

**GLOBAL RANKINGS OF UNIVERSITIES: A PERVERSE AND PRESENT BURDEN**

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Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted (Albert Einstein).

‘A farmer wanting to breed a big cow should focus more on nutrition than the weighing scales’ (President of a Japanese University, cited in Charon and Wauters, 2007)

Indices ‘rarely have adequate scientific foundations to support precise rankings: typical practice is to acknowledge uncertainty in the text of the report and then to present a table with unambiguous rankings’ (Andrews cited in Saisana and D’Hombres, 2008)

## **Introduction**

While national rankings of universities have existed for some decades, in recent years the phenomenon of the global rankings of universities has come into prominence. The Times Higher Education-Quacquarelli Symonds (THE-QS) ‘World University Rankings’ and the Shanghai Jiao Tong Institute of Higher Education’s (SJTIE) ‘Academic Ranking of World Universities’ are the best known of such rankings.

This paper engages with the phenomenon of global rankings from the perspective of higher education in the global South and informed by a particular conception of universities and higher education. It addresses five issues: what credence should be given to rankings; the value of rankings; what is at stake in terms of educational and social purposes; the social determinants of rankings, and the future of rankings.

## **Universities**

For good reasons, national higher education systems tend to evince highly differentiated and diverse institutions, with universities characterised by different missions and goals, and differing size, configurations of academic programmes, admission requirements and academic standards, as appropriate to specified purposes and goals. This implies that the meaning of a university cannot be found in the content of their teaching and research, how they undertake these, or their admission policies. Instead, the core purposes of a university reside elsewhere.

The first purpose is the production of knowledge which advances understanding of the natural and social worlds, and enriches humanity’s accumulated scientific and cultural inheritances. Boulton and Lucas pithily summarize the myriad responsibilities of universities in this regard:

universities operate on a complex set of mutually sustaining fronts – they research into the most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge and yet also seek the practical application of discovery; they test, reinvigorate and

carry forward the inherited knowledge of earlier generations; they seek to establish sound principles of reasoning and action which they teach to generations of students. Thus, universities operate on both the short and the long horizon. On the one hand,...they work with contemporary problems and they render appropriate the discoveries and understanding that they generate. On the other hand, they forage in realms of abstraction and domains of enquiry that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit' (2008:3).

A second purpose of universities is the dissemination of knowledge and the cultivation of the cognitive character of students. The goal is to produce graduates that, ideally: "can think effectively and critically"; have "achieved depth in some field of knowledge"; have a "critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves"; have "a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times"; are "able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it"; have "some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems"; and can that "communicate with cogency" (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000:84).

The final purpose of universities is to undertake *community engagement*. Here, it is important to distinguish between a university being responsive to its political, economic and social contexts and community engagement. Being alive to context does not mean that a university is necessarily engaged with communities. Sensitivity to economic and social conditions and challenges is a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition for community engagement.

Community engagement encompasses community outreach, student and staff volunteer activities and more recently 'service-learning'. Service-learning seeks to build on the core knowledge production and dissemination purposes of the university and has sought to become a "curricular innovation" infused in the teaching and learning and research activities of the University (Stanton, 2008:2). As has been noted

Service-learning...engage(s) students in activities where *both the community and student* are primary beneficiaries and where the primary goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance student *learning* through rendering this service. Reciprocity is therefore a central characteristic of service-learning. The primary focus of programmes in this category is on integrating community service with scholarly activity such as student learning, teaching, and research. This form of community engagement is underpinned by the assumption that service is enriched through scholarly activity and that scholarly activity, particularly student learning, is enriched through service to the community (CHE, 2006:15).

To effectively undertake its diverse educational and social purposes, a university must have a commitment "to the spirit of truth" (Graham, 2005:163), and must possess the necessary academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, while academic freedom and institutional autonomy are necessary conditions, they are also rights in which duties inhere (Jonathan, 2006). In formerly colonial contexts, we must recognize, as

Andre du Toit urges, “the legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation as threats to academic freedom” (2000); and that “the powers conferred by academic freedom go hand in hand with substantive duties to deracialise and decolonize intellectual spaces” (Bentley et al, 2006). Other duties on the part of universities include advancing the public good and being democratically accountable. They also encompass bold engagement with economic and social orthodoxies and public policies that may seriously misunderstand and distort the purposes of universities, stripping them of their substance and leaving them “universities only in name” (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:6).

