And then there were 10+: Reflections on a decade of global rankings

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Themes

- What have we learned?
- Rethinking quality
- Rankings/Policy contradictions

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?
Back where it all began...

- No-one predicted global rankings would become the game-changer they have become, setting the cat among the pigeons.
- Immediately – and subsequently – attracted attention of policymakers and the academy:
  - Choice of indicators has set parameters for what constitutes quality;
  - Visible measure of global competitiveness and multi-polar character;
  - “Top 100” has transformed “world-class” into a strategy, a language, a topic of study;
  - Has driven profound transformation (experimentation) of our HEIs and HE systems;
  - HE/R&D investment is now high on political and policy agenda.
- Today, less about student choice and more about geo-political positioning. And in the process, a whole industry has been created.

In the meantime...

Backdrop of last decade critical to understanding significance and impact:
- Early years associated with tail-end of long period of economic growth driven by unregulated finance capital;
- Latter years marked by lingering effects of the 2008 GFC.
  - OECD countries experienced steepest decline in growth in 60 years;
  - Developing countries growing on average 5.6% (2012) and 5.9% (2013).
- Noticeable shifts in “world order” and intensification of competition for a greater share of mobile capital and talent;
  - Significant demographic changes;
  - R&D investment patterns and geographic imbalances.
- Explains why global rankings have assumed such significance at a geo-political level.
What have we learned?

- Rankings are driver of decision-making at national and institutional level:
  - Highlight ambition and set explicit strategic goals;
  - Identify KPIs used to measure performance and reward success;  
  - Identify under-performers and "reputational" disciplines;
  - Resource allocation, classification, QA, benchmarking, etc.
- 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, publicity or investment purposes;
- Governments policy is increasingly influenced by rankings.

### Indicative Actions Taken by HEIs in Response to Rankings

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<th>Category</th>
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<th>Weighting</th>
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| Research      | • Relatively develop/promote bio-sciences rather than arts, humanities & social sciences  
• Allocate additional faculty to internationally ranked departments  
• Reward publications in highly-cited journals  
• Publish in English-language journals  
• Set individual targets for faculty and departments | ARWU = 100%; THE-QS = 20%  
THE-TR = 65%  
QS = 20%  
SCImago = 100%  
USNews = 20% |
| Organisation  | • Merge with another institution, or bring together discipline-complementary departments  
• Incorporate autonomous institutes into host HEI  
• Establish Centres-of-Excellence & Graduate Schools  
• Develop/expand English-language facilities, international student facilities, laboratories  
• Embed indicators as a performance indicator or contract between presidency and departments.  
• Form task group to review and report on rankings. | ARWU = 10%; Research related indicators as above |
| Curriculum    | • Harmonise with EU/US models  
• Discontinue programmes/activities which negatively affect performance  
• Grow postgraduate activity in preference to undergraduate  
• Favour science disciplines  
• Positively affect student/staff-ratio (SSR) | ARWU = 10%  
THE-QS = 20%  
THE-TR = 15%  
USNews = 20% |
| Students      | • Target high-achieving students, esp. PhD  
• Offer attractive merit scholarships and other benefits  
• Increase selectivity index | ARWU = 15%  
THE-TR = 9.5%  
QS = 5%  
USNews = 15% |
| Faculty       | • Head-hunt international high-achieving/HGI scholars  
• Create new contract/tenure arrangements  
• Set market-based or performance/merit based salaries  
• Reward high-achievers and identify weak performers  
• Enable best researchers to concentrate on research/relieve them of teaching | ARWU = 40%  
THE-QS = 25%  
THE-TR = 2.25%  
QS = 20% |
| Academic Services | Professionalise Admissions, Marketing and Public Relations  
Ensure common brand used on all publications  
Advertisements in Nature and Science and other high focus journals  
Expand internationalisation alliances and membership of global networks | ARWU = 40%  
THE-QS = 40%  
THE-TR = 34.5%  
USNews = 40%  
Webometrics = 60% |
Some effects

- Restructuring of national systems;
- Reshaping of national priorities;
- Refocusing of institutional priorities;
- Reorganising the HEI, institutional departments and hierarchy of disciplines;
- Emphasis on research vs. teaching; postgraduate vs. undergraduate – with implications for the academic profession;
- Changes in research practice: language, publication, orientation, basic/applied, etc.
- Influence on stakeholders – students, governments, business/employers, investors, public, etc.

RETHINKING QUALITY
What do we mean by quality?

