

Ranking and the Globalization of Higher Education

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, the idea of ranking universities has become increasingly widespread. Originating in national rankings systems in the USA, the rankings movement has become international. This paper examines the varied indices of university excellence that are employed in the main rankings systems; asks how valid they are as measures of university quality and the reasons they have become so popular; identifies the ways in which they exhibit systematic bias and the various consequences they have for academic life; describes the emergence of an anti-rankings movement in American universities; and suggests various ways in which universities may respond to rankings in the future.

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The academic world has experienced a number of profound changes over the past couple of decades, making the experiences of teaching and learning at most universities significantly different now than they were in the period up to about the 1980s. Four major changes of particular importance have been: (i) the enormous expansion of higher

education, especially in terms of student numbers, but also in the number of colleges; (ii) the growing impact of ‘academic capitalism’ and the ‘audit culture’; (iii) the recent focus – some would say obsession – with university rankings and branding; and (iv) the increasing impact of ‘internationalization’ and ‘globalization’. The present paper will examine aspects of this third theme, and subsequent papers will examine the other three.

Key Words : University Ranking; Globalization

Ranking

The idea that some universities are better than others is not a new one, as evidenced by the long-standing prestige of ‘Oxbridge’ (Oxford and Cambridge) in England and Wales and the ‘Ivy League’ schools (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, Pennsylvania, Yale) in the USA. Such judgements may well have been highly subjective in nature and reflected social elitism as much as academic reality, but were a significant part of the higher education landscape. Moreover, regardless of how valid such prestige was, it clearly had considerable value for the universities so identified in terms of attracting the most able graduates, the most renowned professors and the greatest amount of funding.

The idea of a more definite national league table seems to have originated in the United States in 1983, when the periodical *US News and World Report* issued the first of its annual rankings of American colleges. That first issue ranked on the basis of selected opinions and made no pretense to be scientific – it was effectively the equivalent of a beauty competition. It sold well, however, and by 1988, the *US News* began to develop a more ‘objective’ framework for ranking.¹ This approach proved very popular, and has since become the magazine’s most distinctive feature, attracting massive public attention. Annual rankings of top hospitals and law-schools were also later introduced. Other countries have followed suit, with a variety of ranking systems of universities being introduced whether by newspapers and magazines, ministries of education, grants councils and accreditation agencies, or by universities and professional organizations. In several countries there are now a number of separate ranking systems in operation.²

¹ Nicholas Thompson. ‘Playing with numbers – problems with U.S. aNews’ college rankings’. *Washington Monthly*, September 2000.

² Simon Marginson. ‘The power of rankings’. *University World News*, Issue 0005, 11 November 2007.

Probably inevitably, international rankings have also been devised. In an increasingly globalized world, academic staff and students have become more mobile and there is greater international competition for prestige and resources. Rankings provide a means by which to evaluate differences. Originating in both China and Britain by the early 2000s, the idea of an international ranking table of universities has proven to be enormously popular and influential. The first table to appear was the ‘Academic Ranking of World Universities’ (ARWU) in 2003. Produced by Shanghai Jiaotong University (and so sometimes referred to as the Shanghai Ranking), the compilation was later taken over by the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy (2009). The *THES-QS World University Rankings* appeared a year later in 2004 as a joint venture between the British *Times Higher Education Supplement* and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), an educational advisory company. Various other systems have subsequently been devised, notably a new ranking developed by the now renamed *Times Higher Education* (the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE)*) magazine in cooperation with the information company Thomson Reuters from 2009 onwards. This represented a formal split between *THE* and QS, following disagreements over methodology, with the QS ranking retaining the original system. The *THE* has also started to publish a separate set of World Reputation Rankings (WRR, 2011). These are the main contenders in international ranking, but there are at least ten more.³

³ Wikipedia lists ten: University Metrics’ ‘G-factor’ (based on Google data); Global University Ranking (Russia); the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan’s ‘Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities’ (2007, Taiwan); the High Impact Universities Research Performance Index (2010, Australia); ChaseCareer.Net’s ‘Human Resources and Labour Review’; the SCImago Institutions Rankings’ ‘SIR World Report’ (2009, Spain); the Paris-based ‘Professional Ranking of World Universities’ (2007); the Middle East Technical University’s ‘University Ranking by Academic Performance’ (2010, Turkey); the ‘Webometrics Ranking of World Universities’ (2004, Spain); and the Wuhan University’s Research Center for Chinese Science Evaluation. A new ‘U-Multirank’, supported by the European Commission, is due later in 2011 (Wikipedia, ‘College and university rankings’. Last accessed 7 April 2011).

The Results

The rankings and ranking systems vary enormously. If we examine just the three most widely used international ranking systems (the ARWU, QS and *THE* systems), we see that although there are similarities and overlaps between the three, each is quite distinctive, indicating different ways of assessing academic excellence. All three focus on (i) the quality of teaching and ‘education’; (ii) the quality of faculty; and (iii) research output and citations, but each weights and quantifies these variables in different ways (Tables 1-5). Other factors are also considered.

Table 1 Areas of academic excellence as weighted in the three most widely-cited international ranking systems (%).

	ARWU	QS	<i>THE</i>
Quality of teaching and ‘education’	10	30	15 (30)
Quality of faculty	40	40	34.5 (0)
Research output & citations	40	20	43 (62.5)
Other	10	10	7.5

1. *Teaching and ‘education’* (Table 2). Thus, teaching and education are most emphasized by QS (30% of the total marks), with measurement based on faculty-student ratios (high is good) and a review of graduates by international employers. By contrast, the *THE* assessment of teaching quality (15%) is based on a series of ratios: the numbers of PhDs awarded and undergraduate students admitted per academic staff, university income per academic staff and the number of doctorates awarded in comparison to undergraduate degrees. The ARWU awards evaluates the quality of education only by the numbers of alumni from a university who went on to receive a Nobel Prize or Field Medal for Mathematics (10 % of the ranking). *THE* also uses a measure of teaching reputation but this is dealt with separately below.