It is not necessary here to deal with the roots, emergence or central doctrines of neo-liberalism, the dominant orthodoxy of recent decades. Suffice to say that neo-liberalism holds that “the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey, 2008:3). Importantly, “if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary” (ibid:2).

Neo-liberal thinking and ideas, whether embraced willingly or imposed through the coercive or disciplinary power of powerful international economic and political institutions, have reshaped economic and social policies, institutions and practices. For one, instead of development as “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (Sen, 1999:3), the conception of development has been economized and reduced to economic growth and enhanced economic performance as measured by various indicators. Not surprisingly, “the logic of the market has...defined the purposes of universities largely in terms of their role in economic development” (Berdahl, 2008:48). Public investment in higher education has come to be justified largely in terms of economic growth and preparing students for the labour market. For another, neo-liberalism has come to define universities as “just supermarkets for a variety of public and private goods that are currently in demand, and whose value is defined by their perceived aggregate financial value” (Boulton and Lucas, 2008:17). As a recent monograph notes, “to define the university enterprise by these specific outputs, and to fund it only through metrics that measure them, is to misunderstand the nature of the enterprise and its potential to deliver social benefit” (ibid., 2008:17).

The notion of higher education as simply another tradable service and a private good that primarily benefits students has influenced public financing, which in turn has impacted on the structure and nature of higher education. As public universities have sought out ‘third stream income’ to supplement resources, this has often resulted in “at one end, the commercialization of universities (which) means business in education. At the other end, the entry of private players in higher education means education as business” (Nayyar, 2008:9). If globalisation, and especially the revolution in information and communication technology, has influenced the “ways and means of providing higher education” (ibid., 2008:7), neo-liberalism has shaped “education both in terms of what is taught and what is researched,...shifting both student interests and university offerings away from broader academic studies and towards narrower vocational programmes” (Duderstadt et al, 2008:275).

Neo-liberalism has also brought in its wake a rampant “culture of materialism”, which has transformed “a reasonable utilitarianism...into Narcissist hedonism” (Nayyar, 2008:5), a celebration of individualism and greed, and self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests. It has disdained knowledge that is antithetical to its core beliefs, and has been hostile to the idea of public good. In these regards, neo-liberalism has effectively incubated the seismic and grave financial and economic crisis that envelops the world today.

Universities have, in general, been timid in their engagement with and response to neo-liberalism, notwithstanding that it has spawned dubious thinking and policy with respect to the value and social purposes of universities, and has sought to reduce universities to instruments of the economy and business. The pernicious effects on education, knowledge and public reasoning, and especially the arts, humanities and social sciences have been all too evident.

### **What credence should be given to rankings?**

The Shanghai Jiao Tong Institute of Higher Education (SJTU) ranking has its genesis in the quest of the Chinese government to create ‘world class universities’ as catalysts of economic development and enhancing China’s position in the global knowledge economy. As one of the father’s of the SJTIHE ranking writes, the concerns were:

What is the definition of a world-class university?...What are the positions of top Chinese universities in the world higher education system? How can top Chinese universities reduce their gap with world-class universities? In order to answer these questions, I started to benchmark top Chinese universities with world-class universities and eventually to rank the world universities (Nian Cai Liu, 2009:2).

The benchmarking gave priority to six indicators for which data was available.

#### **Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking: Indicators and weighting**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Weight</b>
1. Highly cited researchers in broad categories	20%
2. Articles published in Nature & Science	20%
3. Articles in Science/Social Science Citation Index	20%
4. Faculty with Nobel Prizes/Field Medals	20%
5. Alumni with Nobel Prizes/Field Medals	10%
6. Research performance on 1-6 per staff member	10%
Total	100%

It is clear that for the SJTIHE a ‘world-class university’ is a ‘research university’ that performs well in relation to the six chosen indicators and the manner in which they are weighted.

