Preface

THE INFLUENCE OF RANKINGS ON STRATEGY AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

As global university ranking systems continue to contribute to the notion of a world university market (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007), their influence upon the strategic direction of many universities, and the potential future of global higher education continues to grow (Marginson, 2007a). The recognition (although not shared by all in the academic community by any means!) that “everyone wants a world-class university” (Altbach, 2003) means that global university ranking systems are clearly here to stay (IHST, 2007, p. 2). However, the way in which rankings are treated by various governmental departments charged with responsibility for higher education in different countries suggests that whilst some might use a global ranking system as just another imperfect measure of success, others see them as an absolute benchmark for being ‘world class’ which requires alignment which threatens to overwhelm other more critical academic and social issues. However, whilst the author agrees with (Bowden, 2000, p. 58) that rankings “will continue to be published in ever-increasing numbers”, there are now some signs that we might begin to see the demise of some of the current offerings over the next decade.

With considerable expansion and arguably increased access to higher education around the world in recent decades (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), the impact of global university ranking systems in many countries and regions has become increasingly relevant, sometimes exerting significant influence on national agendas in both developing and highly developed countries (Altbach, 2007). Indeed in some parts of the world, global university rankings have already impacted upon almost every aspect of the higher education enterprise including organisational mission, governance, strategic planning, personnel recruitment and public relations (Hazelkorn, 2007, 2008). At a national level, policymakers in many countries have prioritised building what is often termed a World-Class University (WCU), something which they believe will help their countries obtain superior positions in terms of the global competition for graduate talent. Governments in these countries increasingly provide substantial public investment in higher education, and set about expanding capacity. More recently, some of these Governments and their universities have actively taken Downing’s (2011) advice and chosen their ‘poison’ carefully so as to maximize the benefits of the national publicity which will inevitably surround the announcements of their universities latest annual position in the World or Regional rankings. In other words, they have actively chosen to primarily engage with the ranking body or bodies that they are likely to perform best in. Rather like choosing a sport to play, one tends not to pick swimming if every time you enter the water you sink. Basically, everyone wants to be able to say they have risen in one ranking or another. Consequently, in addition to global rankings, we now have a range of regional rankings (Asia, Arab
region, Latin America, etc.), age-related rankings (QS Top 50 under fifty, THE Top 100 under fifty), and the increasingly popular subject and discipline rankings.

**National Rankings**

National university ranking is not a new phenomenon. It has a long history in the US, which can be traced back to 1870, when annual reports by the United States Bureau of Education rank-ordered universities based on statistical information. During the 1980’s, *U.S. News & World Report* was published and university rankings were brought into the national limelight, receiving increasing interest from a wide range of sources including university administrators, potential student and faculty applicants, policymakers and researchers (Meredith, 2004). In the UK, as early as the mid-1970s, the distinguished British sociologist A. H. Halsey conducted a survey of academics and constructed a rank of UK universities. Then in 1992, *The Times* published its top 100 UK universities in its *Good University Guide* for the first time. In Germany, the Center for Higher Education Development and German Academic Exchange Service (CHE/DAAD) has produced a ranking of Germany’s 250 higher education institutions since 1998. In Australia, the University of Melbourne’s Institute of Applied Economics and Social Research first published their International standing of Australian universities in 2004.

Despite these early forerunners, global university rankings remain relatively new. The earliest international (but not global) university ranking was ‘Asia’s best universities’, published by the magazine ‘Asiaweek’ from 1997 to 2000. Whilst there are relatively few truly global university ranking systems introduced to the world over the past decade, university rankings research has nonetheless become a new academic and professional discipline, with some students undertaking PhD theses on their many controversial aspects and potential influences. Generally, academics either review the notion of what constitutes a “world-class university”, explore the corresponding strategies undertaken by universities, or examine the impact of the quest for world-class status on higher education in different contexts (e.g., Deem, Mok, & Lucas, 2008; Mok & Chan, 2008). Other academics focus on the ranking system itself, either by comparing the rankings (Aguillo, Bar-Ilan, Levene, & Ortega, 2010), rating the rankings (Stolz, Hendel, & Horn, 2010; Taylor & Braddock, 2007) or engaging in a critique of the various ranking systems (Bookstein, Seidler, Fieder, & Winckler, 2010; Dehon, McCathie, & Verardi, 2010; Marginson, 2007b).