Table 2 Teaching and educational excellence as weighted in the three most widely-cited international ranking systems (%).

	ARWU	QS	THE
<i>Quality of teaching and 'education'</i>	10	30	15
-Alumni winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	10		
-Recruiter review		10	
-Faculty student ratio		20	
-PhDs awarded per academic staff			6
-Undergraduates admitted per academic staff			4.5
-Income per academic staff			2.25
-PhDs/undergraduate degrees awarded			2.25
Add fm 'Faculty':			
-Teaching reputation survey			15 (Total = 30)

2. *Faculty* (Table 3). Both ARWU and QS give 40 percent of their ranking to the perceived quality of faculty at each university. This is measured by ARWU on the basis of two indices: the number of faculty and research staff who have been awarded Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals and the number of highly-cited researchers in 21 academic fields. By contrast, QS assesses faculty quality purely on the basis of an international academic peer review. Many commentators regard this peer review as unreliable and biased, and this was one factor in convincing the *Times Higher Education* to end its partnership with Quacquarelli Symonds and develop a new system, with two separate reputational surveys of teaching and research together only accounting for 34.5 percent of their ranking (still a high proportion of the total 'mark').

Table 3 Faculty excellence as weighted in the three most widely-cited international ranking systems (%).

	ARWU	QS	THE
<i>Quality of faculty</i>	40	40	34.5
-Staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	20		
-Highly-cited researchers	20		
-Academic peer review		40	
-Teaching reputation survey			15
-Research reputation survey			19.5

3. *Research* (Table 4). Research output and citations are given most emphasis by *THE* (43%) with a combination of influential citations (32.5%), research income, academic papers per staff and the proportion of total research income derived from public sources (*THE* also considers ‘research reputation’, dealt with above). ARWU (40%) is far more specific, relying only on articles in the journals *Nature* and *Science* and the number of papers in the Science and Social Science citation indexes. The QS ranking (20%) is based only on the number of citations per faculty.

Table 4 Research excellence as weighted in the three most widely-cited international ranking systems (%).

	ARWU	QS	THE
Research output & citations	40	20	43
-Articles in <i>Nature & Science</i>	20		
-Citations in SCI & SSCI	20		
-Citations per faculty		20	
-Research income (scaled)			5.25
-Papers per research and academic staff			4.5
-Public research income/total research income			0.75
-Citations - research influence			32.5
Add fm 'Faculty':			
-Research reputation survey			19.5 (Total = 62.5)

4. *Other factors* (Table 5). A few marks are also given to other criteria. Both QS and *THE* award points for the number of international students and staff (10% and 5% respectively) and *THE* recognizes research income from industry (2.5%). ARWU includes an overall ranking score (10%) based on the overall performance of the university in its other variables on a per capita basis to the number of full-time academic staff.

Table 5 Other aspects of excellence as weighted in the three most widely-cited international ranking systems (%).

	ARWU	QS	THE
Other	10	10	7.5
-Per capita performance	10		
-International orientation / diversity		10	5
-Research income from industry			2.5

5. *The American rankings.* Other ranking variables occur in the various American ranking systems. The *US News* rankings have themselves used different criteria over the years, responding at least in part to criticisms of various variables by participating universities and users of their annual surveys. The present *US News* ranking varies somewhat between ‘national’ and ‘regional’ colleges and universities and comprises: (i) the reputation of the institution (22.5% of the total mark for national universities and colleges), including the judgements of high school counsellors as well as top university administrators; (ii) the extent of the university’s selectivity in admitting students (15%), including the percentage of students who were in the top of their high school classes and SAT and ACT scores; (iii) faculty resources (20%), including faculty pay and benefits, the proportion of faculty who are full-time, the percentage of full-time faculty members with PhDs or equivalent ‘top terminal degrees’, the student to faculty ratio and the proportion of classes with small student numbers; (iv) the graduation and freshman retention rates (20%); (v) financial resources per students (10%); (vi) the proportion of alumni who donate money to the college (5%); and (vii) the difference between the college’s actual graduation rate and that predicted by *US News* (7.5%).⁴ Other American rankings include such data as student satisfaction, tuition costs, living expenses, the availability of financial aid for students, and – for specialist fields – the judgements of professional recruiters and the success of graduates in the job market.⁵ In a distinctive system of its own, the *Washington*

⁴ Robert Morse. ‘Methodology: Undergraduate ranking criteria and weights’. *US News and World Report*, 17 August 2100. Some of the variables are quite complex. See also *U.S. News* Staff. ‘How U.S. News calculates the college rankings’. *US News and World Report*, 17 August 2100.

⁵ Nicholas Thompson. ‘The best, the top, the most’. *New York Times*, 3 August 2003.

Monthly differentiates universities on how well they promote research, social mobility and an ethic of service to the community.⁶

How valid are these rankings?

1. The first point to be made about **the ranking systems is their great variety**. This underlines that there is no one way of assessing academic excellence – indeed opponents might argue that the various measures chosen are very poor indicators of academic excellence. Effectively, each ranking system has invented its own ideal of excellence, all of which may be interesting and important, but none of which has universal validity. Any group of people anywhere in the world could sit down and devise their own criteria of excellence, which might be just as valid as any of the ranking systems referred to here.

