

Nuevamente sobre el impacto negativo de los rankings universitarios en la gestión de los sistemas de educación superior universitaria.

OSVALDO BARSKY¹

En el primer número de la revista Debate Universitario de noviembre de 2012, publiqué un artículo: “Acerca de los rankings internacionales de las universidades y su repercusión en la Argentina”. Hacía varios años que venía participando en los esfuerzos de universidades privadas por mejorar sus posiciones en el ranking mundial y latinoamericano de universidades que confeccionaba la consultora QS, siglas que corresponden a los socios fundadores Quacquarely y Symonds. La consultora la dirige Nunzio Quacquerelly (Symonds parece haberse apartado muy tempranamente de la empresa) y ha sido siempre extremadamente audaz para instalarse en el mercado de los rankings, al descubrir el vacío institucional existente y la ansiedad de los dirigentes de las universidades por ocupar un lugar destacado en sus listados.

Al profundizar en las prácticas metodológicas de la confección de los rankings y en la instrumentación de su construcción recuperé una importante producción académica existente hasta ese momento que alertaba sobre la inconsistencia de los mismos y en los efectos nocivos en las comunidades universitarias en su desaprensiva utilización². Profundicé muchos de estos

¹ Director del Centro de Altos Estudios en Educación Superior y de la Revista Debate Universitario de la Universidad Abierta Interamericana (UAI).

² Véase HARVEY, L. (1999) “Quality in higher education” en Paper at the Swedish Quality Conference (november 1999). Göteborg, University of Central England in Birmingham. CAMPANARIO, J.M. (2002) “El sistema de revisión por expertos (peer review): muchos problemas y pocas soluciones” en Revista Española Documentación Científica (Vol. 3, Nro. 25). Madrid, Instituto de Estudios Documentales sobre Ciencia y Tecnología (IEDCYT, antes CINDOC)-CSIC. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/2ZHGO> (acceso 10-10-2012). CAÑEDO ANDALIA, R, NODARSE RODRÍGUEZ, M, GER-RERO PUPO, J y RAMOS OCHOA, R (2012) “Algunas precisiones necesarias en torno al uso del factor de impacto como herramienta de evaluación científica” en Acidmed-Revista Cubana de los Profesionales de la Información y de la Comunicación en Salud (Vol. 13, Nro. 5, septiembre-octubre 2005). La Habana, Centro Nacional de Información de Ciencias Médicas. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/ygLP6> (acceso 10-10-2012). CHE (Centre for Higher Education Development) (2010) “Methodology” en Die Zeit. Berlín, ZEIT ONLINE. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/EJbgV> (acceso 17-8 20120). CORTES VARGAS, D. (2007) “Medir la producción científica de los investigadores universitarios: la bibliometría y sus límites” en Revista de la Educación Superior (Vol. XXXVI, N°142, Abril-Junio, pp.43-65). Tenayuca, ANUIES. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/NQ1Tb> (acceso 10-10-2012). GOLDSTEIN, H y D.J. SPIEGELHALTER (1996) “League tables and their limitations: statistical issues in comparisons of institutional performance” en Journal of the Royal Statistical Society-Series A (Vol. 159, Nro. 3, pp:385-443). Londres, Royal Statistical Society. HARVEY, L. (1999) “Quality in higher education” en Paper at the Swedish Quality Conference Göteborg. Birmingham, University of Central England. IREG (2006) Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions adopted at IREG’s 2nd meeting in Berlin (18-20 Mayo, 2006). Berlín, CHE-CEPES-IHEP Debate Universitario Nro.1- Noviembre de 2012. LEMAITRE, M.J. (2009) “Nuevos enfoques sobre aseguramiento de la calidad en un contexto de cambios” en Revista Calidad en Educación (N°31, pp. 166-189), Santiago de Chile, Consejo Nacional de Educación. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/cq3BQ> (acceso 10-10-2012). LIU, N.C. y CHENG Y. (2005) “Academic Ranking of World Universities. Methodologies and problems” en Higher Education in Europa (Vol.30 Nro.2). Berlín, European Commission. MARTÍNEZ RIZO, F. (2011) “Los rankings de universidades: una visión crítica” en Revista de la Educación Superior (Vol 40, Nro. 157 ene/mar 2011). Tenayuca, ANUIES. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/qyghP> (acceso 10-10-2012) MENDOZA, S. y PARAVIC, T. (2006) “Origen, clasificación y desafíos de las revistas científicas” en Investigación y posgrado (Vol. 21 Nro. 1, junio 2005). Caracas, Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/QN5ve> (Acceso 10-10-2012). NICHOLLS, J (1992). “Academic development and quality control”. Manuscrito no publicado. Presentación en el Seminario Los cambios en la educación Superior, Montevideo. ORDORICA, I. y RODRÍGUEZ GÓMEZ, R. et.al (2008) “Comentarios al Academic Ranking of World Universities 2008” en Cuadernos de trabajo de la Dirección General de Evaluación Institucional (Nro.