- Despite all the criticism, rankings have succeeded in placing HE within a wider comparative and international framework;
- Quality and excellence are the key differentiators in national and global market – and a concern for all stakeholders;
- But what is quality and how is it measured?
  - No internationally agreed definition;
  - No objective or value-free set of indicators;
  - Context is vital:
    - Which university is best depends upon who is asking the question, what question is being asked and the purpose;
    - Different societies have different priorities, and higher education systems produce different results depending upon what is measured, and the purpose.

Alternative Rankings/Alternatives to Rankings

- Rankings have been the dominant instrument but there are a range of other tools being developed:
  - Alternative rankings by competitors, as new products and services;
  - Alternatives to rankings by governments, agencies, HE, and others.
- Proliferation of national rankings – accreditation, sorting/classification, benchmarking, quality assurance, funding, performance/productivity, etc.
  - However, many of these actions confuse rankings with these other quality instruments.
- Increasing number of players: supra-national governments, national governments/US states, HE agencies, commercial media, HE organisations;
- Developments illustrates extent to which HE has effectively lost its role as the primary guardian of quality,
- But also different ways to measure quality.
Would the debate on quality happened otherwise?

- Academy has been slow to engage meaningfully in discussion about quality;
  - Need to move beyond self-declaration to external verification;
  - Efforts at obfuscation, “gaming” and boycott have not helped.

- Information deficit has created opportunities for the public and governments – but especially commercial interests – to define quality for their own purposes;

- Lots of “good practice” but no agreed definition and difficult to compare across jurisdictions across teaching, research and engagement:
  - Challenge is how does HE respond? Can we afford to wait?;
  - Rankings have been a “disruptive technology” - and dominate today;
    - Cross-jurisdictional comparisons remain but social-networking/new formats pose challenges for HE as it places control into user’s hands.

RANKINGS/POLICY CONTRADICTIONS
Unresolved problems (1)

- Quality remains a complex and illusory concept:
  - Most indicators are measure of wealth/socio-economic advantage, and privilege the most resource-intensive institutions;
  - Yet, governments/HEIs content to make very profound decisions for their futures based on imperfect proxies;
  - Abdication of national sovereignty and institutional mission?
- “Norming” effect is reducing intellectual footprint of HE:
  - Narrow focus on research undermines other roles/responsibilities – HE becomes what is measured;
  - As HE in greater demand and nation-states struggle to fund all societal needs, there is an increasing focus on the “world-class university”.
  - Is there the “Sherriff of Nottingham” effect? Is emphasis on world-class encouraging growing stratification?
Unresolved problems (2)

• Distorting our understanding of research and its purposes:
  – Some knowledge is deemed more important;
  – Measures “impact” as that which occurs between academics which ignores the wider social and economic value and benefit of research;
    • Accountability occurs within the “academy” rather than via social accountability;
  – Not obvious elite model of knowledge creation will create sufficient exploitable patentable knowledge, and could reduce over-all national capacity for a sustainable knowledge society.

• Pervasiveness of focusing on top 100 obscures wider public policy issues – without sufficient understanding of implications of decisions being taken.

Rankings/Policy Contradictions

• Measuring what’s easy vs. Measuring what meaningful?
• Aligning strategy to global rankings vs. Pursuing higher educational goals and/or public mission;
• Cost of pursuing an elite model vs. Sustaining mass higher education;
• Concentrating excellence vs. Enhancing human capital and regional capacity;
• Differentiating between teaching & research missions vs. Greater integration between teaching & research;
• Rewarding traditional academic outputs vs. Valuing civic and social responsibility;
• Promoting traditional model of knowledge creation and peer-review accountability vs. Application of knowledge, impact and social-accountability.
New Global Order?

• HE is part of wider geo-political struggle; many reforms are both necessary and inevitable – and arguably late in coming;
• However, are the indicators appropriate strategic goals – for governments or for institutions? And if the indicators change, will the strategic goals change?
• At a time when HE is in growing demand by students and society with rising costs, is higher education being transformed into a private self-serving entity less engaged or committed to its nation/region as it pursues its world-class position?
• Has the public’s interest become confused with private interest?

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Trinity could change name to boost funding

Perhaps it should go back to using its original name, the College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity of Queen Elizabeth near Dublin? That should help get noticed abroad.

Maybe they should change it to Trinity Polytechnic?

We tried to make our buses more efficient by writing 'Swift' on them - but this did not work.

George Bush went to both Harvard and Yale so we shouldn’t overestimate the merits of rankings.

Why bother with costly structural reform, such as offering academics permanent jobs and the tenure track, and halting the use of underpaid PhD students to provide...