
Global University Rankings: Impacts and Applications

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The Ranking Game

In December 2011, the journal *Science* published the information that two Saudi-Arabian universities were massively recruiting highly cited research stars from Cambridge, Harvard, and other universities who had made it onto the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) list of most frequently cited researchers. For about \$70,000 per year, they were offered an affiliation to these universities in exchange for the obligation to be present once a year for a short time and to indicate in all their publications their affiliation to the respective Saudi-Arabian university. The result was that within two to three years both institutions made it from not listed at all into the group of the top two hundred to three hundred in the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). Thus universities are buying the reputation of researchers in order to increase their own reputation. Not all researchers who were contacted could be bought. However, in March 2012, the largest Australian newspaper, *The Australian*, published a list of sixty frequently cited researchers who had been appointed as “distinguished scientists” at one of the two Saudi-Arabian universities. Altogether the list comprises a number of researchers from top universities in the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Australia. All of them are men, and some are already retired.

In 2012, the Australian University of New South Wales published a job advertisement for “Strategic Reputation Management” and the Australian La Trobe University was looking for a “Manager for Institutional Rankings.” For an annual salary of \$100,000, the job descriptions comprised among other things the task to manage the university’s relationships to ranking agencies and to “maximize” or “optimize” the respective institution’s ranking position (Inside Higher Ed, March 22, 2013). In the same article, University of New South Wales’ pro-vice chancellor was

quoted to have stated that it was essential for a university to have a team that takes care of the proper presentation of the numbers.

But does this kind of manipulation work? And more importantly is such a practice still related to good science and scholarship? It becomes clear that rankings seduce and coerce at the same time. Those universities that want to participate in the ranking game have to internalize and institutionalize the logic of rankings. Morphey and Swanson (2011) have pointed out that “rankings determine and even codify which kinds of organizational behavior and practices are legitimate.” Therefore, the players know that they have to be successful under the conditions of the measurements. Ranking positions have a signaling effect and contribute in a seemingly objective way to the discussions about what constitutes quality in higher education. Thus, universities use a number of gaming techniques in order to improve their ranking positions. Morphey and Swanson (2011) provide further examples from US universities: adjunct instructors are not counted when reporting the percentage of full-time faculty employed; admission data are presented in such a way that they signal a high level of selectivity; law schools are spending high amounts of money for glossy brochures to influence reputation scores.

Accordingly, the authors come to the conclusion that these forms of participation in the ranking game simultaneously challenge and reinforce the legitimacy of rankings. A classical paradox!

In her survey among university leaders published in 2007, Ellen Hazelkorn found that ninety-three percent of the respondents wanted to improve the position of their university in national rankings and eighty-two percent wanted to improve the position of their university in international rankings. Seventy percent wanted to see their university among the top ten percent in national rankings, and seventy-one percent wanted to see their university among the top twenty-five percent in international rankings. However, other studies have shown that variations in ranking positions are only temporary and mostly disappear after two years. Between 1988 and 1998, twenty universities out of the top twenty-five identified by the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking never fell out of this top group. Therefore, it is almost impossible for other universities to move into this group. It seems, however, that the multitude of specialized rankings that have been developed in recent years (e.g., top universities under fifty years of age, etc.) is, at least in part, also meant to help these other universities to make it to some kind of “top.”

Global rankings like the ARWU ranking of Shanghai Jiao Tong University or the ranking produced by the Times Higher Education

provide information about four to six percent of all universities globally. As a consequence, “all universities are judged on the basis of criteria that are only appropriate for top universities” (Rauhvargers, 2011). This leads to the construction of a “deficit model” (Locke, 2011) that drives all universities that participate in the ranking game into a perpetual race to improve their ranking position. At the same time, rankings offer hardly a possibility to rise into the top group. So, why all the excitement then?

First, good ranking positions trigger the famous Matthew effect. Better students and academics apply, donations by alumni rise, and, in many countries, such universities receive increased budget allocations by the state. Second, rankings distribute reputation. And reputation is an important immaterial resource, difficult to build up and easy to lose. Third, rankings are popular among political decision makers—on the one hand, because they reduce complexity, and, on the other hand, because high ranking positions of one or more universities in the country have become an indicator for the scientific and technological capacity and productive efficiency of the national economy as such.