2. The second point to be made about **the ranking systems is that they produce quite different results** – that is, while many of the same universities are given high rank in several different systems, there is no universally agreed hierarchy of universities. This is not surprising given the different variables and weighting systems adopted in each of the ranking systems (above). This lack of universality is easily illustrated if we compare the results of the three main international rankings together with the recently introduced *THE* reputation rankings (WRR). Thus, if we take the thirty universities which appear in the top 20 in at least one of the 2010 rankings, we see that there is very little regularity or pattern, other than that (i) most (21) are American, and (ii) that Harvard is the top American university and Cambridge the top British university in all the

⁶ *Washington Monthly*. The Editors. 'A note on methodology'. September-October 2009. For a discussion of a range of indicators and the use of weightings see Alex Usher and Massimo Savino. *A World Of Difference: A Global Survey of University League Tables*. Canadian Education Report Series. Virginia Beach, VA: Education Policy Institute, January 2006.

lists (Tables 6 and 7). Of note, apart from the USA, only five countries feature in the list, with a total of nine universities: 4 from the UK, 2 from Canada, and one each from Switzerland, Australia and Japan. The only two universities in the composite list from non-English speaking countries are ETH Zurich and Tokyo. Also of note is the omission of several universities from the top-20 slots in one or more of the other ranking systems.

Table 6 US Universities which appear in the top 20 in at least one of the 2010 rankings.

2010 rankings	ARWU	QS	<i>THE</i>	WRR
USA				
Harvard	1	2	1	1
Yale	11	3	10	9
MIT	4	5	3	2
Chicago	9	8	12	15
CIT	6	9	2	10
Princeton	7	10	5	7
Columbia	8	11	18	
Pennsylvania	15	12	19	
Stanford	3	13	4	5
Duke		14		
Michigan		15	16	13
Cornell	12	16	14	16
Johns Hopkins	18	17	13	14
UC, Berkeley	2	-	8	4
UCLA	13	-	11	12
Massachusetts		-		19
Carnegie Mellon				20
UC, San Diego	14			
Washington	16			
U Wisconsin, Madison	17			
UC, San Francisco	19			

Table 7 Non-US universities which appear in the top 20 in at least one of the 2010 rankings.

2010 rankings	ARWU	QS	THE	WRR
UK				
Cambridge	5	1	6 =	3
University College, London		4		-
Oxford	10	6	6 =	6
Imperial College, London		7	9	11
Canada				
McGill		19		
Toronto		-	17	17
Switzerland				
ETH Zurich		18	15	
Australia				
Australian National University		20		
Japan				
Tokyo	20	-		8

Given this great diversity of ranking scores, the rankings themselves can be judged to be highly arbitrary. Widely treated as if they have some objective reality, they are an example of a ‘false facticity’ – the common belief that there are measuring tools for everything, and that the very act of assigning a number to something gives that number an objective reality.⁷ Einstein’s alleged adage is relevant here: ‘Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted’.⁸ The rankings may not be valueless, but these enormous

⁷ Another educational example would be the widespread use of numerical performance evaluations of individual faculty members. Some teachers and researchers are undoubtedly better than others, but whether such differences can be given precise numerical value seems highly dubious.

⁸ D. D. Guttenplan. ‘The questionable science behind academic ranking’. *New York Times* (Global Edition), 15 November 2010, p. 11.

variations significantly undermine the value that is widely placed upon them.

3. A third problem is the sometimes extreme **fluctuations of rank placement of individual universities from year to year**. Given that most universities are large, complex organizations which change very slowly, it seems improbable that most such rank changes are based on real change in the institutions. A university may not have changed any of its own basic data but find itself up-graded or down-graded.⁹ As it happens, some of these changes are due to changes in the rankings systems themselves, and in some respects this can be seen as a good thing – with greater experience, ranking agencies are able to critique their own work and seek to improve it by developing better measures of excellence (This certainly was the stated rationale for the *Times Higher Education* split with QS – the original methodology being seen as inadequate both in the way it compiled its reputation survey and its favouring of the sciences over the humanities).¹⁰ Nevertheless, the malleability of several of the ranking systems underlines their essentially arbitrary nature, and it seems likely that in at least some instances the measures of ‘excellence’ which have been adopted are superficial and inconsistent.

4. A fourth problem comes from **systematic bias**. Several different biases are readily discernable and have been widely commented on:

- 1. *The Science bias*. By privileging science journals, Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, the ARWU rankings favour science and mathematics over other areas of academic endeavour. Prestigious colleges which are focussed on the Social Sciences or Business such as the London

⁹Letter from James Casper, President of Stanford University to James Fallows, Editor of *U. S. News & World Report*, 23 September 1996.

¹⁰Phil Baty. ‘Back to square one on the rankings front’. *The Australian*. 17 February 2010; and, idem, ‘Ranking confession’. *Inside Higher Ed*, 15 March 2010.

School of Economics, Institut d'études Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po) and the Harvard Business School are disadvantaged in such a schema. Further bias is introduced in the process of journal citation itself, with the sciences often having stronger traditions of frequent journal publication than the humanities and social sciences, as well as of having multiple rather than single authorship – with each author receiving points in some systems.

- 2. *The language bias*. Almost all top-ranked universities are in English-speaking countries. It is true that English has become the lingua franca of much of the academic world, particularly in the sciences, but it is foolish to suppose that it is only contemporary English-language scholarship that is of value. Serious scholarship in other languages is less likely to appear in internationally accessible journals and so will be under-represented in global comparative data.

- 3. *The journal bias*. The ranking systems privilege journal articles over books because they are easier to measure – thus ignoring what has traditionally been one of the most highly-regarded academic products.¹¹

- 4. *The bias of the questions*. The variables used by the various ranking systems implicitly value certain qualities over others and each elevates a particular model of university excellence over possible alternatives – for example attempting to measure the quality of research at a university rather than its impact on the enviroing society.¹²

¹¹ See, for example, the complaint of American sociologists against the National Research Council's ratings: Scott Jaschik. 'Sociologists blast doctoral rankings'. *Inside Higher Ed*, 21 March 2011.