The purpose of the Times Higher Education-Quacquarelli Symonds (THE-QS) ranking is to “to recognise universities as the multi-faceted organisations that they are, to provide a global comparison of their success against the notional mission of remaining or becoming

world-class". Four criteria are considered pivotal to being judged 'world-class': "research quality", "teaching quality", "graduate employability" and "international outlook". The THE-QS ranking creates a league table of the world's "top universities" through: "academic peer review" (a survey of 6 534 academics in 6 354 in 2008); "employer review", (2 339 responses in 2008), "citations per academic" (using Scopus Elsevier), academic: student ratios, and the proportions of international academics and students at a university (Times Higher Education-QS, 2009).

**Times Higher Ranking: Indicators and weighting**

Indicator	Weight
1. Academic peer review (email questionnaire)	40%
2. Citations per academic	20%
3. Academic staff: student ratio	20%
4. Proportion of international academic staff	5%
5. Proportion of international students	5%
6. Employer review (global online survey)	10%
Total	100%

For the purpose of contrast, mention should be made of the rankings of the Centre for Higher Education (CHE) in Germany. Unlike the SJTIHE and THE-QS global rankings, the CHE's ranking of over 280 universities in Germany "is exclusively subject specific". It uses multiple indicators of academic quality as well as the views of some 200 000 students and 15 000 academics. On the basis of its performance in a specific subject a university is located in one of three categories - the "top", "middle" or "bottom" grouping of universities (Brandenburg, 2009).

With respect to the credence that is to be given to rankings, it is important to critically analyse the purposes and aims that they claim to seek to serve, and the methodologies that they employ. With respect to the *purposes and aims* of rankings, the following are noteworthy.

First, the SJTIHE began its work as an attempt to benchmark Chinese universities as a means of identifying shortcomings and charting a trajectory for their institutional development. It, however, slipped into the creation of a global ranking of universities on the basis of a narrow range of (essentially research) indicators that are wholly inadequate for measuring performance and quality in relation to the diverse social and educational purposes of universities, and especially the variety of roles they must play in underdeveloped societies.

Second, in so far as the THE-QS ranking is concerned, its precise purpose and aims in generating a global league table of universities is opaque. Its discourse, however, is one of "world esteem", with the "world class" university representing the gold standard to which all universities are meant to aspire and by which they should seek to be measured. The criterion of the degree of internationalisation of the student body is seemingly to be valued less for the enrichment of a university's academic and institutional culture as much as because international students are a "prized quarry" as "universities are free to charge them whatever the market will bear" (Times Higher Education, 2007).

Marginson similarly notes that “in the Times Higher universe, higher education is primarily about reputation for its own sake, about the aristocratic prestige and power of the universities as an end in itself, and also about making money from foreign students”, seeming to “have been designed to service the market in cross-border degrees, in which the UK and Australian universities are active”. Thus “it is not about teaching and only marginally about research” (Marginson, 2007b:138-39; 2006a:5).

It was noted that the THE-QS claimed that its purpose in ranking was “to recognise universities as the multi-faceted organisations that they are”. Yet, it is clear that the criteria that the THE-QS employs and its dubious use of some of the criteria as proxies for teaching and learning quality does violence to the idea of universities as “multi-faceted organisations” that must serve a variety of social and educational purposes.

The CHE ranking has no grandiose ambitions such as a global ranking of universities. It seeks to guide “anybody who wants to take up a course of academic studies, but is uncertain about where” and “students who would like to change to another university” (Centre for Higher Education, 2009). It’s more circumspect aim, its focus on subjects, and use of multiple criteria, including the views of academics and students, makes it a more useful instrument. The fact that students are permitted to weight the criteria as they choose also means that they are empowered to make choices in accordance with what they seek and value in a university.

On the *methodological* front, the rankings can be critiqued on a number of grounds.

The SJTIHE and THE-QS rankings suffer to differing degrees from various weaknesses related to the accuracy, reliability and validity of the data. These include: “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, 2008a: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. Likewise, it is invalid to mix subjective data on reputation with objective data on resources or research outputs as the Times Higher Education Supplement does” (Marginson, 2007b:139).

