Global Rankings and University Responses: What the Evidence Tells Us

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Themes

1. Impact and Influence of Rankings on University Decision-making and Student Choice
2. What Experience Tells Us
3. Using Rankings Strategically
1. Impact and Influence on Decision-making & Student Choice

Policy Context

Globalisation and knowledge society
- Knowledge is key “factor in international competitiveness”
- Importance of talent – and hence HE – for knowledge-intensive economies;

Competition between HEIs for students, faculty, finance, researchers
- Demographic shifts pose challenge to national economic and societal goals;
- Internationalisation of higher education and research

Trend towards government steering mechanisms
- Increased emphasis on accountability, and societal value, contribution and impact.
- Shift to public value management & growing need to (re)regulate market

Increasing desire for internationally comparative or benchmarking data
- “Consumer” information for students/parents, and government;
- Dissatisfaction with robustness of traditional collegial mechanisms.
Quality is a Geopolitical Issue

Quality and excellence are key differentiators in national/global market;
— National geo-political positioning and pride;
— Beacon to attract/retain investment, business and talent;
— Institutional reputation and status;
— Performance assessment of scientific-scholarly research;
— Link between qualification and career opportunities and life-style;
— Value-for-money and return-on-(public) investment;

Today, less about student choice and more about geopolitical positioning.

What the Evidence Tells Us

Rankings are driver of decision-making at the institutional and national level;
— Highlights ambition and sets explicit strategic goal;
— Identifies KPIs used to measure performance and reward success;
— Rankings help identify under-performers and "reputational" disciplines.

Students, high achievers and international, use rankings to inform choice;
Other HEIs use rankings to identify potential partners or membership of international networks;
Employers and other stakeholders use rankings for recruitment or publicity purposes;
Government policy is increasingly influenced by rankings.
Institutional Reaction: Some Findings

84% HEIs have **formal internal mechanism** to review institution’s rank, and in 40% of cases, this is led by Vice Chancellor, President or Rector;

Overwhelming majority use **rankings to inform strategic decisions**, set targets or shape priorities, and inform decisions about int’l partnerships;

Majority of HEIs believe rankings **more helpful than hindrance** to institutional reputation;

84% use rankings to **monitor performance of peer institutions** in their own country cf. over 76% in 2006;

~77% HEIs monitor peers worldwide in 2014 cf. ~50% in 2006.

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Rankings’ Role In Institutional Strategy

| Yes, and our institution formulated a clear target in terms of its position in national rankings. | 39% |
| Yes, and our institution formulated a clear target in terms of its position in international rankings. | 18% |
| Yes, and our institution formulated a clear target for both national and international rankings. | 14% |

No | 29% | N = 171
Psychology of Ranking Positioning

Figure 2
COMFORT TIER CLAIMS RESULT IN HIGHER BRAND EVALUATIONS (STUDY 1)

More effective to label a university “Top 100” than “Number 89”, or even “Top 90”. “Top 100” advantageous over “Top 101” which could be interpreted as “Top 200”. Helps define market-specific communication strategies.

Summary of Impact on Decision-making & Academic Behaviour

• Over 50% HEIs (2014) have made strategic, organizational, managerial or academic decisions to improve position in rankings:
  - Revising policy and resource allocation;
  - Prioritising research areas;
  - Changing recruitment and promotional criteria;
  - Creating, closing or merging departments or programmes; and/or merging with another HEI, research institute, etc.
  - Identifying preferential journals in which faculty should seek to be published;
  - Research “stars” rewarded while teaching often seen as a “punishment”.

• Heightened emphasis on research and outputs as performance indicators:
  - Influencing disciplinary practices, such as publishing in English-language and internationally ranked journals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Examples of HEI Actions Taken</strong></th>
<th>~<strong>Weighting (2014)</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase output, quality and citations</td>
<td>ARWU = 100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recruit and reward faculty for publications in highly-cited journals</td>
<td>THE-QS = 60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publish in English-language journals</td>
<td>NTU = 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set individual targets for faculty and departments</td>
<td>THE = 93.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase number/proportion of PhD Students</td>
<td>QS = 70%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Merge with another institution, esp. research institute</td>
<td>ARWU = 10%;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop/expand English-language facilities</td>
<td>Research related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish Institutional Research capability</td>
<td>indicators as above</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embed rankings indicators as a performance indicator</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Form task group to review and report on rankings.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Target recruitment of high-achieving students, esp. PhD students</td>
<td>THE = 9.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer scholarships and other benefits</td>
<td>QS = 5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>More international activities and exchange programmes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Open International Office and professionalise recruitment</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Increase selectivity index, alter student recruitment practices, recategorize students, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Recruit/lead-hunt international high-achieving/HICl scholars</td>
<td>ARWU = 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create new contract/tenure arrangements</td>
<td>THE-QS = 95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Set market-based or performance/merit-based salaries</td>
<td>NTU = 100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reward high-achievers &amp; identify weak performers</td>
<td>THE = 97.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enable best researchers to concentrate on research</td>
<td>QS = 95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Image/Marketing</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensure common brand used on all publications</td>
<td>ARWU = 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalise Admissions, Marketing and Public Relations</td>
<td>THE-QS = 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand internationalisation alliances and membership of global networks</td>
<td>QS = 50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhance reputational factors, incl. referencing to rankings, targeting potential “peers”</td>
<td>THE = 33%</td>
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</tbody>
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**Student Choice & Rankings: Some Findings**