temas y el origen histórico-institucional de los rankings y de las revistas científicas en un libro que ha sido ampliamente utilizado en la comunidad académica.³ El 6 de diciembre de 2016 se realizó un taller en el Centro de Altos Estudios Universitarios de la Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos en que distintos autores retomamos la problemática acordando en líneas generales una visión crítica de la dinámica de los rankings y su influencia negativa en la dinámica universitaria internacional.⁴

Los temas allí planteados han sido recuperados recientemente por el Instituto Internacional para la Salud Global de la Universidad de las Naciones Unidas (UNU-IIGH) que convocó a un grupo de 16 expertos independientes de distintas universidades del mundo que ha producido el documento Statement on Global University Rankings que reproducimos más abajo. Para la revista Espacios de Educación Superior de dicho instituto, el profesor Pablo Acosta-Gallo de la Universidad Rey Juan Carlos ha publicado el 14 de noviembre de 2023 un artículo en castellano que sintetiza esta problemática. Las conclusiones retoman y profundizan en la misma dirección crítica los temas señalados y se reproduce el artículo.

La United Nations University de la ONU alerta sobre los peligros de los Rankings

En artículos recientes hemos recogido opiniones sobre las limitaciones de los ránquines universitarios, la inmensa burocracia que vive de imponer indicadores de calidad, o cómo deberían