While THE-QS claim to use of “peer review”, its actual technique is less the peer review as undertaken in the academic world as much as a reputational survey. In any event, peer review is not without its problems. While it may be a “valuable tool, some prejudice may still exist through peer conservatism and institutional reputation favoured by age, size, name and country biases” (Charon and Wauters, 2007). That is to say, older well-known universities in Europe and the United States may be given undue eminence at the expense of newer yet outstanding universities in other parts of the world. Rankings that make use of reputational surveys have been challenged for their halo effects and “circular character” as “high reputation generates high ranking generates more high reputation, without any connection to performance” (Marginson, 2008a:7).

Attention is also drawn to the manner in which the indicators that are used and the weight that is accorded to particular indicators in global rankings privilege specific

university activities, domains of knowledge production, specific languages and kinds of research and universities. Thus, the natural and medical sciences and engineering are privileged relative to the arts, humanities, and social sciences; articles published in the English language are favoured over those printed in other languages, and journal articles are favoured over book chapters, policy reports and conference proceedings. Moreover, 'comprehensive' universities and generally larger institutions with a wide range of fields, disciplines and faculties and larger numbers of academics and especially researchers are privileged over other universities (Charon and Wauters, 2007). The rankings are therefore self-selecting of those universities whose missions, academic programme offerings, structures and organisation strongly match the performance measures that are employed.

Even if credence is given to the performance measures that are used, a recent report has found that the SJTIHE and THE-QC "rankings are only robust in the identification of the top 15 performers on either side of the Atlantic, but unreliable on the exact ordering of all other institutes" (d'Hombres and Saisana 2009). When the THE-QS and SJTIHE indicators are combined "in a single framework, the space of the inference is too wide for about 50 universities of the 88 universities we studied and thus no meaningful rank can be estimated for those universities" (ibid., 2009).

As a consequence of concerns related to the reliability and validity of data, and aware of the pitfalls regarding data and judgements related to learning and teaching, community engagement and other activities of universities, the SJTIHE ranking, to its credit, confines itself to performance measures that are a proxy for research performance. Nonetheless, if the goal is to globally rank universities, the narrow focus on research and the omission of data related to learning and teaching, community engagement and myriad other issues are serious weaknesses (see also Saisana and D'Hombres, 2008). These issues include equity of student access, opportunity and success; the diversity of students and staff; internationalisation and internationalism with respect to students, staff and curriculum; intellectual climate; institutional culture; academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and democratic governance, including student participation. They also extend to the contributions of universities to democratic citizenship and what Nussbaum calls the "cultivation of humanity" (2006:5); their visibility in the intellectual and cultural life of societies, and their effectiveness, productivity and efficiency with regard to the employment of public subsidies and financial resources. All of these issues are hardly peripheral to judgements about the overall quality of universities.

It should be clear that in a range of areas, quantitative indicators alone will not suffice in judgements about quality. Moreover, the use of quantitative indicators such as student applications, entrance grades, staff qualifications, available resources and research outputs as proxies for judgements on the quality of learning and teaching are inadequate and of doubtful value.

The CHE is on sound ground for being sceptical of whole university rankings, composite indexes and league tables. As it states, "just as universities are not all equally good, so there is no 'the' best university". It is also unlikely that any university will be uniformly outstanding in every discipline and field and every level of academic programme and

qualification. Thus, the CHE notes that “the universities' performance in the individual disciplines, subjects and departments differs far too greatly. Aggregation at the level of whole universities offers no useful information as a decision-making aid” (Centre for Higher Education, 2009).

Rankings resonate strongly with both the performative culture of the new public management of recent decades, and the specific national and institutional interests that in conditions of the commercialisation and marketisation of higher education stand to gain in status, income and power. The SJTIHE and THE-QS rankings are simultaneously the products of the new world of commercialised, marketised and commodified higher education, embody the neo-liberal logic of brazen celebration of power, wealth and prestige, and serve as agents of their reproduction. Marginson puts it well: “discourses of social status are primary in the sustaining of status and are all the more powerful when joined to the force of calculation” (2009:14).