Rankings provide good source of information especially for int’l students

— Institutional rank transmits social and cultural capital which resonates with family, friends and potential employers;

80% undergraduate and postgraduate (taught and research) students have a high interest in rankings, with no real difference between undergraduate and postgraduate students (i-graduate, 2014);

— High achieving and high socio-economic students most likely to make choices based on non-financial factors, e.g. reputation and rankings;

Data often refers to reputation rather than rankings – but difficult to disassociate the concepts.

— Strong correlation between rankings, perceptions of quality, institutional reputation and destination;

— Thus, OECD talks of “perceptions of quality”.

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Top 10 Factors Influencing Student Choice, 2010 and 2014

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Reputation (value in my career) of a qualification from this university</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reputation of this Institution</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Quality of research</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Reputation of the education system in this country</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Personal safety and security</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cost of education (tuition fees)</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Specific programme title</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Cost of living</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Earning potential of my chosen degree from this Institution</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Position in ranking/league tables</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: © International Graduate Insight Group Ltd. (i-graduate), 2014
NB. For 2010 figures, “n/a” means the “Factor” listed for 2014 did not feature in the top ten most important factors in 2010.

2. What Experience Tells Us
Griffith University, Australia

Australia, at the national policy level, highly influenced by rankings – geopolitical positioning and demographic/economic issues;

- Governments have issued statements over the years, highlighting importance of rankings as international benchmark and strategic target

Strategic target: to be “one of the most influential universities in Australia and Asia-Pacific Region” -
global issues subsumed national objectives

Rankings form part of strategic planning mix but not used to set targets or for formal reporting;

- Uses benchmarking data provided by rankings,
- Faculty have had to adopt to use of a wide range of indicators and benchmarking techniques, e.g. citation and h-impact.

Improvement is burden – increasing expectations and slippage is problem.

(Sheils in Altbach et al., 2016, 12-37)

University of Reading, UK

UK government does not explicitly mention rankings – but emphasis on marketization and competition has emphasized reputational hierarchies of HEIs as reflected in/through rankings;

- Positioning of UK universities especially important post-BREXIT

University strategy identifies desire to become global university “in which teaching, research and enterprise are conceived, planned and delivered with explicit reference to global needs and issues”;

- Marketing material references KPIs and rankings performance;
- Focus priorities and actions; identified strengths and weaknesses;
- Doing well had positive impact on staff morale.

Tensions emerge between alignment with rankings and university’s values

- Being competitive and making ethical decisions;
- Climbing the rankings and meeting national/local needs.
University X, China

Chinese government set ambition to establish world-class universities – 211 Plan, 985 Project, 2011 Plan

Rankings identified huge gap between current status and ambition.

- Initially, gap was infrastructure;
- Today, gap is professional qualification and ability of academics.

Attention focused on targeted actions has improved rankings:

- Recruit more overseas PhD graduates, and in-service/professional development of domestic Chinese academics without a PhD;
- HR reforms, incl. tenure system; classification of academic positions;
- Increased competitiveness within/between academic staff.

But tensions emerge:

- Teachers without PhD at grave disadvantage;
- Preferential treatment/positions given to returnees.

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Young (1981) research-intensive university on rapid global rise, due to combination of factors:

- Political support and significant investment in higher education and R&D;
- Introduction of tenure track system, alongside flexible labour laws;
- Recruitment of international “stars”, and young international faculty (grants up to S$1m over 3-years for cutting-edge research, as well as the prospect of tenure-track appointments;
- Collaboration with international corporates and universities;

Actions aligned with attributes promoted by rankings:

- Staff-student ratio, 16:1
- ~32% international students
- Research publications and citation impact
- Student selectivity index.

