WCU-4: “Different Approaches to a Shared Goal”
Shanghai, China
30 October – 02 November 2011
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Rational and constructive use of rankings: a challenge for universities in the global South
In brief…

- How can rankings be used to address challenges faced by universities in the developing world?
- Meaningful engagement - a UCT case study.
- How we drew researchers into the debate about rankings
- UCT ‘Framework for Engagement’
- Further institutional responses to the ‘Framework’
- Impact of the ‘Framework’ on current evaluation practice
- Themes that evolved out of the ranking systems debate
- Summary of lessons learnt
- Concluding remarks

Rational and constructive engagement with ranking systems?

- Developing economies and imperative for social responsiveness
- Moral duty to address challenges in immediate environment
- Excellence required to find novel solutions
- Excellence comes with international competitiveness
- Proxies of excellence vary across disciplines
How we drew researchers into the debate about rankings

- Symposium in 2008 to discuss rankings
  - it encouraged a sophisticated and critical view of rankings
  - it sparked debate about the advantages and disadvantages of ranking for the Global South
  - it encouraged clear principles about how to think about rankings:
    - advancement in the ranking must never be a goal in itself
    - the rankings should prompt each discipline to examine what constitutes excellence in that discipline
    - the most important goal of research is that it should make a difference, i.e. have impact
  - it culminated in ‘Framework for Engagement’

‘UCT Framework for Engagement’

- Ongoing engagement with systems required
  - to remain mindful of indicators used to arrive at proxy of excellence
  - to influence choice of indicators
  - to develop our own discipline-specific indicators of excellence
  - To have ongoing debate in faculties – linked with an ongoing discussion at central level about achieving excellence
Further institutional responses to the ‘Framework’

- Cutting-edge research and social responsiveness: competing priorities?
- Internationalisation imperative: also a competing agenda?
- Solution: Internationally competitive research that also benefits society.
- Social innovation – new solutions through the agency of research and training – and taking care not to waste resources by doing what any NGO can do

Impact of the ‘Framework’ on current evaluation practice

- Critique of ranking systems culminated in institutional concept paper
- A “Research Indaba” in 2010 took stock of progress
- Faculty-specific plans have been evolved
- And there is a common commitment to play in higher league of global research, while always prioritizing what makes intellectual sense, rather than mere advancement in the rankings
Themes that evolved out of the ranking systems debate

- The need for increased focus in areas that offer geographical advantage (development of modalities to support this)
- Renewed focus on international co-operation, including other countries in Africa (evidence of bibliometric analysis on co-authorship etc)
- Drive for increased visibility (review of dissemination strategies; research portal; the Knowledge Co-op)
- Increased support to all levels of researchers

Summary of lessons learnt

- Engage academics in open debate without dictating behaviour
- Rankings raise awareness of comparative data and focuses plans on defining and measuring excellence in ways appropriate to each discipline
- Rankings highlight the importance of targeting publishers and journals that have the highest impact – therefore best visibility – in each field
- Rankings show the importance of producing graduates that can hold their own in world-class institutions (strengthens curricula evaluation, supervision, mentorship)
Summary of lessons learnt (continued)

- Need to provide appropriate incentives to focus effort and concentrate resources
- By focusing on impact, discipline-specific indicators emerge that strengthen evaluation and encourage benchmarking with select peers (comparing apples with apples)
- Rankings serve as catalyst to capitalise on strategic publication, collaboration and ‘packaging’ (making visible)
- Strengthens the nexus between administration and researchers: a common sense of purpose
- Buy-in and collaboration to develop mechanisms to enhance quality; to undergo peer reviews and audits

Conclusion

- The rankings have prompted us to invest even more in quality and the pursuit of appropriate goals, rather than blindly investing in a higher ranking
- The rankings have brought into sharp relief that we have to develop our own vision of excellence
- We will use this vision to make a difference in the increasingly globalised world
- But our engagement will always be informed by our context in the global South