### **What is at stake?**

In so far as global rankings are concerned, there is much at stake for universities in underdeveloped societies in the global South and for higher education in general.

First, under the umbrella of a hegemonic neo-liberalism, 1950s modernisation theory, which vaunted Western capitalist societies as the symbol of ‘development’ and proclaimed ‘catching up’ with the West as the primary task of development, made a triumphant return. With it returned the ideas of Western capitalist societies as the apogee of modernity and the ideal of development, and the view that the path to development by “traditional” societies lay in the faithful adherence to the economic and development prescriptions of Northern governments and Northern-dominated multinational institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation.

Of course, underdeveloped societies are far from “traditional” societies, given the changes that imperialism and colonialism have wrought in economic and social structure and conditions. The new ace, however, was supposedly to be globalisation and its purported effervescent quality of generalising development and creating ‘developing’ societies in the image of the ‘developed’. The previous ‘mistake’ of the World Bank and other international institutions of disregarding universities in underdeveloped societies as agents of development, which resulted in their serious debilitation, would now, in the epoch of the ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘information society’, be rectified and support would be provided for the revitalization of universities.

Wallerstein has argued that twin meanings have tended to be given to development: “On the one hand...greater internal equality, that is, fundamental social...transformation. On the other hand,...economic growth which involved 'catching up' with the leader (i.e. the US)” (1991:115). However, he correctly argues that historical experience shows that “social transformation and catching up are seriously different objectives. They are not necessarily correlative with each other. They may even be in *contradiction* with each

other” (Wallerstein, 1991:115-6). His conclusion is that “it should be clear by now that we have to analyze these objectives separately and cannot continue blithely to assume their pairing, which developmentalists...have for the most done for the past 150 years”. The “rhetoric of development has masked a contradiction that is deep and enduring....(T)his contradiction is now a glaring one” (ibid., 1991:116;117).

Without detracting from the role of national elites in underdeveloped societies in retarding development and social justice, it must be observed that attempts by countries in the South to develop occur on a terrain of enduring global inequalities, which in many instances have intensified in the epoch of globalisation and the hegemony of neo-liberalism. Development, especially of the kind that realizes greater internal equality and social justice, has continued to be elusive. This is so notwithstanding the adherence on the part of many governments in underdeveloped societies to the ‘development’ prescriptions of Northern governments and multinational institutions and the ubiquitous experts and consultants that traverse ‘developing’ societies (see Chang, 2008).

In the same way that modernisation theory depicts Western capitalist societies and institutions as the apex of development and modernity, global university rankings, as the spawn of the modernisation paradigm, constitute the ‘world-class university’, which is essentially North American and European, as the goal of higher education development and the pinnacle of the university hierarchy. One should, of course, not be averse to learning from universities elsewhere and to critically borrow ideas, policies and strategies. The value, however, of a path of uncritical imitation/mimicry of, and ‘catching up’ with, the so-called top ‘research universities’ and the pursuit of the status of ‘world-class university’ for enhancing economic and social development is debatable. In any event, it cannot be blithely assumed that the massive investment that will necessarily be entailed in creating ‘world-class’ universities will in itself have a profound effect on economic and social development. The creation of such universities may be a *necessary condition* but is not a *sufficient condition* for development. Indeed, in many societies in the South the challenge is to create favourable national higher education policy environments and wider economic and social policy environments to facilitate the work and contributions of universities.

Second, Marginson draws attention to Foucault’s reference to discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”. In these terms, “rankings inculcate the idealized model of institution as a norm to be achieved and generalize the failure to achieve it” (2009:13-14). Rankings, indeed, “form the objects of which they speak”. The ‘world-class university’ has, until recently, not existed as a concept. Nor is it to be imagined as an incontrovertible empirical reality. The ‘world-class university’ and its status as the gold standard are the descriptive and normative social constructs of the imagination of rankers.

The specific national conditions, realities and development challenges of underdeveloped societies in the South, and the diversity of social and educational purposes and goals that universities in these societies must serve, require national systems of higher education characterized by differentiated and diverse institutions. Of value, then, are institutional differentiation and diversity, rather than homogeneity and isomorphism. It makes little

sense for all universities to aspire to a common 'gold' standard, irrespective of economic and social needs, their missions and goals, and their capacities and capabilities.

