Chapter 36
University Rankingphilia and Phobia:
Emerging Trajectories and Quality Assurance in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The world over, there is a love-hate perspective to university ranking. It is applause when the university is well ranked and rejection when not so favoured. The group with positive disposition to ranking ("rankingphilic") is quick to cite its ranks on websites and annual reports. The negatively disposed ("rankingphobic"), on the other hand denounces the methodology and emerging league tables. This chapter reviewed developments in higher education ranking/rating in Africa with special focus on Nigeria and the African Quality Rating Mechanism. It addressed accountability issues and the uses to which ranking/rating should be put in bolstering the quality of the higher education system in the region. It presents the findings of an Africa regional study which addressed two questions: What is the perception of African scholars, university managers and students on ranking? What are the arguments in favour or against ranking by stakeholders in the university community in Africa? It concludes with several future scenarios on ranking/rating in the region.

INTRODUCTION

The world over, there is a love-hate perspective to university ranking. It is an applause when the university is well ranked and rejection when not so favoured. The group with positive disposition to ranking ("rankingphilic") is quick to cite its ranks on websites and annual reports. The negatively disposed ("rankingphobic"), on the other hand denounces the methodology and emerging league tables. Over a decade ago when global ranking of universities was primed for unfolding, the African higher education system prepared to take advantage of the utility value of ranking in improving the quality of the system

(Okebukola and Shabani, 2007). African universities were generally ranked low on many of the global university ranking league tables. This has stimulated a perception of deliberate eclipsing of African universities through the application of "western-centric" indicators. A counter-argument is that the concept of the university has trans-boundary characteristics and if any university is good regardless of its geographical location of the university, it has to exhibit these characteristics (Okebukola, 2010, 2014).

As Okebukola (2013) noted, since the 1960s, that ranking of universities in Africa has been conjectural rather than empirical. Two indicators have been typically featured. These are the age of the institution and employers' perception of the quality of graduates. As reported by Taiwo (1981), in the minds of Kenyans, University of Nairobi (established 1956) should be better in quality of training than Kenyatta University (established in 1965). The same order of ranking emerges when employers of labour rank these universities on the assumption that graduates of University of Nairobi should be better than graduates of other universities in Kenya. Nairobi graduates may have been tried and tested and adjudged good in quality. This may colour and sustain their perception over time. In Nigeria, the University of Ibadan, established in 1948, is generally perceived to be better than other universities established after it. Regionally, there has been a pervasive perception that the "first generation", post-colonial universities such as Makerere (1922), Ibadan (1948), and Legon (1948) are better than those that were established after them. While there are complex variables considered contributory to the good ranking of these institutions such as the quality of facilities and staff, strict compliance with standards to match top-rate universities in Europe, quality of leadership, as well as quality and quantity of students, the rankings were not based on verifiable data.

From the early 2000, conjectural ranking began to yield to the empirical. Global rankings provided a template for transparent and objective data collection, analysis and reporting. They also provided a menu of indicators that can be adapted or adopted to suit the local context. The first Times Higher Education ranking in 2004 which showed the big names in the higher education system in Africa by the conjectural ranking not listed in the Times league tables jolted stakeholders. Governments, university managers, students and parents reacted angrily. The call to improve quality and hence global ranking was thick in the air. This call has persisted and has been a major driver for improving the delivery of higher education in the region.

This chapter begins with a short historical context of ranking of universities in Africa and presents a Nigerian national example while the section that follows describes the emergence of the African Quality Rating Mechanism. The findings of a study on the perception of African university managers and scholars on the issue of ranking is then reported. It concludes with a future glimpse of ranking of universities in Africa.

Developments in University Ranking in Africa and the Nigerian Example

University ranking in Africa has had a very recent history. The emergence of global ranking of universities in the early 2000s was a spur for the process. Global ranking has led the creation of indicators which formed basis for the development of a few national ranking schemes. The object at the national level was alignment with what was widely regarded as globally-accepted indicators for ranking universities. In the early days of the rise of the ranking phenomenon, only a few countries ventured which were supported by national agencies. In recent times, a number of non-governmental organisations have established ranking systems which are quite popular and thriving and gleefully cited by rankingphilic groups.

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