

Chapter 2

Academic Performance vs. Academic Reputation: What Comes First – How Well You Perform or How Others See Your Performance?

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ABSTRACT

Global ranking systems have mesmerized both the academia and the general public because they have quickly become an essential part of decision-making processes for various stakeholders. Today, many methodologies exist and each is fighting hard to become widely recognized by different stakeholders. In order to fully meet the needs of general public and prospective students, field and subject based rankings are now occupying the prime focus of researchers and policy-makers. Our aim was to take a closer look at the QS World University Rankings by subject. To realize this aim, we conducted a case study where we identified two subject areas – Mathematics and Medicine. For each area, we collected the official QS scores for three criteria: Academic Reputation, Citations per Paper, and H-index Citations. We wanted to examine whether the academic staff, who participate in QS Global Academic Survey (upon which the Academic Reputation QS Score is calculated), rank the universities according to their actual academic performance i.e. the number and the quality of published scientific papers. To realize our aims, we analyzed two datasets which contained the data of the 50 leading universities according to the 2014 rankings. Besides the officially available data provided by the QS, we obtained the leading journals in which each university publishes its papers (concerning the number of published papers) and bibliometric indicators which were used to characterize the reviewed journals. The obtained results show little correlation between the number of universities' papers/bibliometric quality of journals and the QS scores.

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INTRODUCTION

Education, in a broad sense, can be identified as one of the founding pillars of every society. According to a famous French sociologist David Émile Durkheim, “Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states, which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined.” (Durkheim, 1956 pp.71). When discussing education, it is common to refer to its tangible aspects – curriculum and teaching excellence, necessary for acquisition of crucial knowledge and skills so that young people can take part in a highly dynamic business world. Thus, making a “good career choice” is of a vital importance. The decision itself does not only consist of choosing the right scientific field or industry, but also of choosing an adequate institution to pursue studies. One of the positive effects of globalization when it comes to a career choice is that prospective students today are not geographically restricted because they can also consider a large number of international universities. Moreover, in the era of Internet, there is a lot of available information on universities, schools, and their study programs. However, both globalization and the Internet can make students’ decision-making even more challenging. The search for the best or the most appropriate university could take longer due to the immense amount of data that does not guarantee useful information. Therefore, individual search is frequently a painstaking and time-consuming issue for a lot of students. Sometimes, they may feel lost facing the big data. Luckily, different institutions from all around the world have started making a comparison of higher educational institutions, known as World University Rankings, to help international students short-list potential universities. Rankings are essentially compilations of information provided according to a set of criteria in order to highlight real or perceived differences in quality (Merisotis & Sadlak, 2005). Initially, their main purpose corresponded to a consumer report (an aid to a potential ‘customer’) that sets out to rate universities according to whatever criteria that might be of interest to potential students (such as campus social life, university teaching and research excellence, etc.) (Taylor & Braddock, 2007).

Due to their ability to provide ranks situating a certain university within the global scene (Saisana & D’Hombres, 2008), university rankings quickly became an essential part of decision-making processes for various stakeholders (Altbach 2013; Dill & Soo, 2005; Docampo 2013; Saisana, D’Hombres & Saltelli, 2011; Paruolo, Saisana & Saltelli, 2013). University rankings strive to meet the needs of a broad set of stakeholders including students, parents, academics, university staff, and employers (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Dobrota, Bulajic, Bornmann & Jeremic, 2016; Griffith & Rask, 2007; Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011). As stated by Berbegal-Mirabent & Ribeiro-Soriano (2015), league tables and ranking systems are a catalyst of change and they contribute to the institutional quality and organizational effectiveness of each university. In addition, they satisfy increasing consumer demands for information about academic quality (Dill & Soo, 2005). Still, controversy surrounds the methodology that is used to compile such evaluation tools. Thus, different authors have adopted various methods to produce their rankings. Despite the lack of methodological uniformity, university rankings are undoubtedly influencing the strategy of higher educational institutions (HEIs), and there is a widespread belief that the number of university ranking methodologies will keep growing (Coates, 2007; Hou, 2012; Hou, Morse & Yueh-jen, 2012).

The implications of ranking methods on policy-makers and university officials are vast. The race for “world-class university” is also influencing the economy of a country. One of the facts that confirm this claim is that overseas students contributed with over £10bn to the UK economy in 2011-2012 alone (Luxbacher, 2013). Accordingly, both universities and governments from emerging economies make

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