2). México, UNAM-DGEI. Disponible en web: <http://www.dgei.unam.mx/?q=node/16> (acceso 10-10-2012). ORDORICA, I. y RODRÍGUEZ GÓMEZ, R (2010) "El ranking Times en el mercado del prestigio universitario" en Perfiles Educativos (Vol. XXXII, Nro. 1 29, pp.8-25). México, I ISUE-UNAM. Disponible http://www.dgei.unam.mx/ranking_time.pdf (acceso 10-10-2012). en web: PÉREZ RASETTI, C. (2011) "Construcción de indicadores para el sistema de Educación Superior de Iberoamérica/América Latina y el Caribe. Reflexiones para una propuesta". OEI-CAECID. Debate Universitario Nro.1- Noviembre de 2012 BARSKY, O. "Acerca de los rankings internacionales de las universidades y su repercusión en Argentina" Pag. 77 PÉREZ-ESPARRELS C. y LÓPEZ GARCÍA, A. (2009) "Los rankings de las instituciones de educación superior: una revisión del panorama internacional" en Revista Calidad en la Educación (Nro. 30). Santiago de Chile, Consejo Nacional de Educación. PISCOYA HERMOZA, L. (2006) Ranking universitario en el Perú. Estudio Piloto. Lima, Asamblea Nacional de Rectores (ANR)-IESALC-UNESCO. PULIDO, A. (2009) El futuro de la universidad. Madrid, Delta Publicaciones. QS (2012) "University Rankings: Latin América" en QS (institucional). Disponible en web: <http://www.qs.com/qs-regional-rankings.html> (acceso 10 1 0-2012). RAUHVARGERS, A. (2011) "Global university rankings and their impact" en European University Association. Bruselas, EUA-Fundação Galouste Gulbenkian-Robert Bosch Stiftung. Disponible en web <http://goo.gl/9BsXs> (acceso 10-10-2012). RIVERA, E. (2012), "Razones, defectos y límites de los rankings" en Campus Milenio. México, BUAP-UAEM-UV. www.campusmilenio.com.mx (acceso 10-10-2012). Disponible en. París, OCDE Publishing. Disponible en web <http://goo.gl/wCLnC> (acceso 10-10-2012). SCHWARTZMAN, S. (2010) "O Impacto dos rankings nas instituicoes de ensino" en VIII Congreso Brasileiro de Gestao Educacional (24, 25 y 26 de marzo de 2010). San Pablo, Humus. Disponible en web <http://goo.gl/ReuCt> (acceso 10-10-2012). (1 992) "Non-western societies and higher education" en The Encyclopedia of Higher Education Vol.2; Clark, B.R. and G. Neave (editores). Oxford, Pergamon Press. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/ZywCP> (acceso 10-10-2012). STELLA, A.; WOODHOUSE, D. (2006) "Ranking of Higher Education Institutions" en AUQA; Ocasional Publications (Nro. 6, Agosto 2006). Melbourne, Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). Disponible en web <http://goo.gl/8nN3l> (acceso 10-10-2012) USHER, A.; SAVINO M. (2006) "A world of difference. A global survey of university league tables" en Canadian Education Report Series (Reporte, enero 2006). Toronto, Education Policy Institute. Disponible en web: <http://goo.gl/w0SU7> (acceso 10-10-2012). (2006) "Estudio global de los rankings universitarios" en Calidad en la educación (N° 25, diciembre 2006). Santiago de Chile, CNED. Disponible en web <http://goo.gl/PWNhF> (acceso 10-10 2012). VAN RAAN, A. (2005) "Fatal attraction: Conceptual and methodological problems in the ranking of universities by bibliometric methods", in Scientometrics (Vol. 62, Nro. 1-2005, pp. 133-143). Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó. Disponible en web <http://goo.gl/y9lF3> (acceso 10-10-2012).

³ Véase Osvaldo Barsky "La evaluación de la calidad académica en debate: Volumen I. Los rankings internacionales de las universidades y el rol de las revistas científicas". Colección UAI Investigación, Editorial Teseo, Buenos Aires, 2014.

⁴ Véase Revista Ibero Americana de Ciencias, Tecnología y Sociedad, volumen 13 N°37, Indicadores, rankings y evaluación, Buenos Aires, febrero de 2018.

rediseñarse las herramientas de clasificación de universidades. Un grupo de expertos convocado al efecto por Naciones Unidas ha emitido una declaración sobre el impacto de los ránquines universitarios globales en la educación superior.

Pablo Acosta Gallo
Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

Los antecedentes

Ha circulado estos días una nota de prensa de la Universidad de Naciones Unidas que da cuenta de las conclusiones a las que ha llegado un grupo de expertos que han analizado cómo operan y qué efectos tienen las listas de clasificación de universidades.

La Universidad de Naciones Unidas (UNU) es un organismo autónomo de la ONU que nació en 1973 para dar cumplimiento a una resolución de la Asamblea General. Fue concebida bajo el signo de la más absoluta independencia académica con la misión de estrechar lazos con la comunidad universitaria internacional. Es una universidad peculiar, pues no tiene estudiantes propios ni emite títulos, sino que realiza su labor a través de una red de centros y programas de investigación y de formación, tanto en los países desarrollados como en los países en vías de desarrollo.

Uno de estos centros de investigación es el Instituto Internacional para la Salud Global de la Universidad de las Naciones Unidas (UNU-IIGH), que convocó un Grupo de Expertos Independientes (IEG) formado por 16 expertos de 16 distintas universidades del mundo. El resultado de sus trabajos es el documento titulado Statement on Global University Rankings.