But rankings do not provide any information about the quality of a university as a whole, even if they pretend to do just that. And there are only few players that have the capacity to play the game profitably. According to Salmi (2009), these are, in particular, large, preferably older and research-intensive universities with a broad spectrum of subjects (i.e., including medicine) located in the English-speaking world. In addition, they have to have three further features: abundant resources, a benevolent management, and a concentration of talent. Other potential players should better abstain from playing the game because it might lead to problematic management decisions.

Examples of Resistance

In the meantime, rankings have multiplied at national as well as international levels. Hazelkorn (2011) identified altogether nine active global rankings and more than fifty national rankings. And the number has probably risen by now. Despite the fact that many experts have argued that rankings are here to stay and the task is to improve them rather than ignore them, resistance against rankings has started and it is coming from the academic side. Without being able to provide a complete overview, just a few examples should suffice: the Australian James Cook University is ignoring the ARWU ranking; some universities in the United States, among

them the prestigious Annapolis Group, are boycotting the *US News and World Report* ranking either as a whole or its reputation survey part; and a number of Canadian universities have refused to participate in the Maclean's University Ranking.

In Germany, several learned societies have by now recommended to boycott the ranking carried out by the Center for Higher Education Development (CHE), among them the German Society for Sociology, the German Society of Historians, the German Society of Chemists, and the German Society of Education. These organizations have issued appeals to both their individual academic members and the respective university departments not to submit any data to ranking agencies. In addition, four universities have announced not to submit any data for purposes of rankings: Hamburg, Leipzig, Cologne, and the Distance University of Hagen. The view of these institutional ranking opponents is that the generation and proper presentation of data for the CHE ranking would require the work capacity of more than ten full-time employed people, and they were not prepared to finance this any longer when the task of a university is to provide a good education to the students.

In March 2013, three hundred economics professors in Germany rebelled against a ranking of business studies and economics professors carried out by the *Handelsblatt*, a daily newspaper focusing on economic news. Their main argument was that such a ranking worked with wrong incentives, and that headings like "Germany in search of the super prof" were getting too tacky. For readers who are not very familiar with Germany, there is a German television show called "Germany in Search of the Super Star" in which young talents (mostly singers) compete against each other. The show became known in particular for its prejudiced and mean comments by the jurors.

In the last part of this contribution, a few thoughts are offered about why rankings have met the resistance of academics but are loved by policy makers (and frequently university leaders as well). It is also an attempt to provide a more theoretical framing for the phenomena that have been described so far.

Rankings as a Form of Transnational Policy Coordination

It is an interesting phenomenon that rankings have become rather important for national policy makers and institutional leaders but have met with resistance from the academic side. This is not the place to go into

the criticism of methodological flaws, the bias toward English language publications, the focus on research only, and other well-known critical aspects. It is more interesting to discuss the ways in which the phenomenon of rankings has been theoretically framed.

Erkkilä (2013) has framed rankings as a policy instrument of global university governance, and others have analyzed it as a form of transnational policy coordination. What has been observed is that the outcomes of rankings constitute a policy problem at the national as well as, for example, the European level, which has led to policy changes. Although the ARWU ranking originally was a domestic policy instrument in order to evaluate how Chinese universities fare against top universities in the rest of the world, its outcomes have created a global narrative of higher education competition, which itself is used as an indicator for the competitiveness and strength of national and (in Europe) regional economies. Thus we have a double transfer to meta levels. Rankings have become a symbol of economic status because it is argued that the more universities in a given country or region are ranked among the top ten, fifty, one hundred, or five hundred, the higher is the economic reputation and innovative capacity of that country or region. And, as Erkkilä argues, despite the fact that global rankings do not possess a norm-giving authority, they have influenced policy decisions. In Germany, they triggered the “excellence initiative,” and at the European level, they contributed to the decision of funding the U-Multirank Project. And this has led to another paradox, namely that global rankings address individual higher education institutions while at the same time having geographical implications (i.e., German versus British universities or European higher education versus US higher education). This contributes clearly to isomorphism in national policy making and institutional leadership despite the calls for institutional diversity.

