

Using Rankings Strategically

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Why Rankings

- Rankings **appear** to be a simple and easy way to measure and compare performance and productivity;
- Global rankings reflect the realization that in a global knowledge economy, national pre-eminence is no longer enough;
- Satisfy a "public demand for transparency and information that institutions and government have not been able to meet on their own"
(Usher & Savino, 2006, p38);
- There are implications for:
 - Reputation and status – nationally and internationally;
 - Student recruitment and graduate employability;
 - Government funding;
 - HE and industry alliances
 - Philanthropy and alumni support;
 - Etc.

How Rankings Work

- Compare institutions by using a range of indicators:
 - Indicators are chosen by the designers of each system;
 - Different indicators are weighted differently.
- Final score aggregated to single digit in descending order;
- There are no internationally agreed set of indicators to measure quality;
- Each indicator is considered independently from each other - with no consideration as to context, history, mission, etc.
- Rankings are a commercial product.

What Rankings Measure

Global Rankings Measure

- Bio- and medical sciences Research
- Publications in *Nature* and *Science*
- Student and Faculty Characteristics (e.g. productivity, entry criteria, faculty/student ratio)
- Internationalization
- Reputation – amongst peers, employers, students

Global Rankings Do Not Measure

- Teaching and Learning, incl. "added value", impact of research on teaching
- Arts, Humanities and Social Science Research
- Technology/Knowledge Transfer
- Impact and Benefit of Research
- Regional or Civic Engagement
- Student Experience

Who uses Rankings

- Undergraduate, domestic students
 - Parents
-
- Internationally mobile students and faculty
 - Postgraduate students
 - Academic partners and academic organisations
 - Government/Polycymakers
 - Employers
 - Sponsors, philanthropists and private investors
 - Industrial partners
 - The public and public opinion
 - Ranking agencies/organisations

Role of Stakeholders

- Rankings can affect the opinions and decisions of key stakeholders, e.g. students, members of governing authority, employers, alumni, philanthropists, policymakers and politicians, etc.
- Rankings do influence student choice – but evidence varies:
 - International postgraduate students most likely to use rankings;
 - High achieving students and those who are “free to choose”;
 - Engineering, business or science students more likely to refer to rankings than arts, humanities or social science students;
 - Can play a decisive role for students seeking government sponsorship or a scholarship to study abroad.

Impact of Rankings

- Rankings can affect the opinions and decisions of key stakeholders, e.g. students, members of governing authority, employers, alumni, philanthropists, policymakers and politicians, etc.
- Rankings are one format by which to compare the performance of higher education.
- Alternative tools which, depending upon the user and the objectives, can be used to drive or compare performance, inform students or other stakeholders, and assure and measure quality.
- Which university is best depends on who is asking, what question is being asked and the purpose.

Transparency instruments

- *Accreditation*: used to certify the legitimacy of a particular HEI including the authority to award qualifications, either directly or via another agency;
- *Benchmarking*: used for systematic comparison of practice/performance with peer HEIs/nations to manage strategically, effectively and efficiently;
- *Classification*: provide a typology or framework of higher education institutions to denote diversity according to mission and type;
- *College guides*: fulfil public service role, helping and informing domestic undergraduate students and their parents;
- *QA, Evaluation and Assessment*: used to assess quality of research and/or teaching & learning to compare performance;
- *Qualifications Frameworks*: provide an integrated approach to learning, forming a single hierarchy of different qualifications, usually from primary to doctoral level;
- *Ratings*: assessment according to particular characteristics which form a threshold of achievement.

Using Rankings Strategically

- Cross-national comparisons are inevitable by-product of globalization and will intensify in the future;
- Universities should be aware of rankings – as one source of information – but not be slavish to them;
- Rankings are influencing higher education policy, nationally and internationally, students and stakeholders, and the public;
- “Legacy of rankings” has highlighted the importance of providing publicly available and meaningful, comparative information about institutional performance;
- Key issue is how the university gets its message out – and manages the information about its mission, offerings, achievements, etc.
- 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.

Discussion

- How much attention should universities or their governments pay to rankings?
- How can rankings aid strategic thinking?
- What kind of information should a university provide to its various stakeholders?
- If the current rankings are inappropriate, which other formats or transparency instruments might be more useful?
- Which indicators would be most/more helpful for measuring HE quality or your university in particular?

Dos and Don'ts

Don't

- Seek to change your institution's mission or strategic plan in order to conform to rankings;
- Use rankings to inform resource allocation decisions;
- Manipulate your public information and data in order to rise in the rankings.

Do:

- Ensure your HEI has a coherent mission and strategic plan – and stay true your mission;
- Establish an institutional research unit to provide good data and information to underpin your strategic plan and strategic decision-making;
- Use rankings **only** as part of an overall quality assurance, assessment or benchmarking system and not as a stand-alone evaluation tool;
- Be accountable and provide good quality public information about your institution to students and parents, and other stakeholders;
- Engage in an information campaign with government and the media to broaden the understanding of the limitations of rankings.

Which are the best universities?

- Are these the universities which best match the criteria established by the different rankings or those that help the majority of students earn the credentials that the job market demands?
- Are the best universities those that contribute to new scientific discoveries and highly trained PhDs or those that “emphasize the obligations students have to serve their communities and the nation at large” (Editors, *Washington Monthly*, 2009)?
- Should resources be directed to the few universities which perform best against rankings, or should national policy avoid distortions in resource allocation and ensure resources meet the needs of the wider tertiary education sector (Salmi, 2010)?

Influence and impact on your university

- Rankings provide a good "environmental scan" but not basis for decision-making;
 - No university said (or admitted) they made changes in response to rankings;
- But rankings did have an impact on the public's perception of the university – and sought ways to counter this (negative) impact.
- Many made references to other data sources but not clear extent to which these provide basis for strategic decision-making;
- Little information given as to the type of decisions taken and whether the information gleaned from rankings/other sources was driving the university to rethink key aspects of its strategy/direction, or to fight harder to attract students.
- rankings are a game-changer.
 - Good quality, international comparative information is essential to underpin strategic leadership and decision-making at the institutional level, and to demonstrate value, impact and benefit.