Contenido de la Declaración: 5 hechos clave

La Declaración se basa en los siguientes hechos:

1. El primer ranking universitario mundial se publicó en 2003.
2. Desde entonces, ha crecido de manera sostenida el número de productores de rankings universitarios globales y de otro tipo, que en 2023 suman la cifra de 60. La clasificación de universidades se ha convertido por tanto en un negocio rentable para algunos.
3. Los rankings globales más influyentes son elaborados por solo 4 empresas privadas: Quacquarelli Symonds, Times Higher Education (propiedad de un fondo de inversión), la consultora ShanghaiRanking y el periódico norteamericano U.S. News & World Report. Sus respectivos productos son QSWorld University Rankings, THE World University Rankings, Academic Ranking of World Universities y U.S. News Best Global Universities Rankings.
4. Actualmente hay alrededor de 21.000 instituciones de educación superior en el mundo. Los rankings universitarios mundiales más completos incluyen solo unas 2.000 instituciones.
5. El Top 100 en el ranking global de QS, Shanghai Ranking Consultancy y THE están en gran medida manipulados. Muy pocas instituciones nuevas llegan alguna vez a ese grupo, aunque pueden variar posición dentro del mismo.

6. Los principales rankings universitarios mundiales favorecen a las instituciones orientadas a la investigación de los países más ricos de habla inglesa del hemisferio norte, que son mayoría en el Top 100.

Los principales clasificadores de universidades son empresas privadas que alimentan un próspero negocio

Y 9 poderosas razones:

Los expertos señalan en su informe las siguientes nueve razones por las que los rankings universitarios son problemáticos:

1. Los rankings universitarios globales son conceptualmente inválidos

Una clasificación competitiva no puede reflejar de forma precisa y adecuada la calidad y el valor de las universidades. El desempeño de la enseñanza, la investigación y una amplia gama de otras funciones universitarias no se pueden combinar de manera significativa en un solo indicador compuesto, y cualquier método que intente hacerlo siempre será arbitrario y cuestionable. El método utilizado prescinde del entorno geográfico, económico, cultural y social en el que opera cada institución e ignora las diversas misiones, las distintas fortalezas y los contextos únicos en los que se desenvuelve cada universidad.

2. Las clasificaciones universitarias mundiales se basan en datos y métodos defectuosos y poco transparentes

Los datos y métodos utilizados en las principales clasificaciones universitarias mundiales son defectuosos. Dependen en gran medida de juicios subjetivos obtenidos de muestras aleatorias no suficientemente representativas. También plantea problemas el recuento de citas y su uso como medida de la calidad de la investigación. No se publica información suficiente sobre la metodología de investigación utilizada y los conjuntos de datos tampoco son de acceso público, siendo generalizada la falta de transparencia. A medida que mejora su posición en los rankings, dejan de ser una medida del desempeño real y se convierten en un indicador de la capacidad de una universidad para «jugar el juego» de competir en los rankings.

3. Las clasificaciones universitarias mundiales están sesgadas hacia la investigación, las materias STEM y los académicos y universidades de habla inglesa

Un examen detenido de las metodologías utilizadas muestra un fuerte énfasis en la métrica de investigación y en las materias de Ciencia, Tecnología, Ingeniería y Matemáticas (STEM). Además, están sesgadas hacia los países, instituciones y revistas de habla inglesa. Se desprecia la importancia de otras misiones universitarias, incluida la enseñanza, pero también de las humanidades y las ciencias sociales, y de la investigación y la enseñanza en idiomas distintos del inglés. Al marginar y devaluar otras culturas epistémicas y formas de creación de conocimiento, las clasificaciones globales reflejan y refuerzan una forma de colonialismo dentro de la educación superior.

4. Las clasificaciones universitarias mundiales tienen un sesgo colonial y acentúan las desigualdades globales, regionales y nacionales

Los criterios y métodos utilizados en las clasificaciones universitarias globales reflejan perspectivas, estándares y tradiciones que favorecen a las universidades más ricas, más antiguas, más grandes y más intensivas en investigación del hemisferio norte y refuerzan diversas desigualdades y prejuicios arraigados en las historias coloniales.

