Role of Universities in Face of Rise of International Rankings

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Agenda

• The Rise of Rankings
• Observed Responses to Rankings – HEIs, governments
• Impact of Rankings
• Limitations of Rankings
• Reflection on Roles of Universities
• Conclusion
The Rise of Rankings

- ↑ student mobility globally
- Student-parent as consumer
- ↑ expectation for accountability and quality assurance in HE
- Commercial interests - media/data
- Technology-enabled data collection and dissemination
History of University Rankings

- Times Good University Guide (UK) (1993)
- Times Higher Education and QS split (2010)
- Center for World University Rankings (2012) (Saudi Arabia)
- U-Multirank (Europe) (2014)
- US News & World Report – Best Global Universities Rankings
- NTU Rankings (2007)
- Leiden Rankings

Partial listing of university rankings
The Rise of Rankings

- Characteristics
  - Simple; easy to compare
  - Appears objective
  - Enables benchmarking
  - Multi-dimensional

- Use of rankings
  - Guide identifications of international partners
  - Students/parents making “informed” choices
  - Marketing tool for institutions

- Emphasis of Rankings
  - Measurable + can benchmark globally
  - Heavy weightage on research publications, citations;
    Low weightage on teaching, local regional contributions
Observed Responses by HEIs

- Set rankings as ultimate goal in strategic plan
- Aggressively recruit renowned researchers, e.g. Singapore, South Korea, HK
- “Buy” highly cited researchers → rankings can be manipulated
- Link research performance and salary; ↑ research, ↓ teaching load
- ↑ internationalization - offer ↑ English-based courses to ↑ international students and faculty
Observed Responses by Gov’ts

• Specific national targets / policies
  • **Australia:** 10 universities to rank in top 100 by 2025  
  • **Russia:** “5/100 Project” – at least 5 universities in top 100 by 2020; up to 20% of 600 university cease operation by end 2014  
  • **France:** encourage merging, e.g. *Université Paris-Saclay* starts operate in Sept 2015, aims to be in top 10 in ARWU ranking  
  • **Japan:** “Top Global University Project” in 2014 - 10 univ in top 100 by 2020  
  • **Taiwan:** 10-year “Top University Project” - at least 1 univ among best 100  

• Broad-based investments in developing HE sector  
  • **China:** Project 211; Project 985 - in 2012 alone, > **RMB700 billion**  
  • **South Korea:** Brain Korea 21, The World-Class University, Brain Korea 21 PLUS, > **USD4.6 billion since 1998**  
  • **Singapore:** 5 five-year plans since 1991 > **S$40 billion** mostly goes to NUS and NTU
Impact of Rankings – HEIs

- Reputation
- Global visibility
- Ability to attract academics, students
- Ability to attract funding, international partners
- Staff and student morale
Impact of Rankings – HEIs

• Risks/Dangers
  • Rankings-driven policies and mindset
  • Biased allocation of resources
  • Certain “at-risk” academic fields
  • Value quantity over quality of publications
  • Skewed organizational values - reward productive researchers, but not good teachers
  • Impaired teaching focus / quality
  • ↓ local/regional engagement
  • Indiscriminate policy changes - to fit into new norm of global competition
Impact of Rankings – Sector-wide & National

• For higher education sector
  • More investment on higher education sector
  • Provoke conversations about quality and debate

• For governments
  • Reflection of country’s economic status, human capital, innovative capacity and national achievement
  • Rankings sets performance metric for HE system – provides evidence
  • Concentration of resources on a few univ; or merging → ↓ uniqueness of small institutions; → a more unitary system; threat to HE diversity
Limitations of Rankings

(Based on QS, THE, ARWU rankings)

• Many rankings; confusing to consumers
• Disproportionate weightages
  – Weight research > teaching, service to society
  – High weightage on reputation; lack transparency on how surveys are conducted
    → favors old, large, research-intensive univ

• Flawed methodologies
  – English-language dominance → underrates local research, local language publication, local relevance/impact
  – Measure what is easy to measure → fail to measure the quality, impact or benefits of research
Limitations of Rankings

- Biased indicators and proxies
  - Poor construct validity - use SFR as proxy measure of teaching performance, self-declared numbers subject to gaming behavior
  - No. of journal articles, citation impacts etc. $\rightarrow$ favors natural science and medicine
  - Citations $\neq$ Leadership
Limitations of Rankings

• Biased indicators and proxies
  – No. of major prize winners → measuring the peak; rare events should not be used as proxy

**Affiliation of Nobel Prize Winners 2000-14**

<table>
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<th>Rank</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Howard Hughes Medical Institute</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>1.77</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>University of California, Santa Barbara</td>
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</table>

Note: Scores weighted based on number of winners and sites affiliated with a prize. Literature and peace prizes excluded. [Link](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/stanford-top-university-for-producing-nobel-laureates)

→ Universities’ complaints/boycotts
Limitations of Rankings

• Suggestions to ranking bodies:
  – Continue to evolve & refine methodology
  – ↑ transparency of methodology to ↑ credibility
  – Disclosure of rankings data to allow benchmarking
  – Normalize where possible – e.g. performance per capita, field-based normalization, age of institutions
  – Find ways to ↑ reliability of perception surveys/ratings – methodology, sample population
  – Discourage/punish gaming behaviors
Reflection on Roles of Univ

• Is the tail wagging the dog?
• As a university president,
  – We want our universities to be competitive
  – But we must not forget the fundamentals
    » Why do we exist?
    » What are the roles of a university?
    » What are our responsibilities to the society?

• Universities exist to deliver societal goals; our mission, roles and responsibilities are the cornerstones of our existence.
Reflection on Roles of Univ

• Universities have multiple roles: teaching, research, service to the society.
• HKUST’s experience
  – Adhere to our positioning - focused, elite, research university.
  – Balanced development of research, teaching and service; research - go beyond citations to be leader, not just follower
  – Use rankings as evaluation and benchmarking tool
  – Promote true cross-cultural integration on campus, not purely % of international students; go beyond statistics
  – Truly enhance teaching and learning experience, e.g. two Wharton-QS Stars Awards for innovative learning programs, WBB.
  – Service - nurture local talents, e.g. Entrepreneurship program, DJI.
• Rankings - transformative effect on institutions.
• Rankings ≠ end in itself; we should not blindly pursue rankings at the expenses of academic missions.
• Rankings, internationalization, and competition should be tools to reinforce (not counter) the purpose of education and to improve the work of universities.
“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

--- Albert Einstein