

Chapter 4

University Rankings: Was Academic Life Perfect before Rankings?

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ABSTRACT

While we all recognise the limitations of ranking systems, even if combined with bibliometrics, they remain influential at both the national and international arenas even if a large component is anchored in a subjective reputation survey. While the rankings give visibility to young and rising universities, and this is one way for them to gain worldwide recognition, the reputation survey means that these young institutions forever remain ‘in the shade’ of the older and well established universities. So rankings remain an important means whereby ambitious, up and coming young institutions can achieve both recognition and identify the areas for strengthening which should eventually allow the young universities to challenge their established peers. Finally rankings should also recognise the diversity that must exist amongst universities and this is where the younger universities have a particular role to play.

INTRODUCTION

University rankings are a relatively new phenomenon in academic circles having only been around for a little more than a decade. All those responsible for managing universities or are responsible for higher education policy and funding are still struggling to come to terms with them. How should such senior policy-makers, vice-chancellors and university presidents react?

Rankings have to be judged in the new 21st century environment of higher education and consumer information. The World is globalising rapidly and this is very evident in the world of higher education. We are becoming better educated and have an increasing demand for provision at the tertiary level. The result has been the rise of new universities with the result that, today, there are over 18000 universi-

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ties of diverse characteristics in the World. Of these more than 16000 are young universities – that is, established within the past 50 years.

We have also seen the trade globalisation and the policies of multi-national companies to create a presence in new and emerging economies. Higher education cannot be an exception to this globalisation trend. Already universities are create global alliances and subsidiary campuses or liaison offices overseas as well as competing for an increasingly mobile cadre of students. This is a rapidly changing world and universities must adapt and recognise these trends. Students and their financial sponsors (in many countries this is frequently parents) in many countries require more information on which they can make better informed decisions.

Globalisation brings in its wake the need for comparative information in many spheres of activity. Consumer information and transparency is becoming the norm in most activities. Then there are international comparisons not least between countries. There are an increasing number of rankings and league tables with inter-country comparisons. These especially focus on economic factors such as GDP and subsets of it, including the gross domestic expenditure on Research and Development (GERD) – used to show how well a country is performing in research. There are also league tables of quality of life, low or no corruption levels or economies most conducive to business and innovation and so on. We are all familiar with comparisons of airlines, airports, cars, hotels and restaurants so why should universities be the exception?

The trend today is to look at universities as providing a well- educated population coupled with research and the so-called ‘Third Mission’ about societal well-being in all aspects, including innovation and social and economic benefits to the society in which they are embedded.

Rankings and their methodologies give rise to constant debate about which represents a ‘true’ or balanced picture of an institution’s worth. What has to be accepted is that, for good or ill, rankings are now part of the new academic environment in which universities have to operate and policy-makers and politicians have to take into account. Universities are certainly not perfect and so reliable information about universities is important and yet was absent before we had rankings.

The key question, however, is “What went before rankings and how were consumer decisions made?”

Basically, the only ‘measure’ of a university, outside normal disciplinary knowledge, was that of its reputation, however defined. This was, in reality, a ‘static’ system as reputations are a reflection of history rather than ‘actualité’. Well known universities could not ‘lose’ and neither could new excellent institutions ‘win’ nor be recognised except by a limited ‘word of mouth’ recommendation which is, inevitably, a slow way of building a reputation. Now rankings can provide a picture of the university concerned combining a variety of pieces of information. So what is ‘reputation’ and is it ‘real’? How easy is it to make and gain a reputation and how easy is it to lose it? It is surmised that it is harder to gain a reputation and get a brand name recognised. It is difficult to see Ivy League or Oxbridge losing reputation. Again, the question has to be asked as to why it is wrong to develop ranking systems even if one can argue about which metrics provide the most valuable and realistic information. The introduction of rankings means that a range of information is available, whether these are useful or meaningful or not. Reputation remains a key part of the ranking methodology with the weighting varying between different ranking systems and based on many thousands of academic opinions (it should be noted that in such surveys, those taking part are self-selected)

Were the perceptions about the academic system and individual institutions better or worse before rankings and how have rankings changed universities and their behaviour? Certainly, before rankings, there was no measure or semi-quantitative comparison available and there was an opacity in the system

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