The ARWU ranking became the start of a global assessment of higher education that linked to new forms of global and transnational governance building on comparison and evidence-based decision making. Basically the outcomes of the ranking served as the evidence policy makers needed in order to introduce reforms and overcome resistance. What we have here is actually the governance of complexity in the face of globalization. Thus, global rankings can be understood as a “transnational policy script” (Gornitzka, 2013) that has diffused into different national contexts and has become a reference point for legitimizing higher education reforms. Using examples from Germany and the European level again, the “policy script” was translated in Germany into giving up the

traditional legal homogeneity with which universities were treated by the state and introducing competition, while the “policy script” was translated at the European level by establishing a “modernization agenda” for European higher education.

Holzinger and Knill (2005) have described the process of transnational policy coordination as a form of transnational communication leading to policy diffusion. This transnational communication is characterized by four mechanisms: 1) lesson drawing; 2) transnational problem solving; 3) policy emulation; and 4) international policy promotion.

Lesson drawing is a process where states learn from each other what can be done when problems occur. It implies the existence of “best practice,” which is taken as an efficient way to reform policies by using examples and models developed elsewhere. In transnational problem solving, solutions are sought and found in transnational networks or epistemic communities that—with the help of transfer agents like international organizations—facilitate the exchange between polities and spread the policy. Policy emulation is a one-directional policy transfer that basically consists of copying and implementing a policy without adaptation to local, regional, or national contexts. Thus, policy emulation is imitation rather than innovation. In international policy promotion, finally, we have specialized organizations that actively promote certain policies while defining objectives and standards in an international setting.

It can be argued that the spread of rankings as an instrument of transnational policy coordination consists of a mixture of transnational problem solving and international policy promotion. Increasingly there are groups of academics involved in rankings, the best example being the European U-Multirank Consortium (see <https://www.umultirank.org>), which is funded by the European Commission. It advocates and supports the idea of developing a European university ranking and thus acts as an agent for the promotion of such a policy in Europe.

Conclusions

If we look at the history of rankings, we can observe that they started out as an academic exercise focusing on disciplines or units rather than whole institutions. The views vary about the beginning of rankings. Dill (2009) identifies the first ranking as the one that was carried out in 1925 by Raymond Hughes, a professor of chemistry and later vice-chancellor of Miami University. Hughes did a reputation survey of graduate programs.

Hazelkorn (2011) dates the first ranking earlier, namely to the year 1910, by referring to James Catelli, a US psychologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. And Salmi and Saroyan (2007) observe first ranking attempts from 1870 onward when a commission of the US Bureau of Education began to publish annual statistical reports that also included a classification of institutions.

But while the first rankings in the United States were mostly carried out by active academics, the first *U.S. News and World Report* ranking from 1983 was a commercial ranking that ranked whole institutions. This triggered an imitation frenzy by other weeklies and dailies in order to increase their sold copies. To name just a few, we have the *British Times Higher Education* and the *British Guardian*, the German *ZEIT* and *Spiegel*, the French *Nouvel Observateur*, the Irish *Sunday Times*, the Italian *La Repubblica*, the Russian *Finance*, the Canadian *Maclean's*, and probably many others.

The ARWU ranking demonstrated the beginning of a reappropriation of rankings by academics, and we have currently more rankings that are carried out again by academics. But the impacts and political uses of rankings have changed. Rankings are used as a policy instrument for what is nowadays called evidence-based political decision making. Ranking results present a simple, although undercomplex (i.e., not appropriately reflecting the actual complexity of what universities are about), hierarchy expressed in a positional number according to which funding can be allocated and legitimized by governments. Thus rankings establish a deficit model (Locke, 2011) according to which no institution is ever good enough, except the one on the top, or let's say the few on the top. This triggers a race for position that disregards issues of quality improvement and diversity of mission. In other words, rankings seduce and coerce at the same time (Locke, 2011). By now, every national government wants at least "one Harvard University" in their country in order to demonstrate to the world that it is economically competitive. And thus the ranking results become themselves indicators or, more exactly, proxies for something else, and national governments might make decisions on the basis of the symbolic value of ranking scales. This is a truly postmodern phenomenon. The positional hierarchy of universities created by rankings makes the actual reality of universities and what they are about disappear. The hierarchy is then shifted into the economic sphere of nations or regions, thereby constituting a decontextualized symbolic value that itself can be charged with new meaning and thus creating a new material reality that is no longer related to its original.

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