¹² Paulo Achard. 'Rankings: A case of blurry pictures of the academic landscape?' *Inside Higher Ed*, 21 September 2010. Achard also notes derisively a French ranking system (by the cole nationale suprieure des Mines de Paris) which places five French colleges in the world's top twenty as an example of extreme partiality in devising variables to be measured.

5. A fifth problem concerns the **suspected unreliability of at least some of the data**. The rankings produced by the *US News and World Report* have come in for particular criticism, with apparent manufacture or manipulation of data by both the rating agency and some individual universities (see below). There is also a distorting statistical impact when small sets of data are used, as with the number of Nobel Prize winners or measures of citations in academic fields with only a few publications.¹³ Again, there are examples of random distortions including the rankings drop of the University of Malaya from 89th in the *THES-QS* ranking in 2004 to 169th in 2005 after Malaysian Chinese and Indians were no longer classified as international students,¹⁴ and the placement of the University of Alexandria as 147th in the *THE* ranking in 2010, a relatively high placing due mainly to including the 320 articles published by one academic in a journal of which he himself was the editor.¹⁵

6. A sixth problem relates to the very **concept of a single set of ranks** – so that rather than asking what the particular strengths and weaknesses of each university are, all are thrown together in a single set of composite numbers. As one college president observed higher education was a complex product crafted by its practitioners rather than some mass-produced homogenous commodity.¹⁶ Institutions have different strengths which are easily submerged in an aggregated system.¹⁷

Why are such rankings so popular?

The rankings are widely seen as having great influence, shaping the behaviour of universities and policy makers and compelling the

¹³ Achard.

¹⁴ Marginson.

¹⁵ Guttenplan.

¹⁶ Colin Diver. 'Is there life after rankings?' *The Atlantic*, November 2005.

¹⁷ Indira Samarasekera. 'Rising up against rankings'. *In Higher Ed*, 2 April 2007.

attention of faculty, students and their parents. They also help determine decisions about university funding and the formation of international partnerships between universities.¹⁸ American university administrators have therefore long been concerned with their annual rankings score, but this concern has now become global, and although very recent in origin, the ARWU, QS and *THE* rankings already command attention and influence university decision making.

1. As to why these rankings are popular, one suggestion is that they satisfy a public demand for information about higher education so that students can more easily make decisions about which university to attend.¹⁹ This certainly seems to be the prime rationale for the influential *US News* ranking, which effectively functions as a consumers' guide to higher education. The ranking helps prospective students and their parents decide which out of a large number of institutions is the most attractive and cost effective. The popularity of the *US News* rankings has also been attributed to a general American love of establishing rank orders so as to identify the 'number one' and the 'top ten' of anything.²⁰ This does not seem to be a uniquely American trait, however, as witnessed by the popularity of such international competitions as 'Miss World' (started in Britain in 1951) and the Eurovision Song Contest (started by the European Broadcasting Union in 1956), and we may minimize or discount it.

2. Both any presumed American cultural traits and the consumer guide rationale seem likely to be less relevant in the international ranking

¹⁸ Ellen Hazelkorn. 'OECD: Consumer concept becomes a policy instrument'. *University World News*, Issue 0005, 11 November 2007.

¹⁹ Phil Baty. 'Back to square one'.

²⁰ Don Hossler. 'The problem with college rankings'. *About Campus*, March-April 2000.

systems as only a very few students have the opportunity to make choices between Harvard and Cambridge (say), and such choices are more likely to be made at the post-graduate rather than undergraduate stage of education – and so be driven by perceptions of the quality of an individual programme and its faculty rather than the university as a whole. Instead, concerns about national status and prowess may be more relevant. Thus, in an age of globalization, in which the ‘knowledge economy’ is seen as a crucial element in national success, a high ranking for any of a country’s universities is seen as a mark of success – governments seek high status for universities in their countries as a means of enhancing national prestige and at least some local citizens support such moves in the spirit of national pride.²¹ In this context, it is of note that both the Shanghai and the original *THES-QS* ranking systems originated in the context of explicit concerns about international comparisons. Thus, the original purpose of ARWU was to find out what the gap was between Chinese universities and ‘world-class’ universities in other parts of the world – presumably so as to discover how to improve the competitiveness of Chinese universities on a global scale. Again, the *THES-QS* ranking appeared almost immediately after the publication of the influential Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration (December 2003) which had called for the establishment of a league table of the best research universities worldwide so that both government and universities could assess the relative standing of British universities in global terms and so ensure success in international competition.²²

²¹ Doug Lederman. ‘You think we’re rankings-obsessed?’ *In Higher Ed*, 1 February 2010.

²² Richard Lambert. *Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration*. London: HM Treasury, December 2003, para 6.63. Lambert assumed that such an index would be easy to produce.

Consequences.

1. Rankings can have both positive and negative consequences. Positive consequences of the concern with increasing a university's status may include: (i) the provision of more resources, especially by governments seeking greater educational prestige; (ii) universities paying more attention to those factors which are valued in ranking systems and becoming more aware of the facilities or qualities which they need to build up – paying more attention to encouraging research, for example; and (iii) (according to some observers) increased transparency and public accountability.²³

2. **Commercial interests.** One probably negative consequence of the ranking process is the further commercialization of higher education. If we think of ranking as a particular form of consumer guide then the prevalence of commercial publishers in the ranking process is unsurprising. Neither should we be surprised to discover that commercial ranking agencies are concerned with the potential profit to be gained from their endeavours: it is unlikely that they spend time and money on rankings simply in altruistic pursuit of knowledge. Indeed, given the popularity of the rankings, those companies which compile the data are able to gain considerable commercial advantage from their publication. These comprise both direct gains and indirect opportunities from the publication of the rankings. Thus, for example, there have been dramatic increases in single-copy sales of *US News* for the ratings issues (in 1995, there was a two-thirds increase from the then average), and with on-line access, website hits reached eight million by 1999, and even the less popular *Business Week's* website received two million hits after announcing its 2003 rankings.²⁴ There are also opportunities

²³ Lederman. 'You think we're rankings-obsessed?'