Las clasificaciones universitarias mundiales están sesgadas hacia la investigación, las materias STEM y los académicos y universidades del mundo anglosajón

5. Los rankings universitarios mundiales socavan el desarrollo de la educación superior como institución global

El enfoque en el desempeño de las universidades a título individual desvía la atención del sector de educación superior en su conjunto. En lugar de fomentar la responsabilidad compartida y la cooperación, las clasificaciones incentivan a las universidades y al personal académico a competir y priorizar actividades que mejoren sus propias posiciones, negando su participación en el sistema.

6. Las clasificaciones universitarias mundiales presionan a las universidades para que se adapten a ciclos de evaluación frecuentes y de corto plazo

Las principales empresas publican sus clasificaciones globales de universidades con frecuencia y regularidad, normalmente una vez al año. Esto crea un entorno en el que las universidades se ven presionadas a esforzarse constantemente por mejorar su posición en relación con otras universidades, priorizando el corto plazo sobre el medio-largo, incluso si las mejoras de un año a otro son estadísticamente o en términos reales insignificantes. Esto es costoso y consume grandes cantidades de tiempo y recursos escasos.

7. Los rankings universitarios globales producen una ansiedad reputacional que afecta negativamente el comportamiento universitario

La preocupación a menudo aguda, constante y exagerada por las clasificaciones puede llevar a un estado de ansiedad y estrés constante dentro de las universidades. Se hacen más frecuentes los comportamientos desviados, como que las universidades paguen a sus científicos para que publiquen en revistas de alto impacto o prioricen las puntuaciones de citas al contratar personal académico. También puede conducir a olvidar la propia misión institucional, a una excesiva marca corporativa y a involucrarse en la manipulación y fabricación de datos y otras formas de fraude.

Las metodologías utilizadas son defectuosas e intencionalmente opacas, eludiendo la verificación por terceros

8. Los rankings universitarios mundiales son extractivos y explotadores

Los principales clasificadores a nivel mundial son principalmente empresas privadas, cuyo interés en la educación superior está impulsado o al menos fuertemente influenciado por la necesidad de maximizar las ganancias. Esto alinea efectivamente a los clasificadores con las principales empresas editoriales como Elsevier, Clarivate, Wiley y Springer, que en las últimas décadas se han convertido en empresas de análisis de datos con márgenes de beneficio crecientes.

Extraer datos, tiempo y otros recursos de las universidades y el sector público, al tiempo que generan demanda de productos y servicios de análisis y consultoría, son el núcleo de su modelo de negocio. La desviación de recursos de las funciones académicas centrales que crea este modelo de negocios también coloca a las universidades y gobiernos con presupuestos limitados en una desventaja aún mayor.

9. Los clasificadores universitarios tienen un conflicto de intereses

Dado su modelo de negocios, los principales clasificadores se encuentran claramente en una posición de conflicto de intereses. Aunque afirman brindar un juicio imparcial sobre el

desempeño de las universidades, su principal objetivo es vender publicidad y productos y servicios relacionados con el desempeño a las mismas universidades que están clasificando. Este conflicto de intereses se ve agravado por la falta de una transparencia adecuada que permita algún nivel básico de rendición de cuentas y escrutinio público de sus operaciones. Al vender servicios de consultoría a gobiernos y otras partes interesadas, los principales clasificados a nivel mundial también pueden reforzar aún más su prominencia y papel en el sector.

