The rise of rankings

QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

CWUR

Shanghai Ranking

Times Higher Education
Aren’t they just harmless curiosities?

• Governments invest in ranking-climbing programmes
• Governments merge institutions to ‘win’ at ranking
• Governments use them for decision-making
• Students use them to decide where to study
• Faculty use them to decide where to work
• Where there’s a prize, there’s a game…
Government-run university excellence initiatives

- Taiwan “Development plan for world class universities and research centers of excellence”
- Russia “Academic Excellence Initiative” Project 5-100
- China “Double First Class Initiative” 42 world-class HEIs by 2050
- Japan “Top Global University Project”
University mergers
Romania kicks off debate on university mergers after falling out of Shanghai ranking

22 Aug 2023 | News

Some university heads are saying the country should follow the French model of consolidation after the only university to have featured in the research-focused ranking drops out

By Florin Zubașcu

Network Updates

These updates are republished press releases and communications from members of the Science | Business Network

KU Leuven researchers develop safe alternative to controversial building-block chemical
31 Aug 2023 | KU Leuven

Trinity wins prestigious Athena Swan Silver Awards
High Potential Individual (HPI) visa

Eligibility
To be eligible for a High Potential Individual (HPI) visa, you must have been awarded a qualification by an eligible university.

Where you studied
The list of eligible universities is based on rankings of universities from around the world.
organisational data on 102 English universities from 2008 to 2017, we find that the rank a university occupies in league tables affects all universities except elite universities, controlling for previous level of financial sustainability and institutional level differences. We further show that this relationship is partly explained by universities’ income from tuition fees. The findings document universities’ financial vulnerability to rankings in quasi-markets of higher education, and the reinforcement of elite status as a positional good.
Investment in ranking improvement

Durham University Business School

Dynamic and vibrant, Durham University Business School is one of Durham University’s four Faculties and is comprised of three research-intensive departments: Accounting, Economics and Finance, and Management and Marketing. Known for its global reputation, its impact on policy and practice and its strong focus on ethics, responsibility and sustainability, the School aims to be a leading European business school with a strong global presence by 2027.

The School currently has 180 academic and teaching staff, with plans and resource commitments to grow to 230 by 2027. The School has a high-quality portfolio of programmes at undergraduate, masters and doctoral level, across all subject areas. The School’s student population is around 4000, across undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes, attracting a talented and diverse student intake (with over 130 nationalities).

Our vision is to lead business thought and practice to improve global wealth and well-being. Our associated mission is to create, share and use knowledge to deliver equitable and sustainable futures around
Gaming...and cheating
Trickle-down effect

University rankings
Governments
Funders
Universities
Individuals
CoARA Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment

Core commitments

1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators
3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment
But shouldn’t universities be accountable?

• Yes!
• But accountable to whom?
• Who appointed the rankings?
• To whom are they accountable?
• Shouldn’t universities be holding the rankings to account?
If you need a league table to tell you what matters, are you really a university?
ARE THEY TRUE?
The research question

• Which is the best university in the world?
• Best at what?
• What are the characteristics of a top university
• …and in what proportion?
Methods

• Indicator validity
• Data quality
• Sensitivity
• Error bars
## 3. Indicators and Weights for ARWU

<table>
<thead>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
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Ranking surveys are “unscientific straw polls”
“Bielefeld’s 120-place rise in the ranking was, our analysis showed, clearly caused by one scholar.”
Honest reporting: CWTS Leiden Ranking stability intervals

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<th>P</th>
<th>P(top 10%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>26 London Sch Hyg &amp; Trop Med</td>
<td>2422</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Northwestern Univ</td>
<td>11133</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Washington Univ St Louis</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 King's Coll London</td>
<td>8826</td>
<td>1469</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Icahn Sch Med - Mt Sinai</td>
<td>5905</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Univ Glasgow</td>
<td>5634</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 Univ Texas - Southwestern Med Ctr - Dallas</td>
<td>4840</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 Hong Kong Univ Sci &amp; Technol</td>
<td>3839</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 London Sch Econ &amp; Polit Sci</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 Boston Coll</td>
<td>1372</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>36 Changsha Univ Sci &amp; Technol</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td>245</td>
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<tr>
<td>37 Univ California - Los Angeles</td>
<td>14196</td>
<td>2268</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>38 Queen Mary Univ London</td>
<td>3939</td>
<td>628</td>
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<tr>
<td>39 Humanitas Univ</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
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Reporting

