University Rankings: what’s the problem & what can we do about it?

Dr Elizabeth Gadd
Chair, INORMS Research Evaluation Group
Vice-Chair, CoARA
Government-run university excellence initiatives

- Taiwan “Development plan for world class universities and research centers of excellence”
- Russia “Academic Excellence Initiative” Project 5-100
- China “Double First Class Initiative” 42 world-class HEIs by 2050
- Japan “Top Global University Project”
Government sanctioned university mergers

How France overcame the odds to build a research mega-campus

The huge Paris-Saclay University has earned a top international ranking — but whether the model is a success.

Two SA universities look to merge and create top 100 contender

South Australia's two largest universities have formally agreed to investigate a full merger, with the new institution to be operational by January 2026 if all goes to plan.

Experts warn failure to consider merging all four WA universities could leave institutions out in the cold

Failing to consider mergers could leave WA universities out in the cold as bigger institutions climb higher on academic world rankings, experts have warned.

Research ranking case for “Adelaide University”

A merged Uni Adelaide and Uni SA should rise at least 15 places in the shorter term.
High Potential Individual (HPI) visa

Eligibility

To be eligible for a High Potential Individual (HPI) visa, you must have been awarded a qualification by an eligible university.

Where you studied

The list of eligible universities is based on rankings of universities from around the world.
organisational data on 102 English universities from 2008 to 2017, we find that the rank a university occupies in league tables affects all universities except elite universities, controlling for previous level of financial sustainability and institutional level differences. We further show that this relationship is partly explained by universities’ income from tuition fees. The findings document universities’ financial vulnerability to rankings in quasi-markets of higher education, and these reinforce costs of elite status as a positional good.
Investment in ranking improvement

## Rankings Assistant

**Durham University Business School**

Dynamic and vibrant, Durham University Business School is one of Durham University’s four Faculties and is comprised of three research-intensive departments: Accounting, Economics and Finance, and Management and Marketing. Known for its global reputation, its impact on policy and practice and its strong focus on ethics, responsibility and sustainability, the School aims to be a leading European business school with a strong global presence by 2027.

The School currently has 180 academic and teaching staff, with plans and resource commitments to grow to 230 by 2027. The School has a high-quality portfolio of programmes at undergraduate, masters and doctoral level, across all subject areas. The School’s student population is around 4000, across undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes, attracting a talented and diverse student intake (with over 130 nationalities).

Our vision is to lead business thought and practice to improve global wealth and well-being. Our associated mission is to create, share and use knowledge to deliver equitable and sustainable futures around
Gaming...and cheating
Trickle-down effect

- Individuals
- Universities
- Funders
- Governments
- University rankings
CoARA Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment

Core commitments

1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators
3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment
Systemic effects:

- Maintain the status quo
- Concentrating power & prestige
- Homogeneity
- Stifling innovation
- Competition over collaboration
- Deficit model
- Scarcity mindset
But shouldn’t universities be accountable?

- Yes!
- But accountable to whom?
- Who appointed the rankings?
- To whom are they accountable?
But shouldn’t universities be accountable?

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- Who appointed the rankings?
- To whom are they accountable?
If you need a league table to tell you what matters, are you really a university?
ARE THEY TRUE?
Methodological issues
The research question

- Which is the best university in the world?
- Best at what?
- What are the characteristics of a top university
- …and in what proportion?
### 3. Indicators and Weights for ARWU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Education</td>
<td>Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals</td>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Faculty</td>
<td>Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals</td>
<td>Award</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Faculty</td>
<td>Highly Cited Researchers</td>
<td>HiCi</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Output</td>
<td>Papers published in Nature and Science*</td>
<td>N&amp;S</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Output</td>
<td>Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index</td>
<td>PUB</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Performance</td>
<td>Per capita academic performance of an institution</td>
<td>PCP</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data quality

Ranking surveys are "unscientific straw polls"
“Bielefeld’s 120-place rise in the ranking was, our analysis showed, clearly caused by one scholar.”
Honest reporting:
CWTS Leiden Ranking stability intervals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>P(top 10%)</th>
<th>PP(top 10%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London Sch Hyg &amp; Trop Med</td>
<td>2422</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwestern Univ</td>
<td>11133</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington Univ St Louis</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King's Coll London</td>
<td>8826</td>
<td>1469</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icalma Sch Med - Mt Sinai</td>
<td>5905</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Univ Glasgow</td>
<td>5634</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Univ Texas - Southwestern Med Ctr - Dallas</td>
<td>4840</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong Univ Sci &amp; Technol</td>
<td>3839</td>
<td>629</td>
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<tr>
<td>London Sch Econ &amp; Polit Sci</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>325</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boston Coll</td>
<td>1372</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changsha Univ Sci &amp; Technol</td>
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<td>Queen Mary Univ London</td>
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<td>628</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humanities Univ</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Are they fair?
Embedding inequalities
Characteristics of a highly-ranked HEI

- Old
- Large
- Wealthy
- Research-intensive
- Science-focussed
- English-speaking
- ‘Global North’
Location of journals used in THE & QS Rankings

Structural inequity in research assessment

Journals
(based on SJR-Scopus)
Location of top 20 HEIs in THE Impact Ranking 2023
Countries in which high potential individuals can be found according the UK government

World-class Universities? Interrogating the Biases and Coloniality of Global University Rankings

UNU-IIGH Briefing Paper, February 2023
Yale, Harvard and UC Berkeley law schools withdraw from US News rankings

Both law schools say US News & World Report’s annual rankings are in conflict with commitments to diversity and affordability.