²⁴ Jeff Garigliano. 'U.S. News college rankings rankle critics'. *Folio: The Magazine for Market Management*, 15 March 1997; Thompson. 'The best, the top, the most'; idem. 'Playing with numbers'..

for additional sales of books and services, such as the benchmarking comparisons offered by Quacquarelli Symonds: \$45,000 for a three-year comparison with six other institutions in 2010.²⁵ The ranking agencies argue that they are only providing a useful and popular service but their critics have been suspicious – for example, accusing them of forcing an annual release of data so as to ensure a steady income. Nor are commercial interests confined to the ranking agencies, of course. An inherent part of the growth of the ‘knowledge economy’ has been the ‘marketization’ of the university system and the increasing dominance of ‘audit culture’ values in determining university goals. In this context, ranking becomes a marketing tool in universities’ quest for improved student intake, faculty and funding.

3. Setting the agenda. By choosing to value certain criteria as signs of university excellence, rating agencies influence universities to value those criteria. What may originally have been a consumer concept has become an instrument of policy.²⁶ This is unproblematic when the criteria are widely or universally agreed to be important, but creates tensions when they are controversial. Pervasively, ranking scores no longer simply reflect a university’s quality, but come to define what ‘quality’ means, so that the university’s mission, objectives and activities are shaped by their administrators’ perceptions of what qualities are valued by their favoured ranking system. Thus, devotees of the Shanghai ranking learn to place higher value on scientific research and Nobel prizes, while devotees of the QS and *THE* rankings value reputation building and international marketing. Both, however, may neglect the quality of teaching, the university’s involvement with its local community and practical problem solving.²⁷

²⁵ Olds.

²⁶ Ellen Hazelkorn. ‘OECD: Consumer concept becomes a policy instrument’. *University World News*, Issue 0005, 11 November 2007.

²⁷ Marginson.

This pattern of influence has been particularly noted for the criteria used by the *US News* in its rankings, with universities paying more attention (for example) to student applicants' SAT scores, retention rates of students, or the proportion of alumni who contribute to college funding because these are amongst the *US News* criteria. This has been a significant factor in generating opposition to rankings in the United States (below), with university administrators, academics and students opining that educational values should be established and maintained by the universities themselves and not by some external agency that benefits commercially from the data it publishes. From this standpoint, the rankings agency is doing more than merely reporting data in an objective fashion, but is rather taking sides in educational debates which it then influences through its commercial power and its penalization of those institutions that do not conform to its criteria.²⁸ Similarly, it has been objected that the *US News* creates a pressure towards homogeneity which undercuts the varied and distinctive missions pursued by different colleges, and that the variables which it chooses reinforce a view of education that is concerned with merely extrinsic goals such as the university's prestige and wealth and the student's aim of acquiring credentials rather than any more idealistic objectives, or even such practical concerns as finding out what students actually got out of their college experience or how to improve the quality of teaching.²⁹ A related issue is the appearance of the various rankings on an annual basis – that is, satisfying the rating agencies' desire for an annual publication, rather than any longer time period which may be more convenient for the university to produce (see below).³⁰

²⁸ For example, see Scott Jaschik. 'Rankings frenzy '09'. *Inside Higher Ed*, 20 August 2009.

²⁹ Diver; Hosller; Thompson, 'Playing with numbers'.

³⁰ Kris Olds. 'Bibliometrics, global rankings, and transparency'. *Global Higher Ed*, 23 June 2010; and Kris Olds, Ellen Hazelkorn and Susan Robertson. 'Governing world university rankers: An agenda for much needed reform'. *Inside Higher Ed*, 21 September 2010.

4. **‘Production targets’**. Along with defining (or redefining) the values of academe, the ranking process is likely to lead to an urgent concern with enhancing university performance in areas valued by the ranking process. This trend is reinforced by the increasing embrace of the ‘audit culture’ approach in evaluating academic quality and success. In Britain, for example, it is alleged that the ‘Research Assessment Exercise’ (RAE), which is intended to assess the quality of academic output in fact serves to degrade its quality by encouraging ‘short-termism’ and a ‘narrowness of focus’.³¹ Thus, in order to fulfil what we might call ‘production targets’ academics are under intense pressure to publish journal articles and short monographs because these can be completed and peer-reviewed relatively quickly and in time to be included in any assessment exercise. Well-crafted books – once regarded as one of the most-valued products of academe, are disregarded because the delay of years of painstaking work required means that they do not fit into ‘assessment schedules’. This includes ‘big idea books’ that once might have helped to define the discipline. Moreover, in order to achieve rapid publication in ‘assessment-approved’ journals, the individual author is under considerable pressure to write what he or she knows the journal likes rather than to present ideas which may challenge any prevailing orthodoxy: that is, to be risk-averse and avoid innovation. Similarly, the monographs produced may be geared for assessment rather than any real academic or publication value. Whether or not the article or monograph is any good in academic terms becomes secondary to academic ‘productivity’ as measured in bureaucratic terms.