**Global Rankings Attract Global Attention**

Despite the many and varied criticisms of the scientific and cultural bases of most ranking systems, it cannot be denied that they continue to attract considerable and growing attention from institutions, academics, employers, students and their parents. A review of the literature reveals relatively few comparative studies of international academic ranking systems (e.g., Aguillo, et al., 2010; Buela-Casal, Gutierrez-Martinez, Bermudez-Sanchez, & Vadillo-Munoz, 2007; Dill & Soo, 2005; Provan & Abercromby, 2000; Usher & Savino, 2006; van Dyke, 2005). Some commentators point out that many universities actively participate in global and regional rankings in order to benefit from hopefully positive publicity and attract students (Provan & Abercromby, 2000), whilst others suggest that rankings exert a negative impact on university performance (Dill & Soo, 2005). The critiques from other academics concentrate on the selection of indicators, the assignment of weights and the statistical insignificance of differences between institutions (Dill & Soo, 2005; Provan & Abercromby, 2000). Buela-Casal and others (2007) compared four international academic rankings of universities (Shanghai ARWU ranking, Times supple-
ment ranking, CEST Scientometrics Ranking and Asiaweek) whilst Aguillo et al (2010) compared the Shanghai ranking, Times supplement ranking, Taiwan ranking, Leiden ranking and Webometrics ranking by using a set of similar measures. Perhaps not too surprisingly, these studies generally find that there are reasonable similarities between the rankings, even though each applies a different methodology, which is often based primarily on research and academic reputation. Despite these academic identified similarities, different ranking systems are driven by different purposes, target different audiences, take into account different parameters, and depend upon the availability of relatively common data (van Dyke, 2005) across different geographical locations and cultures (Usher & Savino, 2006).

The Big Three

Arguably, three global university ranking systems have recently exerted dominance in terms of world and regional higher education ranking. The oldest system, by one year, is the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) prepared by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) which was first published in 2003, followed by the World University Rankings by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) first being published in 2004 with Times Higher Education as media partners. In 2010, following a carefully orchestrated media release, the Times Higher Education published its own set of World University Rankings called the Times Higher Education Survey (THES). Subsequently the ARWU, QS and THE have established themselves as the three global rankings of significance. Detailed information about their various criteria, weightings and scoring systems is available from the respective websites of these ranking systems so will not be repeated in this preface. However, it is worth sharing some historical and more recent information about the big three here. The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) was first published in June 2003 by the Center for World-Class Universities and the Institute of Higher Education at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China, and then updated on an annual basis. Starting from 2009, the ARWU has been published by the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, a fully independent organization (http://www.arwu.org/). The Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (QS-WUR) was initially published by the Times Higher Education Supplement in 2004 (http://www.topuniversities.com/home/), but has operated very successfully on a wholly independent basis since 2010. Finally, the newest system, The Times Higher Education World University Rankings THE-WUR has been published by the Times Higher from 2010 (http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/). Whilst some might try to hide it, it is a fact that all of the big three are highly successful commercial organisations, with none being able to claim the ‘moral’ high ground in terms of this aspect of their operations.

Some Differences between the Big Three

There are substantial differences between each of the big three university league tables in terms of what they measure, how they measure it and in their implicit definition of ‘quality’ (Usher & Savino, 2006). Every one of the big three has successfully captured global media attention through a variety of means, whilst also receiving fierce criticism and praise. Unlike the criticism which also comes from the global academic community, praise does not usually come from their fellow ranking organisations. The ARWU is often criticized for being too mono-dimensional in the modern higher education landscape being clearly based on solely research related criteria. For example, using tools and concepts from Multiple Criteria Decision Making, Billaut and his colleagues (2010) concluded that ARWU did not qualify as a useful and pertinent tool in terms of discussing the “quality” of academic institutions, let alone as something
which could be used to guide the choice of students and their families, or to promote improvements in higher education systems. Furthermore, Dehon and others (2010) employed robust principal component analysis to uncover two different and uncorrelated aspects of academic research: overall research output and top-notch researchers, and they concluded that the relative weight placed upon these two factors determined to a large extent the final ranking an institution received in the ARWU. The QS-WUR gives great weight to academic peer review, which inevitably results in the criticism of having a strong regional bias by virtue of the fact that its peer review assessors are likely to rate universities in their own region rather than across the world (Taylor & Braddock, 2007). Immediately after the publication of THE-WUR in 2010, it attracted robust global questioning related to anomalies, missing institutions, transparency and validity. The then President at Nanyang Technical University in Singapore, Su Guaning commented about the new THE system. “A detailed analysis reveals it is 88% percent computed from research-related indicators with unusual normalisation of data producing some bizarre results…For rapidly rising universities, the results of recent world-class research work are not immediately captured in rankings such as Times Higher Education.”