Llamada a la acción

Descrito el anterior panorama, la Declaración hace una llamada a la acción basada en las siguientes recomendaciones:

1. Crear conciencia sobre los problemas y daños que ocasionan los rankings universitarios globales.
2. Fomentar y adoptar alternativas positivas
3. Desvincularse de prácticas extractivas, explotadoras y no transparentes

Entre las medidas propuestas destaca la adopción de otros sistemas de evaluación institucional, entre los que cabe destacar dos:

1. More Than Our Rank, iniciativa que reconoce una definición más amplia y diversa de éxito o calidad universitaria y brinda una oportunidad para que las universidades destaquen las múltiples y diversas formas en que sirven a la sociedad que no se reflejan en su posición en el ranking.
2. U-Multirank, iniciativa no comercial financiada principalmente por la Comisión Europea que no produce una clasificación basada en un único indicador compuesto, sino que clasifica a las universidades en cinco áreas de desempeño para brindar una imagen más justa del desempeño y mostrar fortalezas y perfiles específicos de cada universidad.

Las clasificaciones globales prescinden de los entornos únicos en los que opera cada institución y de su misión

Conclusión

En definitiva, la Declaración de Expertos comisionada por la UNU dibuja un duro panorama en el que las instituciones de educación superior se ven impelidas a perder su misión y su personalidad en la lucha por ascender en unas clasificaciones injustas y depredadoras.

Dada la cantidad de evidencias que se aportan, no se puede calificar de opinativa la Declaración, en cuyas conclusiones se considera que una respuesta adecuada a la creciente y pernicioso influencia de las clasificaciones universitarias globales requiere acciones simultáneas e idealmente coordinadas por parte de múltiples partes interesadas en todos los niveles.

Las acciones pueden ser emprendidas por académicos y administradores individuales, universidades que trabajen de manera independiente y colectiva e instituciones nacionales e internacionales responsables de la política y gestión de la educación superior. Se trata de

escapar de una versión estrecha y simplista del éxito que pasa por alto muchas de las ricas y vitales contribuciones que las universidades hacen a la sociedad.

Statement on Global University Rankings



Preface

Universities are crucial organisations of our modern times. They play a key role in the delivery of education and training. They also provide knowledge, information, and evidence, and have a critical role in policy, practice, and public debate. Through independent academic enquiry and enabling informed public discussion, universities help strengthen democracy and protect human rights. Everywhere, they contribute to regional development and serve as hubs for cultural and civic engagement. By enabling equitable access to higher education, universities encourage social mobility and fairness across society. And through international research and scientific collaborations, universities promote cross-border cooperation, trust, and peace.

COVID-19 demonstrated the particular importance of universities in providing public health evidence and analyses for policymakers and the general public. It brought to light how indispensable universities, their staff, and students are in providing assistance to health workers and local communities everywhere. The pandemic also demonstrated the importance of academic communities in public health and medical sciences cooperating and collaborating across national borders. It is thus vital that we protect, promote, and develop these social and public-interest functions, which have always been the pillars of universities' role in society.

For the past two decades, global university rankings have had a large and increasing influence over higher education worldwide. While rankings may have incentivised some improvement in the quality of some universities, there is growing recognition that they also incentivise a number of perverse and harmful behaviours and produce systemic long-term negative effects. These problems were described in a briefing paper published by the United Nations University - International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH) in February 2023.[1]

With the aim of promoting equitable and improved academic public health education, research, and practice as a global public good, UNU-IIGH convened an independent expert group (IEG) of 20 people to address the problematic nature and effects of global university rankings. This statement follows several rounds of discussion involving the IEG between February and September 2023, and is endorsed by 16 members of the original group (see Appendix 1).

Part 1 of the Statement briefly outlines what global university rankings are. Part 2 explains why they are problematic. And Part 3 puts forward a set of recommendations for change, followed by a conclusion. Each expert participated in their individual capacity and the statement does not represent the view or position of the organisations they belong to.

[1] Nassiri-Ansari T & McCoy D (2023). World-class Universities? Interrogating the Biases and Coloniality of Global University Rankings. <https://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:9082>.

What are global university rankings?

Global university rankings are regularly published hierarchical lists that compare universities from around the world. Typically, they rank universities in a league table according to a quantitative measure of quality.[2] Since they first appeared in 2003, these rankings have garnered significant attention and their growing influence on the global higher education landscape has been extensively documented.[3] University rankings have also vastly expanded in number, scope, and complexity in the last 20 years. Many alternative and different types of rankings have been introduced. They now include not just global rankings, but also regional, topical, and subject rankings, among others.