5. **Work load**. As the ranking exercises have grown more complex, the amount of work required from the universities in providing data has

³¹ Richard Baggaley. ‘How the RAE is smothering ‘big ideas’ books. *Times Higher Education*, 25 May 2007; Simon Head. ‘The grim threat to British universities’. *The New York Review of Books*, 13 January 2011.

increased. Ranking therefore necessitates the employment of extra staff to complete the forms or diverts existing staff away from other tasks. By 2005, for example, the *US News* statistical survey had grown to 656 questions, and institutions were also asked to rank hundreds of other colleges.³² In Britain, it is complained that in addition to distorting traditional ideas of academic quality, the tools of the ‘audit culture’ impose often considerable extra work on academics in terms of reporting and auditing while lower-level administrators such as departmental heads find themselves effectively redefined as ‘line managers’ in the production process of the knowledge economy, working to ensure that production criteria are met and that the academic products conform to the standards established by the ranking procedures. Unsurprisingly, as a result of these developments, reported job satisfaction amongst academics declines as they observe the micro-management of their own research in ways that distort their own concepts of academic quality and excellence.³³

6. **‘Gaming the system’**. ‘Campbell’s Law’ states that any quantitative social indicator that is used as the basis for decision making will be subject to corruptive pressures and will itself be likely to distort and corrupt the social processes which it is intended to monitor. The greater the emphasis that is put on the indicator, the more likely it is to corrupt and be corrupted.³⁴ Thus, measuring such indicators as academic reputation and publishing and citation records may be revealing and of value, but as soon as such measurements are seen as keys to success in ranking scores, then there are subject to corruptive pressures, with universities ‘gaming the system’, that is, seeking to enhance their status by manipulating and shaping their index scores.

³² Diver.

³³ Head.

³⁴ Donald T. Campbell. *Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change*. The Public Affairs Center, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1976.

Allegations of such behaviour have been common in the United States for almost as long as the ranking process has been an important aspect of evaluating the relative merits of colleges and continue to the present day.³⁵ Thus, in one prominent case, reported in June 2009, it was stated that Clemson University in South Carolina had succeeded in raising its ranking from 38th to 22nd over an eight-year period through deliberately changing key variables for the data that its officials submitted to *US News*. Changes included raising entry standards for new students ('favouring merit over access'); increasing the number of reported small classes (by reducing class size in selected courses while allowing them to rise in others);³⁶ increasing faculty salaries and further enhancing the reported figures by creative presentation; defining financial costs so as to emphasize academic expenditures over administrative ones; contacting 'disconnected alumni' and appealing to them to make even a nominal donation to the university so as to increase the recorded 'giving rate'; and systematically describing all other institutions as 'below average' in the reputational survey. This approach was seen as a practical means of improving the university's standing and has garnered praise, albeit at the cost of walking 'the fine line between illegal, unethical, and really interesting'.³⁷ A follow-up study by the on-line publication *Inside Higher Ed* suggested that while such deliberate open manipulation was rare there were many examples of poor data collection in the important ranking component of the *US News* gradings, including the submission of reply forms on behalf of someone else; superficial and rushed grading of other institutions; and the privileging of the home and related institutions over

³⁵ Hossler; Marginson.

³⁶ If extra 'marks' are given for small class size (less than 20, say), then it makes sense to distribute 75 students into two small classes and one large one (e.g. 18-18-39) rather than evenly distribute them between three medium-sized classes if these are not categorized as 'small' (i.e. 25-25-25).

³⁷ Doug Lederman. "Manipulating", er, influencing "U.S. News". *Inside Higher Ed*, 3 June 2009.

other universities. It was also noted that although university officials might be sceptical about the whole ranking exercise (particularly the peer assessment survey), they felt bound – by duty or the realities of market competition – to participate and fill in the required forms.³⁸

Other reported distortions over the years have included the regulation of student entry and refusal rates and the types of students admitted;³⁹ increasing the number of general applications so as to appear more selective;⁴⁰ not reporting low SAT scores from groups such as foreign students, recruited athletes and other ‘special admissions’; misclassifying certain categories of expenses so as to increase apparent per capita expenditures on instruction; artificially driving up the recorded number of applicants by manipulating the statistics; and hiring unemployed recent graduates for short-term positions so as to increase the percentage of employed graduates.⁴¹ It is also suspected that the goals of having a high retention and graduation rates of students can lead to less educational rigour, inflated grades, more provision of non-academic amenities and a reduction in graduation requirements.⁴² A more recent example of possible data misrepresentation or even manipulation concerns teaching staff, where figures reported to *US News* show that over 80 or 90 percent of faculty in most top colleges are full-time whereas it is widely acknowledged that American universities increasingly employ large numbers of part-time adjunct lecturers and graduate assistants as teachers in order to reduce salary costs. This discrepancy is partly due to the systematic exclusion of graduate assistants from the figures, but in at least one instance, was also due to only counting tenured faculty as staff and excluding those without tenure.⁴³

³⁸ Stephanie Lee. ‘Reputation without rigor’. *Inside Higher Ed*, 19 August 2009.

³⁹ Marginson.

⁴⁰ Hossler.

⁴¹ Diver.

⁴² Diver.

⁴³ Scott Jaschik. ‘Hiding adjuncts from “U.S. News”’. *Inside Higher Ed*, 3 September 2009.