Taylor and Braddock (2007) concluded in their study that ARWU was a better indicator of university excellence than QS-WUR, while Downing (2010a) thought the QS-WUR allowed more opportunities for ambitious young universities to be noticed in the world rankings than ARWU. Marginson (2007b) critiqued the above two ranking systems and canvassed the methodological difficulties and problems by advocating a better approach to rank universities which he termed a ‘clean’ rankings, transparent, free of self-interest, and methodologically coherent (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). As international league tables like the QS-WUR, THE and ARWU compete for dominance (IHEP, 2007; Usher & Savino, 2006), there is ongoing debate related to criteria for inclusion (the role of medical centres and hospitals), weightings (a priori models), variable interdependencies (correlation among bibliometric measures) and size components (classification of universities) amongst other topics. Regardless of the particular methods employed, most ranking systems share common limitations. ‘The main problems are that most rankings purport to evaluate universities as a whole, negating any internal differentiation, and that the weightings used to construct composite indices covering various aspects of quality or performance may be arbitrary and biased in favour of research, while providing little (or no) guidance on the quality of teaching. Research performance measures tend to be biased towards the natural and medical sciences and the English language, enhancing the stature of comprehensive research universities in major English-speaking countries’ (van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2009, p. 72).

No Such Thing as Bad Publicity

Despite being criticised for being superficial, arbitrary, and lacking any real measure of quality (Meredith, 2004) and the ongoing debate about their uses and validity (Altbach, 2006; Brooks, 2005; Dill & Soo, 2005), the big three global university rankings nonetheless immediately secured great prominence in higher education, policy, and public arenas and have had discernable effects in institutional and policy behaviours (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007) which is already influencing the future of higher education. There is evidence to show that university rankings have exerted substantial effect on high-level administrators at US colleges and universities (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010). With the advent of the publication of the third of the big three systems in 2010 (THE-WUR), Downing (2010a, 2011) proposed that it is time to choose your rankings “poison” carefully. He undertook a highly detailed analysis of major global rankings tables and found that universities in Asia have been rising steadily
through the QS-WUR rankings over the previous three or four years, with many more making it into the top 200 world institutions by 2010 (Sharma, 2010) than in previous years. This is a very positive boost for young, ambitious universities in regions like Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Latin America that aspire to secure a high ranking in the league tables.

There is a surprising level of agreement between ranking systems, irrespective of the differences in some of their indicators, on which universities are ‘the best’: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, MIT and Stanford in the US; Oxford and Cambridge in the UK; the University of Toronto in Canada; ANU and the University of Melbourne in Australia, and Peking and Tsinghua in China. Such similar ranking results among the top universities in each country have led some commentators to suggest that the indicators used in most university rankings might really be measuring some underlying characteristics such as institutional age and funding per student (Michael, 2005; Usher & Savino, 2006). Variation between rankings occurs lower down the scale, where even small changes in the methods can change institutional rank significantly. This suggests that lesser-known, but nonetheless nationally or regionally respected universities might benefit from insights into their relative strengths and weaknesses from their rankings in different global university rankings. Notwithstanding this, some commentators continue to refer to rankings as an unavoidable ‘poison’ which has proved fatal in terms of some promising academic careers. They are a wonderfully accurate measure of progress whilst the university is rising in global prominence but contain a criminally inaccurate set of non-representative criteria when the university is heading in the other direction (Downing, 2010a).

**It Is an Ill Wind…**

As Downing (2010b) put it, all these rankings organisations recognise the growing impact of the global environment on higher education systems and institutions, and the importance placed on some means of identifying institutional excellence by prospective ‘consumers’. Some of these consumers have the advantage of government funded or subsidised opportunities to access higher education, whilst others will be spending their own hard-earned money in order to obtain the best education possible for themselves or, more likely, their offspring. In almost every other walk of life, we can make informed choices because we are provided with appropriate ways of assessing the quality of what we purchase and consequently narrowing down the choice of products we wish to investigate further. The advent of rankings has undoubtedly made it easier for these individuals to access information about an institution as a whole that will assist with that choice. Whilst rankings might not always provide information about the particular strengths and weaknesses of the disciplines and departments encompassed within any given higher education institution (HEI), at undergraduate level it is often the reputation and ranking of the HEI that will encourage further investigation. In fact, outside of academic circles (and in some cases inside as well) the strengths and weaknesses of particular departments or disciplines within an institution are often ignored in favour of recognising that someone has a degree from a highly ranked university. Academics, students, their parents and employers recognise this, and as students become more globally mobile, the reputation of any HEI contributed to by its standing or ranking comparative to others, will continue to grow in importance. The status of WCU is regarded as both a symbol of national achievement and prestige and as an engine of economic growth in a global knowledge economy. Therefore, the global rankings have prompted an increasing desire to achieve high-ranking research university status within national systems (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). The quest for WCU status is very strong in Asia
and the global rankings provide opportunities for more Asian universities to be more globally visible. In fact, rankings are bringing Asia out of the shadow cast by their Western counterparts (Downing, 2010b).

