

## **The word-class university and the global South**

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### **Introduction**

The global ranking of universities has come into prominence in the past few years. This paper analyses their value and what is at stake. I argue that such rankings generate false perceptions and prejudice the global South, and that they should be replaced by alternative instruments that better serve educational and social purposes.

### **Global rankings**

The Shanghai Jiao Tong Institute of Higher Education (SJTIE) ranking has its genesis in the Chinese government's quest to create "world-class universities" as catalysts of development. The SJTIE ranking gives priority to six indicators for which data were available (Mohamedbhai, 2009)

The purpose of the Times Higher Education-Quacquarelli Symonds (THE-QS) ranking is "to recognise universities as the multi-faceted organisations that they are, [and] to provide a global comparison of their success against the notional mission of remaining or becoming world-class" (Times Higher Education, 2009). It considers a mere six criteria to be pivotal for judging *world-class* (see Kauppi and Erkila).

### **Rankings: what value?**

In order to establish their validity, university rankings need to be subjected to critical analysis in terms of their purposes, methodologies, and value to universities and society. I will briefly address each in turn.

Regarding *purposes*, the SJTIE originated as an attempt to benchmark Chinese universities as a means of charting a trajectory for their development. However, SJTIE has become a global ranking of universities, although only based on a narrow range of (essentially research) indicators that are wholly inadequate for measuring performance and quality in relation to diverse social and educational purposes as well as university goals.

The THE-QS's precise purpose with 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 should ostensibly aspire and according to which they should be measured. In the THE-QS "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" (Marginson, 2007b:138-39). The

internationalization of the student body is valued less for enriching a university; instead, international students are a “prized quarry” as “universities are free to charge them whatever the market will bear” (Times Higher Education, 2007). Thus, “it is not about teaching and only marginally about research” (Marginson, 2006a:5). Although it claims “to recognise universities as multi-faceted organisations”, the THE-QS criteria are dubious as proxies for teaching and learning quality.

*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, 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” (Marginson, 2007b: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.

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

In terms of their methodologies, the SJTIHE and THE-QS rankings have little intrinsic value and serve no meaningful educational or social purpose. On the contrary, 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 in underdeveloped societies in the global South.

1. 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.

2. 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. 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.

3. 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.

Today, the competition for, and concentration on, economic advantage means that certain kinds of knowledge and research – especially those 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” (2009:vii), 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” (ibid:vii).

4. Rankings compromise the value and promise of universities as they “divert attention from some central purposes of higher education” (Marginson, 2007b: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.

5. Finally, 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.

## **Conclusion**

Global university rankings fail to capture either the meaning or diverse qualities of a university or the characteristics of universities in a way that values and respects their educational and social purposes, missions and goals. At present, these rankings are of dubious value, are underpinned by questionable social science, arbitrarily privilege particular indicators, and use shallow proxies as correlates of quality.

Universities in the global South must refuse to play the game as formulated by the SJTIHE and THE-QS, even if others collude with rankings for the sake of self-aggrandisement. Rather than permit these rankings from prescribing a “gold standard” and imposing narrow definitions of quality, quality should be regarded as historically specific and related to institutional missions and goals as well as educational and social purposes.

My critique of global university rankings is not a refusal of critical public scrutiny of universities or of universities in the global South. Besides rankings, there is much value in performance indicators and benchmarks if carefully conceptualized and designed with a clarity of purpose and respectful of institutional missions and policy goals. Performance indicators have an important role in institutional development and, through these, the achievement of national socioeconomic development priorities. Clearly, effective monitoring, evaluation and critical reviews of universities, including their goals, strategies, academic programmes, administration, governance and financial management also have key roles in university development.

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

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