Ranked 1st amongst QS under 50 years, and 3rd in THE rankings
Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Spain

Established 1991 – decision by Catalan Parliament to divide U Barcelona;

− Establish “knowledge pole” to contribute “decisively to the involvement of
Catalonia and Spain in the cultural, social and economical development of the
world”;

Align teaching, research & innovation along 5 strategic areas: chemistry/chemical
engineering; classical/prehistoric archaeology; oenology; tourism/leisure; nutrition/health;
Leverage local expertise for global recognition.

− Research performance in key fields → good position in rankings
(rather than vice versa)

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University of Kentucky, USA

State legislature set goal to reach Top-20 by 2020 according to USNWR.
University identified the need to: recruit additional 6200 undergraduates, 750 graduate and
professional students, 374 post-doctoral researchers, 625 faculty, award 3065 bachelor and 189
doctoral degrees, and raise research expenditure by $470m [EUR 345.5 million]
University had to alter student entry criteria and become more selective to meet
completion/employment level, including graduate salaries:

− As a land-grant university this meant refocusing its mission and becoming more prestigious
and exclusive.

Post-2008, state & university faced difficult economic/budgetary problems;
By 2009-2010, university had failed to keep pace with its 2006 metrics, plus there was a major
funding gap of over $420m [EUR 309.8 million].
The strategy was abandoned.

[DeYoung and Baas, 2012, 89; University of Kentucky, 2005; Lederman, 2005].
3. Using Rankings Strategically

Lessons and Tensions

Rankings say something about university performance, competitiveness, quality & productivity;
- Increasingly important for all stakeholders, international partnerships and scholarships;
- Represents shift from self-declaration to external verification;
Rankings are a “report card” on disparity in resources and unevenness in global production of knowledge;
- WCUs are increasing spending per student at faster rate than less prestigious universities (spending increased by 15.7% on average between 2011-2016) (Usher & Ramos, 2018);

Widening schism between local, regional, national and global ambitions:
- Emphasis on selectivity, elites and research, and less interest in equity, teaching, or national/regional issues;
- Privilege bio-sciences vs. arts, humanities and social sciences;
Allocation of different resources & benefits based on rankings, e.g. research vs. teaching; graduate vs. undergraduate students
Future Trends

Cross-national comparisons are inevitable by-product of globalization and will intensify in the future;

- Growing array of national and international tools for assessing and comparing quality, performance and productivity;
- Social media likely to play growing role;
- Consolidation across global knowledge intelligence industry: publishers, big data/data analytics, and rankings, e.g. Elsevier, Linked-In,
- Emergent tensions around data/data – and its ownership & governance.

“Legacy of rankings” has highlighted the importance of internationally comparative information about institutional performance;

Political and societal support for HE can only be maintained by a system of quality assessment, performance enhancement and value-for-money – providing investor confidence.

Some Simple Steps

1. Ensure institutional data submitted to Elsevier (Scopus) and Clarivate (Web of Science) and rankings is accurate:
   - Faculty involved in teaching/research are properly counted,
   - “institutional income”, research income, etc. should be accurate;
2. Ensure common attribution to be used by everyone for all publications, e.g. ensure the same university name and address;
3. Conduct search of publications in bibliometric databases to ensure university listed correctly, esp. co-authored articles;
4. Ensure accurate and strategic data collection, monitoring and analysis;
5. Greater communication about university and its research to boost reputational impact.
Have you costed your ambition?

1. Being comprehensively excellent is not possible, so choices matter.
   - Resources matter – but consistency over time matters more.
   - Strategic trade offs: rankings vs. mission?
   - Human trade offs – differentiated treatment of faculty and impact of research KPIs
2. Aside from a few actions, every action has a price – e.g. in terms of mission, choices and resources;
3. Targeting particular indicators will only move the dial a small, statistically insignificant amount – but the cost can be significant;
4. There will never been a sufficient level of resources – so it's a question of using the resources you have more strategically and effectively;
5. Instead: consider any improvement in rankings as an outcome of an aligned strategy rather than an input/driver of strategy.

Dos and Don’ts

Don’t
Change your institution’s mission to conform with rankings;
Use rankings as the only/primary set of indicators to frame goals or assess performance;
Use rankings to inform policy or resource allocation decisions;
Manipulate public information and data in order to rise in the rankings.

Do:
Ensure your university has an appropriate/realistic strategy and performance framework;
Use rankings only as part of an overall quality assurance, assessment or benchmarking system;
Be accountable and provide good quality public information about learning outcomes, impact and benefit to students and society;
Engage in an information campaign to broaden media and public understanding of the limitations of rankings.
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