**The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

So the question remains what is good, what is bad and what is ugly about the rankings? Well their impact upon the management of universities should not be underestimated because it has undoubtedly brought both good and bad consequences. For some universities it has provided a useful set of indicators against which to benchmark their global performance (good), whilst for others it has taken on an unhealthy prominence that diverts senior managers from their otherwise valid vision and mission (bad). Sometimes an annual rise or fall in the rankings of a few places is seen as indicating a longer term change in performance and many careers are made or broken over a few (often poorly understood) parameters, when the greater good done by a particular university in its local or regional community is ignored (ugly). The advent of global rankings has meant that many governments in developing countries are investing more heavily in higher education to ensure they can claim a high global ranking or WCU status (good), but some of these countries are neglecting investment in those institutions with a community or local mission in favour of those identified as having a global goal (bad and ugly). In some universities the concentration on citations as an indicator of quality in the rankings has led to a proliferation of medical, engineering and science subjects, which traditionally attract higher citation counts, to the detriment of the arts and humanities (bad). However, some universities recognise the importance of the arts and humanities to a civilised and cultured society, not to mention their potential impact on academic reputation scores (good)! Two of the big three ranking systems ignore the fact that most university students do not go on to study at postgraduate level but go on to work as professionals in our societies (bad) whilst one has an employer review criterion (good). Two of the big three ranking systems are relatively transparent in their methodology and normalisation details (good), whilst one is anything but (ugly).

I could of course go on, but the real issue in relation to the good bad and the ugly comes down to how the global rankings are used by the intelligent people who run our universities and countries. When used as indicators of absolute global positioning in terms of the quality of any individual university, rankings are undoubtedly bad. As consumer services for students and their families, and benchmarking tools for universities and their faculty members, they are undoubtedly good, particularly when the ‘consumer’ is armed with sufficient knowledge about their criteria and methods and when used with a modicum of common sense. They are rarely ugly when they are transparent and used positively to bring about improvements in teaching and research quality and institutional strategy in line with the vision and mission of a particular university, but of course they are always less than beautiful when your university is on a downward spiral with all that entails. The choice of which ranking any university chooses to use for promotional or strategic purposes should be self-serving. Relatively young ambitious institutions, particularly those outside of Western Europe and the US, might prefer to major with the QS-WUR, whilst older and richer institutions who can afford to nurture and employ Nobel Laureates and Field’s Medallists will prefer the ARWU.

Global rankings have introduced more transparent, albeit sometimes imperfect competition, with some systems providing opportunities for younger universities and their graduates to establish themselves on a regional and global stage. Conversely, this competition should prevent some of the older and better known institutions from ‘living off their reputations’ because they can see that there are ‘new kids on the block’ who are challenging their historical dominance. There are some signs that this is beginning
to drive a virtuous circle of competition, which drives improvement and punishes complacency. This can only be good for global higher education provided that the various consumers of the global rankings use them judiciously. Whatever your view of higher education ranking systems, they are clearly here to stay and are already influencing the future direction of higher education on a global scale. This is the starting point for this book and the contributions made by a wide variety of well-informed academics, journalists and senior administrators.

**Organization of the Book**

This book is divided into three parts. Section 1 (chapters 1 to 10) looks at the history of rankings, the influence they are having on the present and future of higher education and the challenges they bring around the world. Section 2 (chapters 11 to 16) provide critiques of some of the various ranking systems from a range of perspectives including academics, employers, university planners and students. This part of the book considers issues of institutional size and potential cultural and subject bias as well as looking at potential new ranking systems. Finally, Section 3 (chapters 17 to 22) considers a number of case studies of how some very different universities from diverse regions of the globe have dealt with the advent of rankings, and to what extent their strategic directions have been influenced. These case studies provide detailed ‘fly on the wall’ insights into the responses of some universities to being ranked on a global and regional scale.

Therefore, the book is organized into 22 chapters and a brief description of each chapter follows:

Chapter 1 sets out to explain how various aspects of institutional performance are conceptualised and measured in a practical and operational framework for rankings purposes, and how these measurements have evolved. Further issues, currently under investigation for the improvement of the QS Rankings and their indicators, are also addressed.

Chapter 2 is written by one of the architects of the QS World University Rankings and the person responsible for all QS Rankings and Ratings. This opening chapter sets out to explain how various aspects of institutional performance are conceptualised and measured in a practical and operational framework for rankings purposes, and how these measurements have evolved. Further issues, currently under investigation for the improvement of the QS Rankings and their indicators, are also addressed.

