

Chapter 12

Uses and Abuses of Ranking in University Strategic Planning

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ABSTRACT

The ranking of higher education institutions is a growing phenomenon around the world, with ranking systems in place in more than 40 countries. The emergence of world ranking systems that compare higher education institutions across national boundaries and the proliferation of these since the past decade, are indeed a reality now, and are already exerting substantial influence on both short and long term developments of higher education institutions. Rankings are being used by a variety of stakeholders for different purposes. Rankings are no doubt, useful for fostering institutional strategic planning and management, and their communication externally as well as their own institutional community and the national interest.

INTRODUCTION

Substantial transformations have occurred in the global higher education landscape over the past two decades, and these changes have been well documented in the higher education literature. These developments have had a profound impact on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs are primarily venues for human capital development for their host countries as well as centres for new knowledge creation and dissemination for society as a whole. Universities in both the developed and developing world are in a race to deliver on both of these roles requiring them to develop, attract and retain ‘talents’ in order to produce future-ready graduates. Universities must also ensure they remain relevant in the rapidly changing world of global education whilst remaining highly competitive in the prevailing global economy and increasingly globalised job market. This has led to a much more ‘corporate’ approach to their strategy and management than in previous decades.

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The ranking of higher education institutions is a growing phenomenon around the world, with ranking systems now in place in more than 40 countries. The emergence of world ranking systems that compare higher education institutions across national boundaries, and the proliferation of these over the past decade, are now commonplace. These systems are already exerting substantial influence on the short and longer term developments of many HEIs. In some jurisdictions, considerable (some would say inappropriate) influence is exerted by the rankings on policy making, and this influence and its effects are likely to stay (*Marginson & van der Wende, 2007*). With this emergence of global university ranking systems, especially in terms of the ranking in research performance and internalization indicators, higher education institutions have entered an era of open and highly visible global competition, where they are often judged by where they stand in global terms in the various ranking systems.

National ranking systems have existed for some time in many countries, more notably in the United States, but today rankings exist in almost every part of the world. More than sixty (60) countries have introduced their own national ranking systems and these are developed by governments, government agencies, regional commercial companies or commercial rankings organisations, with the growing trend evident especially in countries with emerging economies. In China, several systems of national ranking have been in use for a decade (*Liu & Liu, 2005*) whilst other countries to introduce national rankings include Brazil, Chile, Malaysia, India, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Macedonia, Mexico, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Taiwan and Vietnam. Some are also developing alternative ranking systems targeting not only higher education institutions within their own countries but also extending to their regions as specific regional group rankings. The African Union endorsed a regional initiative “the African Quality Rating Mechanism, AQRM” in 2010 with 34 higher education institutions (HEIs) from the region participating (*Okebukola, 2011*).

There are now more than ten global university rankings, and amongst them the oldest system was prepared by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which first published global rankings in 2003, with the THES/QS World University Ranking produced by Quaquarelli Symonds (QS) first being published in 2004 in collaboration at that time with The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES). Times Higher Education (THE) also launched a world university ranking system after separating from seven years of collaboration with QS, to produce a third global ranking system (*Downing, 2013*). The emergence of global ranking in 2003 has had a revolutionizing effect on perceptions of the world order (*Hazekorn, 2012*) with these highlighting previously little known higher education institution (HEIs) and their global positions. Global rankings have also tracked shifts in the competitive strengths and weaknesses of nations through the performance of their higher education institutions (HEIs).

With the increasing attention given to global university rankings and their growing influence on Higher Education Institutions through the formulation of policies and strategies within these universities, there have been winners and losers and a range of proper and improper use of rankings data. This chapter discusses the impact of global rankings on some Universities and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the uses and abuses of ranking information in institutional strategic planning and decision making processes. Consequently, this chapter is divided into four sections: the first explores the changing and shifting nature of global higher education, the drivers for these changes and their relationship to the rankings. The second section discusses the formulation of policies and strategies in universities and the influence of ranking in these processes, whilst the third section highlights the increased use of benchmarking, setting up performance indicators and internal dissemination information using rank-

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