The desire to raise rank can also have serious policy consequences as with legislators in the state of Kentucky, who severed the former links between the University of Kentucky and the state's community and technical colleges in order to increase the university's chances of gaining a higher rank.⁴⁴

We should not be surprised by the apparently widespread adoption of questionable practices in relation to rankings. There is an obvious incentive to game the system if it leads to a higher ranking and the presumed financial benefits that might follow, and as Robert Merton noted long ago deviance can be generated by the inability to achieve culturally valued goals by socially-approved means (in this case educational renown by achieving genuine educational excellence).⁴⁵ There are also instances of direct financial gain for the responsible officials if they succeed in increasing the ranking of their university – for example, the trustees of Virginia Commonwealth University at one time offered their university president a raise of \$25,000 if the university could be raised by one tier in the rankings.⁴⁶

7. Privileging. Another possible consequence of rankings is to deepen the divide between elite and non-elite institutions where such distinctions exist. In higher education systems increasingly dominated by the assumptions of the audit culture, governments may decide that the best use of scarce resources is by disproportionately expending them on institutions with a proven record of excellence shown by rankings success. Such colleges are likely to already be amongst the wealthier institutions so the divide between resource-rich and resource-poor is increased.⁴⁷ This privileging may also have a social dimension in

⁴⁴Doug Lederman. 'Angling for the top 20'. *Inside Higher Ed*, 6 December 2005.

⁴⁵Robert K. Merton. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Expanded edition. New York: Macmillan, The Free Press, 1968, pp. 185-248.

⁴⁶Thompson. 'The best'.

⁴⁷Hazelkorn. According to one estimate, in 2006, it cost at least one billion dollars a year to fund the work of a significant world class university (Hazelkorn).

societies in which richer, elite universities attract students from better-off families and those students from poorer families are more likely to attend cheaper and less prestigious institutions. A related issue is that in order to enhance their perceived excellence, universities are likely to become more selective in their admissions policies favouring merit over need.⁴⁸

8. **Prestige threat.** In preparing any system of university rankings, there are obviously ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Undoubtedly some universities are better than others, but an annual ranking serves to sharply focus attention on differences of rank, perhaps leading both to pride in gaining rank and ‘ranking envy’ on the part of those institutions of lesser or declining rank. Unsurprisingly, one survey of ‘university leaders’ found that ‘over half’ were unhappy with their current position in the university rankings, and 71 percent aspired for their university to be in top quarter of universities in international ranking.⁴⁹ Given that the ranking variables remain controversial and contested, this seems like an unnecessary source of stress. Universities can – and should – strive towards excellence, but worrying about their marginal success in a set of variables imposed by a ranking agency may not be an effective way of achieving excellence, particularly when the ranking results are presented as a single ‘score’ rather than specific points of comparison. The annual rankings undoubtedly pressurize universities to seek a particular kind of prestige, as rankings agencies and others may remind them: an account of the 2010 *THE* rankings notes that they would make it harder for university leaders ‘to provide an explanation as to why their universities have fallen down the rankings ladder’;⁵⁰ and the headline of an article

⁴⁸ Lederman. ‘You think we’re rankings-obsessed?’

⁴⁹ Hazelkorn.

⁵⁰ Kris Olds. ‘The 2010 THE World University Rankings, powered by Thomson Reuters’. *Global Higher Ed*, 15 September 2010.

on the latest rankings survey in 2011 warns that university reputations are ‘on the line’ as the data nears completion.⁵¹

The opposition movement in the USA.

As the longest-established and probably most influential of the ranking schemes, that produced by the *US News and World Report* since 1983 has been the most heavily criticized, even generating an active opposition movement. Criticism has been particularly directed at *US News*’s opaque evaluation criteria – which have changed over time and for their critics were not clearly spelt out and were put together by a secret formula; at the perceived arbitrariness and unreliability of the important reputational component of the ranking; the perceptions that what the ranking really measures is the institutional wealth of different colleges, and that reputation may depend as much on celebrity and fame (as in a university’s sporting facilities and reputation) as its academic record. A 1995 *Wall Street Journal* expos revealed some of the ways in which false data was produced in order to enhance colleges’ reputations.⁵²

1. The first significant opposition to the *US News* rankings came from the prestigious Reed College in Portland, Oregon, which from 1995 onwards has refused to participate in the *US News* surveys, citing their concern with the quality of the data collection – including institutions allegedly manipulating data to increase their rank, and their objections to treating universities as commodities and the use of a single-scale ranking of a complex and diverse institution. This stance had dangers for Reed’s reputation, as seen by *US News*’ act of revenge in instantly down-grading of Reed in its rankings, but the College’s reputation was so strong that it was able to withstand this attack. Its student admissions and revenue

⁵¹ Phil Baty. ‘Rankings update: Reputations on the line as survey nears closing date’. *Times Higher Education*, 5 May 2011.

⁵² Hossler.

were unaffected, and it gained kudos for its principled stand against commercial forces.⁵³ It also attracted praise from the Associated Students of Stanford University and a national student-based group calling itself ‘Forget *U.S. News* Coalition’ (FUNC), established in 1996. Stanford itself also adopted an anti-rankings policy in 1997 and encouraged other universities to join it in boycotting the *US News*’ reputational survey and developing an alternative internet site for publishing comparative statistical data on universities.⁵⁴

Despite the obviously widespread dissatisfaction with the rankings, this first burst of opposition was not sustained: FUNC ran out of steam and was apparently disbanded; Stanford came to accept that rankings were going to be a permanent reality and by 2006 had returned to participation in the *US News* system – celebrating its own high placing;⁵⁵ and although a few colleges like Reed continued to ignore the rankings, no permanent national opposition movement had emerged.

2. Criticism was revived in March 2007, however, by an article in the *Washington Post* by M. T. Myers, the then president of Sarah Lawrence College, a prestigious liberal-arts institution in New York state. The College had recently dropped its requirement that prospective students submit SAT test scores, and in response, *US News* had significantly lowered the College’s score on the SAT component of the ranking (by

⁵³ Harriet Watson. ‘U.S. News and World Report hat trick’. *Reed Magazine*, November 1997. See also Reed College, Admission Office. ‘College rankings’, and Diver. ‘Is there life after rankings?’