Graham has argued universities should avoid aspiring to "ideal(s) which they cannot attain". Otherwise, "no sense of worth will be forthcoming" and they can have no "proper self-confidence" (2005:157). It must also be recognised that there are many conceptions and models of the 'university' and that these have changed over time. Thus, the "name 'university' now applies to institutions with widely different functions and characters", and that this means that the "ideals each can aspire to" will be different (Graham, 2005:157; 258). Moreover, as Newby argues, "today's universities are expected to engage in lifelong learning (not just 'teaching'), research, knowledge transfer, social inclusion..., local and regional economic development, citizenship training and much more. No university is resourced sufficiently to perform all these functions simultaneously and in equal measure at ever-increasing levels of quality" (2008:57-58). Institutions, therefore, have to identify, concentrate on, and build niche areas of strength that are congruent with their missions and goals, and governments must ensure that institutions display and pursue a diversity of missions. Newby also suggests that "different activities in universities have different geographical frames of reference" - research tends to be relatively more globally oriented, undergraduate teaching and learning more nationally focused and knowledge transfer and community engagement more regionally and locally focused (ibid., 2008:57).

Instead of valuing a horizontal continuum that recognises the need for universities to have different and diverse missions and which accords respect to universities that pursue various missions, the idea of the 'world-class university' as "the idealized model of institution" has the perverse effect of a 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 North-South inequalities, the burden of these characterisations, of course, weigh disproportionately on universities in the South.

Third, the performance measures that are used in global rankings privilege publishing in English-language journals and in effect privilege the English-language. Yet, universities have social responsibilities that relate to their local, regional and national societies. Especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences, prioritising research and publishing for improvement of ranking and an unadulterated orientation to the global pole can seriously undermine the roles of universities in the intellectual and cultural life of their localities and nations. Today, the competition for and concentration on economic advantage means that certain kinds of knowledge and research, especially that generated by the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering are privileged. However, as Mkandawire argues, "attempts to improve Africa's prospects by focusing on scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford" and "it is vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place...if Africa's development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed" (2009:vii).

Fourth, rankings compromise the value and promise of universities as they “divert attention from some central purposes of higher education’, and “to accept these ranking systems is to acquiesce at these definitions of higher education and its purposes” (Marginson, 2007b:139). Important as are new knowledge production and the “scholarship of discovery” (Boyer, 1990), the foundation of the production of high quality graduates that can advance development in the underdeveloped South is high quality learning-teaching. Moreover, community engagement, and specifically service-learning, is also a vital function of universities in the South. Both are “means for connecting universities and communities with development needs” and “for higher education staff and students to partner with communities to address development aims and goals” (Stanton, 2008:3; 2). However, the global rankings are only marginally concerned with learning-teaching and completely ignore the value of community engagement.

Fifth, a dangerous possible consequence of global rankings is related to the contemporary feature of a ‘demand overload’ on universities, as they are buffeted by the cross-currents of the varied requirements of the state, the market, civil society and institutional stakeholders. Not infrequently, the demands on universities are contradictory, irreconcilable and erosive of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and public good ideals. Often, universities, especially in underdeveloped societies, must respond to the differing demands without any significant increase in or with declining public finance, increasing dependence on tuition fees and third stream income, and difficulties in securing and retaining talented academics that are attracted to the higher remuneration packages of the public and private sectors. Rankings and the norm of the ‘world class-university’ exacerbate the ‘demand overload’. They construct ideals which most universities “cannot attain” and generate public expectations that are unrealistic for most universities in the South. Unchecked, they could reshape and seriously distort the social purposes, goals and priorities of universities. They could also corrode institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

Finally, the extent to which the global rankings have come to be embraced by numerous universities and higher education agencies as knowledge of and on universities and higher education must be a matter of great concern. Instead of bold criticism of the dubious value and ends of rankings and the extremely questionable social science that underpins them, of the indicators that are arbitrarily privileged and the shallow proxies that are utilised as correlates of quality, there is seeming acquiescence. Rather than withering challenges of conceptions of quality that conceive it as timeless and invariant, and attached to a single, a-historical and universal model of a university, instead of as historically specific and related to the missions and goals of institutions and their educational and social purposes, there is submission to quality as defined by the SJTIE and THE-QS (see also Hazelkorn, 2009). The validation of rankings as knowledge on universities, notwithstanding their questionable social science underpinnings, is ultimately corrosive of knowledge and science.

