions has led to increased commodification of knowledge. In a market-driven system, the prevalence of treating students as consumers and top-down administration has accentuated "managerialism" in higher education. These changes intensify the debate on quality, competition, efficiency, performance, and accountability.

In Chapter 3, Downing et al. discuss the advent of the ranking systems and their expansion. The chapter details an output-oriented culture wherein rankings are the manifestations of the infusion of audit and corporate-type mechanisms within institutions. These mechanisms are bound to affect the internal functioning as well as the efficiency of universities. However, the Berlin Principles[3] (BP) used in the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG) audit of universities is not without flaws since it fails to ensure the accuracy of the submitted data by the institution or ranking agency.

In Chapters 4-6, wherein the book discusses the Higher Education Ranking Systems (HERS), there is an emphasis on methodological indicators. The selection of different indicators and the attached weightings are subject to multiple examinations and criticism by the authors. The indicators inviting the most criticism are reputational surveys, teaching quality, and citations. The authors criticize the excessive weight attributed to reputational surveys by Times Higher Education (THE) at 33% and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) at 40%. They claim that reputational surveys are prejudiced towards renowned institutions that have been long established, are located in English speaking countries, and fail to represent current research performance. In this context, Glennerster (1991) argues that in markets for education, the competition is S-based[4] (selection-based). Competition creates a hierarchy amongst institutions. The best ones are well-endowed with funds to attract the best quality faculty and students and remain at the top (Winston, 1999). Only when an institution enters with a large endowment fund[5] is there a possibility of negating the S-competition over time (Nandi and Chattopadhyay, 2012).

[1] The transformations in terms of privatization of public funded institutes, increased internationalization and globalization.
[2] To score high in NAAC and compete for funds, faculties are required to set targets under IDP to be realized over a period of time.
[3] A set of rules promoting good practices within the ranking industry.
[4] Both the students and teachers choose an institution and the institution also chooses good quality teachers and students.
[5] This is particularly true for the few new private universities in India.

The book mentions that Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) conformists argue that the proxy for teaching and learning (student-staff ratio) is incomparable across different countries, and the same used by THE and QS is an inappropriate measure of the quality. These middle chapters indicate instances of manipulation such as universities' indulgence in inflating the number of faculty to reflect inaccurate teaching quality. The use of the Nobel Prize[6] as an indicator of faculty quality by ARWU is problematic. Also, there are citation biases as researchers may have language preferences and tendencies to cite researchers from the same region or country, which may create an artificial boost to the ranking. Compellingly, here Downing et al. have critically analyzed each indicator's biases which is helpful for scholars trying to develop a familiarity with the methodology debate. Nevertheless, the methodology is essential for understanding the discourse on rankings; theoretical implications require more examination.

The book pinpoints the non-linearity[7] issue amongst the different ranks and scores. Qamar (2021) underscores this concern in the context of India's national rankings, particularly for 1st and 10th ranked institutions. Following the global trend of allotting the highest weight to research output, the National Institute of Ranking Framework (NIRF) assigns 30% to the Research Performance and Professional Practices (RPP) category. The analysis revealed that the best universities scored 92.16% in research performance, and this score fell drastically to 60.52% for the 10th ranked and 4.35% for the 100th ranked university, respectively. Due to the non-disclosure of the data on the number of staff employed in a university, Qamar utilizes the data of expenditure on faculty and staff along with the number of students enrolled in a doctoral program to gauge the university size. The analysis illustrates that the more a university spends on its staff, the higher its ranking will be. Indeed, both funding and faculty play a prominent role in university rankings.

Downing et al. also argue that a single indicator cannot measure performance; varied indicators are considered for assessing university performance and ranking. However, including many indicators creates multicollinearity[8] issues, rendering specific indicators redundant and ranking scores unstable. Arguably one-dimensional, rankings fail to give a holistic analysis as universities are not homogeneous, but rather unique in characteristics. The book does plead for a plurality[9] of rankings highlighting different stakeholders representing diverse needs and priorities. Though the authors critique a standardized measurement, they fail to suggest feasible solutions for the concerns raised in the text. In sum, ranking fails to identify areas that need improvement[10] as more attention is devoted to vertical than horizontal differences.