⁵⁴ Nick Thompson. ‘Down with rankings!’. *Summit: Stanford’s Newsmagazine of Progressive Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 November 1996; Jeff Garigliano. ‘U.S. News college rankings rankle critics’. *Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management*, 15 March 1997; Gerhard Casper. ‘An alternative to the *U.S. News and World Report* College Survey’. Stanford University, Office of the President, 18 April 1997; Elaine Ray. ‘Rankings: Round two’. *Stanford News Service*, 23 April 1997; Elaine Ray. ‘Can a college education really be reduced to numbers?’ *Stanford Today*, May/June 1997.

⁵⁵ Luukas Ilves and Stuart Baimel. ‘Stanford fourth in US News rankings’. *The Stanford Review* (online edition), vol. 37, issue 1, 22 September 2006.

one standard deviation). Myers was outraged: not only was *US News* essentially making up data but they were effectively pressurizing Sarah Lawrence to readopt the SAT requirement which they had rejected on educational grounds.⁵⁶ Soon after this, in May 2007, a group calling itself The Educational Conservancy organized an appeal to college presidents calling on them to refrain from filling in the *US News* reputational survey and to cease using the *US News* rankings in their advertising. Initially signed by twelve college presidents, it eventually attracted sixty-six signatories.⁵⁷ Then, in June 2007, a majority of the college presidents gathered for the annual meeting of the Annapolis Group declared their intention of no longer participating in the reputational survey and of developing an alternative data source to that provided by *US News*. It may be too soon to judge whether this new opposition movement will be sustained, but it is of note that by 2009, only some 48 percentage of all American colleges were responding to the *US News*'s reputational survey – less than half, and significantly down from an earlier rate of 67 percent.⁵⁸ A similar opposition movement to a Canadian rankings system published by *Maclean's* magazine started in 2006.⁵⁹

What of the future?

1. Given that higher education is increasingly perceived in globalized terms and that both governments and university administrators clearly desire to make international comparisons, the international ranking systems are undoubtedly with us to stay. However, as we have seen the whole process of **ranking is highly problematic** with little realistic hope of consensus as to how to do it and a plethora of negative consequences

⁵⁶ Michele Tolela Myers. 'The cost of bucking college rankings'. *The Washington Post*, 11 March 2007.

⁵⁷ The Educational Conservancy. 'Presidents' letter', 10 May 2007.

⁵⁸ Jaschik. 'Rankings frenzy'.

⁵⁹ Samarasekera.

that are unlikely to be avoided. Whether there would be **opposition** to the international ranking process on the part of many administrators and academics – as occurred in the United States in the movement against the *US News* rankings, is less certain given the different motivational appeals underlying international and Americans rankings. The possibility of an international refusal to provide the commercial ranking agencies with university data has been raised, however.⁶⁰ Growing opposition on theoretical grounds is also likely, as more and more people become conscious of the weak basis for the actual rankings and their consequent relative arbitrariness. Practical objections to having to frame university objectives in terms of the ranking agencies' criteria and to the effort and expense required to try to achieve a higher ranking are also likely to be voiced.

2. Given these realities, apart from tinkering with existing formulae, are there any ways in which rankings can be improved and made more acceptable to critics? One obvious possibility is to avoid making a total ranking of universities and instead **focus on component elements**. This is already done by some ranking systems and in some countries on a subject basis. Subject based league tables are both easier to compile and more comprehensible to most academics. For anyone who is a specialist in a particular area of knowledge – be it atomic physics, marketing, Middle Eastern Studies or German literature, the criteria for excellence are relatively easy to establish, and comparative tables easy to compile both on a national and international basis. Furthermore, by confining comparisons within a specific field, the problems caused by the different ways of measuring excellence in different disciplines are avoided: each discipline has its own specific criteria of success. Similarly, it is more straightforward to make comparative lists for

⁶⁰Olds, Hazelkorn and Robertson.

specific criteria – the number of graduates who go on to take a higher degree, for example.

3. Another response is to ask **who should control the ranking process**. The main international comparisons are made by ranking agencies that are external to both universities and governments. It is they who establish the criteria for evaluation and who control access to data and its presentation as well as any amendments in the process that may be deemed necessary. The passive role of universities in this process seems surprising to some observers, especially as it is the universities that bear the growing costs of compiling the data which is utilized by the ranking agencies. It has therefore been suggested that the universities should become more proactive in determining the rankings agenda, either through regional associations of universities or the creation of an international organization to oversee the work of the rankings agencies and to ensure that genuinely educational rather than merely commercial motivations prevail. An alternative suggestion has been to regulate and supervise rankings by means of inter-governmental agreements.⁶¹

4. Related to these ideas is the suggestion that the rankings be produced on a **more manageable time-frame** than every year. Although issuing an annual report on university rankings is beneficial to the ranking agencies which sell their reports, it places considerable logistical strain and added costs on the universities which are required to submit data. Moreover, given the slow pace of change in most university variables (with universities compared by one writer to slow moving oil tankers which are slow to change course), it is unlikely that annual reports are necessary in describing educational variables.⁶² Rankings would then become comparable to the Olympics rather than the Miss World competitions as at present.

⁶¹ Olds, Hazelkorn and Robertson.

⁶² Olds; Olds, Hazelkorn and Robertson.

5. Finally, there is the example of Reed College. Certain of the validity and value of their own criteria of excellence, the College authorities remained true to their own concept of education rather than any imposed by a rankings agency – despite considerable pressure to conform to the rankings system. This refusal to compromise meant that Reed retained its own values and sense of integrity. Not all universities have the advantage of Reed’s reputation, of course, but the concept of retaining one’s own sense of quality and integrity may be one that is attractive to at least some universities. An important first step for administrators and faculty would be to ask what they themselves considered to be excellence in education.

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