## The social determinants of rankings

Global rankings and league tables of universities are both rooted in and also an expression of contemporary economic and social conditions and the hegemony of the ideology of neo-liberalism within society and universities. At least four developments have stimulated the rise of global rankings.

The rise of an economy in which knowledge increasingly plays a critical role and is prized for the economic advantage that it can confer on businesses and countries means that new knowledge production and the development and application of knowledge take on great significance. Carnoy contends that a key feature of the global economy is that the accumulation of capital is “increasingly dependent on knowledge and information applied to production, and this knowledge is increasingly science-based” (1998:2). The implication is that “if knowledge is the electricity of the new informational international economy, then institutions of higher education are the power sources on which a new development process must rely” (Castells, 1993). Universities, and especially those that have research as a strong and distinctive dimension of their mission, clearly take on great importance in this context. Although universities are increasingly not the sole knowledge-producing and research and development institutions, they remain important sites, especially of fundamental research. Furthermore, they also are the preeminent disseminators of knowledge that cultivate high-level professionals with the capacity to innovate. Rankings and the ‘research university’, as the embodiment of the ‘world-class university’ and the new gold standard, reflect the intense competition and pursuit of economic advantage in the ‘knowledge economy’.

Second, rankings also both reflect and are an outcome of the rampant marketisation and commercialisation of higher education. In numerous fields, scientific research has increasingly become a hugely resource-hungry endeavour. Concomitantly, universities themselves, and especially research-intensive universities, have become increasingly organisationally complex and resource-greedy organisations. In the face of declining public subsidies new sources of income, whether through the imposition of tuition fees or the generation of third stream income through contract research, private endowments, donor grants and alumni gifts, have taken on great importance and have intensified competition among universities. It is in this context that internationalisation, instead of embodying *internationalism*, has been corroded and reduced to *transnationalisation*, in which mutual benefit and value for nations are lesser considerations than international students as a valuable source of ‘export earnings’, income for universities and potential expertise for countries. Rankings, in constituting the ‘world-class university’ and conferring prestige, simultaneously enhance the competitive power of those universities deemed to be ‘world-class’ and position them to benefit from the competition for resources and international students. Given continuing North-South inequalities, the attraction of Southern students to Northern ‘world class’ universities simultaneously benefits Northern countries, providing them a talented pool from which to replenish scientific expertise and maintain their economic dominance.

It is suggested that the global rankings help to guide governments, businesses and foundations in decision-making on the investment of funds, award of research contracts

and the provision of endowments. While they could be a guide in relation to the activities and performance measures that are privileged by global rankings, such rankings are ultimately a poor guide with respect to other important activities of universities. Moreover, they are also of little value regarding a university's performance in specific disciplines and fields, because "a university may indeed be a leader in the field of research, but the equipment it offers its students may be miserable, or it may be strong in German Studies, but poor in Economics and Business Administration" (Centre for Higher Education, 2009). In short, it is not possible to make judgments on excellence and quality on the basis of the composite indexes that are characteristic of global rankings.

Rankings are also the logical outcomes of the new performative culture that has arisen under neo-liberalism and especially the "financial and administrative technologies collated in the New Public Management", which conceives of universities "as firms driven by desires for economic revenues and market share, not by teaching, research and service as ends in themselves" (Marginson, 2009:3) As Marginson goes on to note, the construction of higher education as a performative market of competing universities-as-firms" necessitates the "plausible mapping of the higher education field in the form of a hierarchy of institutional performance, that can be represented as the outcome of market competition....The ideal model functions as a template against which institutions of higher education are measured and ranked" (ibid., 2009:4). The 'world-class university' constituted in accordance with certain preferred criteria and weightings becomes the prize, with performance and rankings depending on how well a university plays the game whose rules have been formulated by the rankers and also how well a university is resourced.