Adrian Barnett, Elizabeth Gadd, University League

Tables have no Legs to Stand on, *Significance*, Volume 19, Issue 4, August 2022, Pages 4–7, [https://doi.org/10.1111/1740-9713.01663](https://doi.org/10.1111/1740-9713.01663)

**Figure 2:** Total citation counts from 1,225 universities plus-and-minus an assumed 10% error.
ARE THEY FAIR?
Characteristics of a highly-ranked HEI

- Old
- Large
- Wealthy
- Research-intensive
- Science-focused
- English-speaking
- ‘Global North’
Location of journals used in THE & QS Rankings

Arianna Becerril-García, Responsible Research Assessment Conference, GRC, November 2020
Location of top 20 HEIs in THE Impact Ranking 2023
Countries in which high potential individuals can be found according the UK government

World-class Universities? Interrogating the Biases and Coloniality of Global University Rankings

UNU-IIGH Briefing Paper, February 2023
Yale, Harvard and UC Berkeley law schools withdraw from US News rankings

Both law schools say US News & World Report’s annual rankings are in conflict with commitments to diversity and affordability.

Harvard Leads an Exodus of Medical Schools Withdrawing from US News Rankings

The nation’s top-ranked medical schools have stated they will no longer participate in annual rankings with U.S. News, citing methodological and philosophical frustrations.

By Alexandra Treswijn-Perenyi - 03/24/23 4:37pm

Students at Harvard law school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yale and Harvard appear to be the first to opt out of the US News rankings. Photograph: Steven Senne/AP

In the most dramatic rebuke of the US News & World Report’s colleges and universities rankings to date, Yale and Harvard announced on Wednesday they will stop participating in the magazine’s law school rankings, citing frustrations with the list’s methodology.

Harvard Medical School was the first to withdraw from med school rankings. (Photo by David L. Ryan/The Boston)
Why UU is missing in the THE ranking

29 September 2023

Contact
Press Office Utrecht University
pressoffice@uu.nl
Conflicts of interest

“Universities with frequent QS-related contracts had an increase of 0.75 standard deviations (~140 positions) in QS World University Rankings … over five years, regardless of changes in the institutional quality.”
About The World 100

The World 100 is focused on improving and maintaining the reputation, communications, strategy, crisis, marketing, and international partnerships of the world’s best universities via our Reputation Network, consultancy, research, events and more.

- 72% Of members improved or maintained their THE 2021 rank
- 6 Members made the top 50 places of AWRU 2021
- 64% Of members improved their academic reputation scores in the 2021 QS Rankings

The World 100 Reputation Network
26 Red Lion Square,
London, WC1R 4HQ

The World Universities Insights Limited
26 Red Lion Square
London
WC1R 4HQ
United Kingdom
Imagine a game of football in which a referee is also the coach of one of the teams playing. Crazy, right? You know what's crazier? The audience believing that a fair game is possible.
ARE THEY HELPFUL?
Do they help students?

- Rankings offer no/poor assessments of teaching quality

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The streetlight effect

This is where you lost your wallet?
No, I lost it in the park. But this is where the light is.
Do they help students?

• Students aren’t looking for a good place to study…
• Students are looking for a good place to put on their CV
“Post-secondary education has become a competition for prestige. And rankings…have become the primary signifiers of prestige.”

Professor Colin Diver, “Breaking Ranks”
False signifiers of prestige

- Rankings for universities
- Journal Impact Factors for journals
- H-indices for faculty

- It’s not the indicators but the prestige economy that’s the problem
Union of Students in Ireland call on universities to cut ties with rankings

USI and TCDSU Call to Cut Ties with University Rankings

In a motion passed at USI Council this evening and in a letter from the TCDSU to the Provost, student representatives are calling for College governing bodies to "re-evaluate their participation in university rankings" with the ultimate goal to withdraw from those they see as unfair.

