

CHERTL PANEL ON UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

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Introduction

In the *Business Day* of 6 October 2011, it was reported that the University of Cape Town (UCT) was -- at 156th -- the sole 'African institution in the top 200 on the British-based Times Higher Education (THES) magazine's World University Rankings' list.

It was further reported that 'UCT deputy vice-chancellor Danie Visser said the university was taking its ranking with a "pinch of salt", as a complex institution should not be reduced to a number' (ibid.).

It was also reported that one 'Saleem Badat said rankings of universities were based on "dubious science", and therefore Rhodes had chosen not to participate'. He added that 'in a nutshell, neither I nor Rhodes are waiting with bated breath for the publication of the THES rankings, nor will lose any sleep over not being in any of the global rankings'.

As I wrote in a 2010 chapter, no real value can be attached to the Shanghai Jiao Tong Institute (SJTIE) or Times Higher Education-Quacquarelli Symonds (THE-QS) rankings. They are simply incapable of capturing either the meaning or diverse qualities of universities or the varied roles of universities in a manner that values and respects their educational and social purposes, missions and goals. The rankings are also underpinned by questionable social science and arbitrarily privilege-particular indicators and they use shallow proxies as correlates of quality.

Rankings are of dubious value, are a false agenda and should be replaced by alternative instruments that better serve educational and social purposes.

Critique

1. *Methodologically*, global rankings suffer from “weaknesses in data collection and computation; the arbitrary criteria used in ranking; and the arbitrary weightings and standardization procedures used in combining different data sets into composite indexes” (Marginson, 2008:7). Such indexes “undermine validity [as] it is dubious to combine different purposes and the corresponding data using arbitrary weightings. Links between purposes and data are lost” (Marginson, 2007:139).

The indicators and their weighting privilege specific university activities, domains of knowledge production, research types, languages, and university types. Thus, the natural and medical sciences are privileged over the arts, humanities and social sciences; articles published in English are favoured over those in other languages; journal articles are favoured over book chapters, policy and other reports. Furthermore, “comprehensive” universities and generally larger institutions with a wide range of disciplines and larger numbers of academics – especially researchers – are privileged over others (Charon and Wauters, 2007). The rankings therefore enable the self-selection of universities whose missions and academic offerings strongly match the rankings’ performance measures.

In terms of their methodologies, the SJTIHE and THE-QS rankings have little intrinsic value and serve no meaningful educational or social purpose. If they are not challenged, rankings and the assumed notion of the “*world-class university*” as gold standard can have perverse and dangerous effects on universities.

2. Under the umbrella of neo-liberalism, 1950s modernization theory singled out Western capitalist societies as the apex of modernity and made “catching up” with the West an ultimate development goal. With it came the view that underdeveloped societies’ path to development lay in faithful adherence to the prescriptions of Western governments and Western-dominated multinational institutions, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. Globalization and its supposed development benefits became the new goal.

If modernization theory depicts Western capitalist societies as the apex of modernity, global university rankings present the *world-class university* – essentially North American and European institutions – as the pinnacle and goal of all higher education development.

The value of uncritical mimicry of and “catching up” with the so-called world-class university in order to further socioeconomic development is questionable. It also cannot be blithely assumed that creating world-class universities will in itself result in investment or development. Outstanding universities may be a *necessary condition* but are not a *sufficient condition* of development. There is a need in many societies in the global South to create favourable national environments to facilitate university work and contributions.

3. The SJTIHE and THE-QS rankings “inculcate the idealized model of institution as a norm to be achieved and generalize the failure to achieve it” (Marginson, 2009:13-14). The *world-class university* has until recently neither existed as a concept, nor as an empirical reality. Its status as the gold standard is the normative social construct of the rankers themselves.

The specific national conditions, realities and development challenges of societies in the global South, and the diversity of social and educational purposes and goals that universities in these societies must serve, require national higher education systems characterized by differentiated and diverse institutions. Institutional differentiation and diversity are to be valued over homogeneity and isomorphism. It makes little sense for all universities to aspire to a common “gold” standard, irrespective of socioeconomic needs, missions, goals, capacities and capabilities.

Gordon Graham has argued that universities should avoid aspiring to “ideal[s] which they cannot attain” (Graham, 2005:157). Otherwise, “no sense of worth will be forthcoming” and they can have no “proper self-confidence” (ibid:157). There are many conceptions and models of the university and these have changed over time.

Furthermore, according to Graham, the “name ‘university’ now applies to institutions with widely different functions and characters” (2005:157), and this means that the “ideals each can aspire to” will be different (ibid:258).

Instead of valuing a horizontal continuum that recognizes the need for universities to have different and diverse missions, and which makes provision for universities that pursue various missions, the idea of the *world-class university* as “the idealized model of institution” has the perverse effect of privileging a vertical hierarchy. Universities that do not feature in the top 500 of the SJTIHE ranking or the top 200 of the THE-QS ranking are devalued and are – by implication – poor quality, second-rate or failures. In the face of continuing global North-South inequalities, the burden of such characterizations weighs disproportionately on universities in the global South.

4. The rankings criteria favour publishing in English journals and, in effect, privilege the English language. Especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences, prioritizing research and publishing in order to improve ranking can seriously undermine universities with important social, intellectual and cultural roles related to their local, regional and national societies.
5. Rankings compromise the value and promise of universities as they “divert attention from some central purposes of higher education” (Marginson, 2007:139), and “to accept these ranking systems is to acquiesce at these definitions of higher education and its purposes” (ibid,:139).

As important as new knowledge production and the scholarship of discovery are (Boyer, 1990), the foundation of the production of high-quality graduates who can advance development in the underdeveloped global South is high-quality learning and teaching. Moreover, community engagement and service learning are also vital functions of universities in the global South. Both are a “means for connecting universities and communities with development needs” (Stanton, 2008:3), and “for higher education staff and students to partner with communities to address development aims and goals” (ibid:2). However, the global rankings are only

marginally concerned with learning and teaching, and completely overlook or omit the value of community engagement.

Conclusion

The extent to which the global rankings are embraced by numerous universities and higher education agencies must be considered a matter of great concern. The validation of rankings as knowledge of universities ultimately corrodes knowledge and science.

The critique of global university rankings is not a rebuttal of the critical public scrutiny of universities. Instead of being obsessed with global rankings, we should rather create instruments that genuinely serve educational and social purposes; that contribute to improvement, innovation and development in universities; that enhance transparency and critical public scrutiny of universities; and that facilitate informed choices and judgements on the basis of robust social science and appropriate methodologies.

These instruments must respect the varied social purposes of universities instead of seeking to reduce universities to instruments of the economy and to vocational schools. They must recognise the vital public, positive functions of higher education, as opposed to the idea of higher education as a market, universities as 'firms' and students as 'customers'.

And, instead of using the destructive logic of global rankings and a universal gold standard, the diversity of universities and the variety of their missions and goals in relation to the different historical and social conditions and developmental challenges of society must be revalued.

Performance indicators and benchmarks, as distinct from rankings, are of much greater value when they are carefully conceptualised, designed with clarity of purpose and aims, and are respectful of institutional mission and policy goals.

These have an important role to play in institutional improvement and development and, through these, in the achievement of national economic and social development priorities and goals. So too do effective monitoring, evaluation and penetrating reviews of universities. None of these important goals, however, are advanced by the SJTIHE or THE-QS global university rankings.

In summary, universities should refuse to play the game as formulated by the SJTIHE, THE-QS and others, even if various universities collude with rankings for the sake of self-aggrandisement.