Lastly, as with all social phenomena, rankings are not the products of social structure and conjuncture alone but also of human agency. In as much as globalization and a hegemonic neo-liberalism have provided fertile conditions for the emergence of global rankings of universities and the construct of the 'world-class university' as the gold standard, they are also the off-springs of specific social actors with particular motivations. Burawoy defines politics as "as struggles within a specific arena aimed at specific sets of relations,...struggles that take as their *objective* the quantitative or qualitative change of those relations" (1985:253-54); and Castells argues that universities are subject to "the conflicts and contradictions of society and therefore they will tend to express...the ideological struggles present in all societies" (2001: 206). In general, higher education has been characterised by the embrace of, accommodation with, or acquiescence with the neo-liberal logic. This is in keeping with Castells' contention that "the more the ideological hegemony of dominant elites is established in society at large, the more conservative ideologies tend to be prominent in universities" (ibid., 2006:6). Rankings, which are far from value-free, technical and neutral instruments, reflect the contemporary higher education terrain and express the state of contemporary struggles in this domain.

## **The future of rankings**

The critique of rankings is not to be assumed to imply that they can be simply ignored or wished away. If a perverse and present burden, the SJTIHE and the THE-QS rankings and others that take the form of reductive composite indexes are likely to shape policy and practice in higher education and universities. It is, however, important to avoid a fatalism that imagines that rankings that are of questionable value are immutable and impervious to the force of critique and social action. Simple assertions of the ‘inevitability’ of rankings, whether in relation to the “competitive and market-oriented academic world of the 21st century”, “massification” or other features of contemporary society, are not persuasive (Altbach, 2006:2; see also Nian Cai Liu, 2009:3).

The critique of global university rankings is also not a refusal of critical public scrutiny of universities in the South. Performance indicators and benchmarks, as distinct from rankings, are of much value when carefully conceptualised and designed with clarity of purpose and aims and are respectful of institutional mission and policy goals. They 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 THE-QS and SJTIHE global university rankings.

## **Conclusion**

No value can be attached to the SJTIHE and the THE-QS rankings. They are incapable of capturing either the meaning or diverse qualities of a university or their varied roles in a manner that values and respects their educational and social purposes, missions and goals. They are underpinned by questionable social science, arbitrarily privilege particular indicators, and use shallow proxies as correlates of quality.

The challenge for universities in the South is to effectively displace global rankings by alternative instruments that genuinely serve educational and social purposes, contribute to improvement, innovation and development in universities, enhance transparency and critical public scrutiny of universities, and facilitate informed choices and judgements on the basis of robust social science and appropriate methodologies.

The global economic crisis provides the opportunity for a new imagination that is freed from the stifling neo-liberal orthodoxy of the past decades. It creates the space for new ideas, and for the recovery of important values related to human development, social justice, freedom, solidarity and internationalism. It also enables us to think about and to act to construct a different kind of world and citizenship, “a world where markets are servants, not masters” (Mulgan, 2009).

Whether and to what extent this happens depends on whether intellectuals, scholars, and universities in the South join hands with other social actors and take on the responsibility of re-thinking and re-making our societies and universities on the basis of

other principles, coordinates and logics than the ones that have dominated in recent decades.

The current crisis provides the opportunity to restore to universities their varied social purposes instead of their reduction to instruments of the economy and vocational schools; to recover the vital public good functions of higher education, as opposed to the ideas of higher education as a market, universities as 'firms' and students as 'customers' and, instead of the destructive logic of global rankings and a universal gold standard, to revalue 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 the South. Higher education "requires bold visions of internationalism, of alternative globalization, that transcend the edicts of market accountability and narrow commercial calculations and embrace the ethics of social accountability and an expansive humanism that will elevate and empower all ...people". For certain, "we will have failed the future if we do not vigorously pursue the dreams of university education as an ennobling adventure for individuals, communities, nations, and the world at large, if we do not strive to create universities that produce ideas rather than peddle information, critical rationality rather than consumer rations, and knowledge that has lasting value" (Zezeza, 2005:54-55).

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