Students at Harvard law school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yale and Harvard appear to be the first to opt out of the US News rankings. Photograph: Steven Senne/AP

In the most dramatic rebuke of the US News & World Report’s colleges and universities rankings to date, Yale and Harvard announced on Wednesday they will stop participating in the magazine’s law school rankings, citing frustrations with the list’s methodology.

Harvard Leads an Exodus of Medical Schools Withdrawing from US News Rankings

The nation’s top-ranked medical schools have stated they will no longer participate in annual rankings with U.S. News, citing methodological and philosophical frustrations.

By Alexandra Tromayne-Penney - 01/24/23 4:37pm

Harvard Medical School was the first to withdraw from med school rankings. (Photo by David L. Ryan/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)
Why UU is missing in the THE ranking

29 September 2023

Contact
Press Office Utrecht University
pressoffice@uu.nl
“Universities with frequent QS-related contracts had an increase of 0.75 standard deviations (~140 positions) in QS World University Rankings ... over five years, regardless of changes in the institutional quality.”
About The World 100

The World 100 is focused on improving and maintaining the reputation, communications, strategy, crisis, marketing, and international partnerships of the world’s best universities via our Reputation Network, consultancy, research, events and more.

- 72% of members improved or maintained their THE 2021 rank
- 6 members made the top 50 places of AWRU 2021
- 64% of members improved their academic reputation scores in the 2021 QS Rankings

Find Us

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London, WC1R 4HQ

THE World Universities Insights Limited
26 Red Lion Square
London
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United Kingdom
Imagine a game of football in which a referee is also the coach of one of the teams playing. Crazy, right? You know what's crazier? The audience believing that a fair game is possible.
What can institutions do?

- **Accepting** the rankings is an unacceptable position for any intellectually credible institution that claims to care about knowledge equity.

- **Rejecting** the rankings can amount to financial and reputational suicide
What can’t institutions do?

- Nothing
- If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.
- A time is coming when university reputation will be assessed not only by how it’s judged by the rankings, but by how it engages with the rankings.
Union of Students in Ireland call on universities to cut ties with rankings

USI and TCDSU Call to Cut Ties with University Rankings

In a motion passed at USI Council this evening and in a letter from the TCDSU to the Provost, student representatives are calling for College governing bodies to "re-evaluate their participation in university rankings" with the ultimate goal to withdraw from those they see as unfair.

Alex Payne
ASSISTANT EDITOR

In a motion passed at USI Council this evening and in a letter from the TCDSU to the Provost, student representatives are calling for College governing bodies to "re-evaluate their participation in university rankings" with the ultimate goal to withdraw from those they see as unfair.

Both arguing against the "neoliberalisation of our institutions", the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the Trinity College Dublin Students' Union (TCDSU) are using the example of Utrecht University's recent withdrawal from the Times Higher Education World Rankings for 2024 to highlight their perceived issues with partaking in a ranking system which the USI describes as an "inherently biased" and the TCDSU claims is unfair.
Lots of advice!
Use of the rankings

- Institutional decisions should not be driven by rankings
  - Universities should follow holistic institutional strategies, instead of investing considerable time and energy in improving rankings results.
  - Do not use rankings in evaluations, for budget allocation purposes and in other policy contexts.
Communication about the rankings

Universities have a duty to educate:

- Educate external stakeholders in the uses and misuses of rankings
- Encourage students to conduct their own research rather than just using rankings.
- An institution’s decision for or against participating in a ranking exercise should be clearly explained and communicated, as should the meaning of any given outcome or score.
Collaboration with the rankings

Universities should consider the nature of their collaborations with the rankings:

- Not submitting data and information for commercial ranking purposes or
- ...making the submitted data also publicly available on their websites.
- Not participating in reputation surveys distributed by rankers.
- Not purchasing products and services from the commercial rankers.
- Not hosting or participating in events organised by the commercial rankers.
Alternatives to the rankings

- Universities should support better ways of assessing university performance.
  - U-Multirank (quantitative)
  - More Than Our Rank (qualitative)
Sign up to More Than Our Rank

More Than Our Rank

The More Than Our Rank initiative has been developed in response to some of the problematic features and effects of the global university rankings. It provides an opportunity for academic institutions to highlight the many and various ways they serve the world that are not reflected in their ranking position. This initiative is meant for every academic institution, whether ranked or unranked, top 10 or yet to place. It is an initiative for institutions who are proud of their ranking position but also recognize the limitations of the indicators used, and for those who feel that the rankings do not reflect their strengths or institutional mission. Every institution in the world is much more than their rank. This initiative is simply an opportunity to publicly say so and explain why.

Why participate?

By participating in the More Than Our Rank initiative, academic institutions are demonstrating a commitment to responsible assessment and to acknowledging a broader and more diverse definition of institutional success.

https://inorms.net/more-than-our-rank/
The More Than Our Rank logo displayed next to the names highlights that these universities are More Than Our Rank signatories. More Than Our Rank signatories are highlighted in orange.
10. We know that universities are much, much more than their rank

The data that underpins our portfolio of rankings covers a vast array of vital university activities: teaching, research, knowledge transfer, financial health, reputation, inclusion, student outcomes, social and economic impact, and sustainability. They offer a sophisticated set of benchmarks and insights that can be tailored to suit multiple missions in many different contexts. But we also fully understand that data alone can never capture all the extraordinary ways that universities contribute to our world.
Don’t tell me you care about knowledge equity and do nothing about the global university rankings.
Thanks for listening

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