Chapter 7 discusses Western model of domination of international higher education, and the changes in the ecosystem[11] in which the universities were evolved. The book posits that participation in the ranking systems requires changes in how a university functions, which is determined by the institution itself. The New Public Management[12] (NPM) invoked reforms that involve "corporatization" in higher education in light of the fund crunch. Chattopadhyay (2019) argues that a competitive environment within higher education institutions weakens collegiality and undermines trust. Increased accountability not only constrains academic freedom but changes the types of research undertaken at universities. Increased accountability is also an impetus for faculty to publish in those journals which HERS uses to analyze outputs. The changes observed in institutional micro-processes

[6] It represents only a handful of winners and not the performance of the whole university.
[7] There is a significant variation among the differently ranked institutions.
[8] Existence of a linear (highly correlated) relationship between explanatory variables in a model.
[9] HERS should move away from one size fits all approach.
[10] In terms of research output, quality of graduates churned out and other deficiencies.
[11] University governance, quality assurance framework etc.
[12] A worldwide recognized governance reform which involves quantification of output and infusion of audit culture to evaluate university performance.

in response to the ranking systems include recruiting managers to work in accord with ranking agencies, reevaluating class size, and adjusting departmental targets in the form of publishing in high focus journals, increasing international alliances etc. Limited term appointments have become a norm in faculty recruitment, which diminishes the culture of discussion and debates and leads to less engagement and involvement in academic environment. Hence, in the NPM, new measures of accountability are strengthened. Output-based funding contingent on rankings and accreditation are new ways of improving the existing deficiencies. These measures are considered a push from the state for institutions to be accountable to the students and the market.

In Chapter 8, Downing et al. continue discussing how changes in government structures impact rankings. They elaborate with particular reference to the Trump administration in the US and Brexit in the UK. The chapter illustrates how stringent policy changes in one country can positively influence other nations due to the rise of the international knowledge network. With internationalization being one of the indicators in the methodology rankings, a trend of recruiting international students from the Middle East and Southeast Asia is noted, along with an increase in research collaborations. Nonetheless, Downing et al. argue that these regulations in the Western nations raise suspicions of academic hegemony facing competition by Asian countries such as Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. Through a discussion of the power hierarchies, the chapter explores how developed and developing nations are subject to the influence of rankings. India, too, is engaged in the discourse on global prominence and policymakers' aims at establishing world-class institutions of higher education (Government of India, 2018). International faculty constitutes one of the parameters in institutional ranking. There is a tendency to hire international faculty to exhibit world-class status, by some private universities. Hence, there is a trade-off between meeting global needs and deviating from national ones to fulfill the ranking criteria.

To this end, the book makes a very timely contribution to the critical discourse on institutional rankings. The authors' criticism concerns the lack of an accurate measure of quality and the concomitant arbitrariness of current evaluating mechanisms; there are also issues concerning reliability, transparency, and data validity. Downing et al. claim that rankings are good, bad, or ugly depending on the prospective stakeholder's perception. They are an indicator against which universities can benchmark their peer institutions; for others, rankings are part of an unhealthy competition for prominence that diverges from a university's mission. Since quality is constructed by prospective stakeholders and thereby fluid, fulfilling institutional vision and mission, rather than compromising it, is critical. With the emphasis on competition, the drive to rise in global rankings sometimes results in neglecting the needs of local and regional stakeholders.

The emergence of ranking systems carries important implications for society, and the book depicts the tensions between and shifting behaviors of the various stakeholders involved. The text explores the impact of university rankings. The transitions in the global education landscape, the milieus which led to the formation of the HERS, and the amplification of rankings in the transnational context, complicated by gaming and distorted information, have completely blurred the boundaries that rankings originally sought to establish. These fundamental concerns and debates have posed pertinent questions that are difficult to reconcile, adding to the pressure of performativity. The tendencies to internationalize entail repercussions in terms of loss of language diversity, cultural heritage, and distinct academic cultures. This corporatization of academia necessitates the overhaul of curricula to cater to different cultures, and consequently, demand for market-oriented courses emerges. Engagement with local communities is also deteriorating because of this process. Moreover, the treatment of students as consumers hampers quality in the teaching-learning process (Teichler, 2011a; Marginson, 2016). The role of teachers is diminishing to that of a service provider whose activities are governed by the university.

In *The Impact of Higher Education Ranking Systems on Universities*, Downing et al. raise an essential question: What problematic implications do the market forces associated with rankings bode for the various types of higher education institutions around the globe? While the ranking debate intensifies competition that may lead to efficiency and increased quality of education for some institutions, it fails to engage with equity concerns. Chattopadhyay (2019) argues that markets fail to achieve efficiency because of the absence of a well-defined production function[13]. If the cost minimization is through substituting inputs (teachers), the quality of education delivery suffers. Curriculum in and of itself does not define quality, but rather, its construction is ongoing through interactions between students, teachers, and peers. Hence, structural deficiencies and target achievements set by institutional administration affect faculty motivation to innovate as it constrains their academic freedom. Downing et al. aptly conclude by reaffirming that ranking systems are defined by what they measure and may not be an accurate barometer of true excellence. _

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[13] This absence of production function differentiates a factory from a university because an input of a university is not easily replaceable as quality is embedded in individuals.

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