Alex Payne
academic writer

In a motion passed at USI Council this evening and in a letter from the TCDSU to the Provost, student representatives are calling for College governing bodies to "re-evaluate their participation in university rankings" with the ultimate goal to withdraw from those they see as unfair.

Both arguing against the "neoliberalisation of our institutions", the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the Trinity College Dublin Students' Union (TCDSU) are using the example of Utrecht University’s recent withdrawal from the Times Higher Education World Rankings for 2014 to highlight their perceived issues with partaking in a ranking system which the USI describes as an “inherrably biased” and the TCDSU claims is unfair.
Do they help the sector to do better?

- Better or best?
- Diversity or homogeneity?
- Inspiring winners or making losers out of everyone?
- Encouraging collaboration or competition?
Perhaps the better question is, who stands most to benefit from university rankings?

- The rankers
- The highly ranked
How do we tackle the prestige economy?

• Redefine prestige
  – New definitions need to displace legacy definitions

• Educate that ‘excellence’ cannot be counted
  – Seek better ways of recognising quality
What can institutions do?

- **Accepting** the rankings is an unacceptable position for the thinking university.
- **Rejecting** the rankings amounts to financial and reputational suicide
- “If you’re not part of the **solution**, you’re part of the problem”
Lots of advice!
Use of the rankings

- Institutional decisions should not be driven by rankings
  - Universities should follow holistic institutional strategies, instead of investing considerable time and energy in improving rankings results.
  - Do not use rankings in evaluations, for budget allocation purposes and in other policy contexts.
Communication about the rankings

• Universities also have a duty to educate external stakeholders in the uses and misuses of rankings.

• Encourage students to conduct their own research rather than just using rankings.

• An institution’s decision for or against participating in a ranking exercise should be clearly explained and communicated, as should the meaning of any given outcome or score.
Collaboration with the rankings

• Consider:
  – Not submitting data and information for commercial ranking purposes or
  – …making the submitted data also publicly available on their websites.
  – Not participating in reputation surveys distributed by rankers.
  – Not purchasing products and services from the commercial rankers.
  – Not hosting or participating in events organised by the commercial rankers.
Alternatives to *the rankings*

• Support and engage with initiatives promoting better ways of assessing university performance.
  – U-Multirank (quantitative)
  – More Than Our Rank (qualitative)
The European University Association (EUA) is pleased to provide its support to the INORMS “More Than Our Rank” initiative...EUA believes that the initiative will have an important role in drawing attention to the broad diversity of practices and activities that should be part of a responsible assessment system.

https://inorms.net/more-than-our-rank/
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<td>1047</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Herriot-Watt Univ</td>
<td>1621</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keele Univ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loughborough Univ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nottingham Trent Univ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Univ W England - Bristol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loughborough Univ</td>
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<td>Univ Kent</td>
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<td>Univ Portsmouth</td>
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<td>Coventry Univ</td>
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<td>Bournemouth Univ</td>
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<td>Open Univ</td>
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<td>Sheffield Hallam Univ</td>
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The More Than Our Rank logo displayed next to the names highlights that these universities are More Than Our Rank signatories.

More Than Our Rank signatories are highlighted in orange.
10. We know that universities are much, much more than their rank

The data that underpins our portfolio of rankings covers a vast array of vital university activities: teaching, research, knowledge transfer, financial health, reputation, inclusion, student outcomes, social and economic impact, and sustainability. They offer a sophisticated set of benchmarks and insights that can be tailored to suit multiple missions in many different contexts. But we also fully understand that data alone can never capture all the extraordinary ways that universities contribute to our world.
Thanks for listening

- Dr Elizabeth Gadd
- *Chair* INORMS Research Evaluation Group
- *Vice-Chair* Coalition on Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA)
- Email: [E.a.gadd@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:E.a.gadd@lboro.ac.uk)
- Twitter: [@INORMS_REWG](https://twitter.com/INORMS_REWG) @LizzieGadd @CoARAssessment
- [https://inorms.net/activities/research-evaluation-group/](https://inorms.net/activities/research-evaluation-group/)