Chapter 3 takes an in depth look at the history of higher education ranking systems and identifies the period around 2003 and 2004 when the major global rankings were initiated. It then embarks on a detailed review of the many successful and perhaps not so successful league tables that have emerged over the past decade in various parts of the world.

Chapters 4 and 5 ponder the question of what academic life was like before rankings and consequently what changes rankings have wrought upon the landscape of higher education over the past decade or so. They consider the potential consequences of ranking for the present and future of higher education from a theoretical and realistic standpoint.

Chapter 6 deals with a concept that is increasingly gaining traction in higher education-the notion of a world-class university and the impact of this idea on what the authors term the ‘rest’. Does the drive to acquire so-called ‘world-class’ status really mean anything at all? This chapter discusses the implications for all those universities with more regional or community based missions who might never aspire to, or achieve ‘world-class’ status.

Chapter 7 describes an evolution whereby many universities have evolved to undertake and promote research as a significant feature of their activities alongside both undergraduate and postgraduate teach-
ing. It argues that a significant tension arises from the pressure to favour research over teaching and use revenue from student fees to help fund the non-teaching activities of institutions. The chapter explores various aspects of university rankings with emphasis on the role of citations resulting from research publications and more specifically on the role that Open Access publishing may play.

Chapters 8 and 9 look at the impact of size and the range of disciplines offered on a university’s ranking and strategy. These chapters consider some important areas of consideration for university planners and identifies some potential limiting factors in terms of scale and scope when considering the question of whether ‘one-size-fits-all’.

Chapter 10 concludes Section 1 by looking at the impact of trying to compete in a global ranking system in contexts where resources are severely limited. It considers the issues around the links between funding and success in ranking exercises.

Chapter 11 is the first chapter in Section 2 and reviews the literature on both sides of the argument about ranking, and presents graduate employment data related to Australian universities to ascertain whether elite universities have better graduate employment outcomes compared with other universities.

Chapter 12 takes an in-depth look at how rankings have been used and abused around the globe with some institutions diverting too much attention to rankings at the expense of their academic roles and missions. This chapter shows the significant impact, good and bad, that rankings are having on the present functioning and future strategies of higher education institutions.

Chapter 13 looks at how students choose a university to study at from both personal and institutional perspectives. From the standpoint of students the authors identify some important factors students consider when choosing a university. From the standpoint of a university, the authors highlight how an institution’s particular characteristics can influence an increase in student enrolment.

Chapter 14 considers some crucial elements of bias inherent in the data used to rank universities. In particular it suggests that the size of the institution and the subjects it offers often leads to different outcomes in terms of ranking. The authors outline some methods to counter these potential data biases.

Chapter 15 makes the case for a new institutional ranking system specifically for public administration research and scholarship. The chapter identifies the inputs and outcomes of such a system and the practical intended and unintended consequences in a wider context.

Chapter 16 rounds out Section 2 of the book by arguing that global rankings systems are a manifestation of embedded colonial power. This chapter argues that global ranking systems set the parameters for what is regarded as knowledge, the production of knowledge and the identity of the ‘knowers’.

Chapter 17 is the first chapter in Section 3 of the book and introduces the juxtaposition between the global interest in rankings and the relatively more recent rise of more regional league tables, using Asia as a case study. The fascination with global rankings over the past decade or so has spawned a whole range of regional rankings, particularly from QS and THE and this is having an impact upon how institutions in those regions benchmark their performance.

Chapter 18 takes the story a step further in terms of a very detailed case study of a University in Asia and its strategic and academic journey over the past few years. This case study demonstrates how regional rankings in particular have acted as a catalyst for changes in higher education landscape.

Chapters 19 and 20 take us to the Russian Federation where the challenges of global ranking have had some remarkable consequences with the Russian government getting involved in a project to assist some of the elite institutions to achieve ‘world-class’ top 100 status in the major ranking exercises by the year 2020. Chapter 18 looks at the impact of institutional legacy as the context for attempts to rise
in international rankings and chapter 18 provides a case study for building a ‘world-class’ institution in Russia in an era of global rankings.

Chapter 21 takes us to the continent of Africa and considers the advantages and disadvantages of rankings for African institutions with a consideration of the relationship with quality assurance practices.

Chapter 22, the final chapter, provides a case study of a fast rising university from Jeddah in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which shows how one University from the Middle East has leveraged rankings and accreditation to assist in its strategic goal of achieving excellence in terms of its operation.

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REFERENCES