This Statement is concerned with both global university rankings and their producers, particularly the longest-operating and the most influential ones: Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, and U.S. News & World Report.[4] Respectively, their global rankings are QS World University Rankings, THE World University Rankings, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and U.S. News Best Global Universities Rankings. These rankings are based on composite indicators, whereby several separate measures of performance are combined into a single score. It is important to note that, over the years, the portfolio of rankings that these companies produce has expanded.

Despite their influence and impact on society and university staff and students, and despite the problems associated with university rankings, the major ranking organisations are not accountable to the public, the academic community, or governments. As private for-profit companies that extract considerable resources from higher education, they are subjected to surprisingly little scrutiny from the sector's stakeholders. While they do collaborate with universities and governments, such arrangements are no substitute for independent accountability mechanisms. This Statement is, therefore, a call to higher education stakeholders, national and international, to address both the problems associated with global rankings but also the undue influence that the major ranking companies have over the sector.

Why global university rankings are problematic

1. Global university rankings are conceptually invalid

A competitive league table does not accurately and appropriately reflect the quality and value of universities.

[5] The performance of teaching, research, and a wide range of other university functions cannot be meaningfully combined into a single composite indicator, and any method attempting to do so will always be arbitrary and questionable. Furthermore, the suggestion that the performance of a university (or specific department or discipline) can be reduced to a single indicator that is equally applicable in different parts of the world is not only profoundly misleading but ignores the diverse missions, varying strengths, and unique contexts within which universities operate. Finally, constituting rankings as a zero-sum hierarchy suggests that quality higher education is in limited supply and that no two universities should expect to have equal status. This also is plainly false.

In 2021, for example, ARWU and THE ranked around 1800 and 1500 universities respectively.

Hazelkorn E (2011). Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence. Springer; Hazelkorn E, & Mihut G (2021). Introduction: Putting rankings in context - looking back, looking forward. In Hazelkorn & Mihut (Eds.), Research Handbook on University Rankings: Theory, Methodology, Influence and Impact (pp. 1–17). Edward Elgar Publishing.

The points made in this statement, however, may be extended also to other rankers and rankings, depending on the extent to which they share the same characteristics and/or effects.

2. Global university rankings are based on flawed and insufficiently transparent data and methods

The data and methods used in the major global university rankings are flawed.[6] Of particular note is that these rankings heavily rely on subjective judgements of quality made by non-representative grab samples of survey respondents.[7] There are also well-established data quality issues with citation counts and their use as a measure of research quality. Moreover, while the major rankers provide some information about their methods, they do not publish details explaining how they calculate rankings (e.g., their weighting schemes are only partially disclosed). They also do not make their datasets publicly accessible.[8] The lack of transparency regarding the quality of the data used to produce the rankings raises concerns about bias, objectivity, and credibility, and prevents anyone from being able to verify or critically evaluate how these rankings are produced. Lastly, as improving position in rankings becomes increasingly important to many universities, rankings become less a measure of actual performance and more an indicator of a university's ability to 'play the game' of competing in rankings.

3. Global university rankings are biased towards research, STEM subjects, and English-speaking scholars and universities

A close examination of the methodologies of global university rankings reveals a heavy emphasis on research metrics and on science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) subjects. They are additionally biased towards anglophone countries, institutions, and journals.[9] These biases implicitly diminish the importance of other university missions, including teaching, but also of the humanities and social sciences, and of research and instruction in languages other than English. In marginalising and devaluing other epistemic cultures and forms of knowledge creation, global rankings both reflect and reinforce a form of coloniality within higher education.

Furthermore, the bias toward 'cutting-edge research' pulls universities away from conducting research that is more practical, action-oriented, and relevant to real-world needs, policies, and programmes.[10]

4. Global university rankings are colonial and accentuate global, regional, and national inequalities

The criteria and methods used in global university rankings reflect perspectives, standards, and traditions that favour wealthier, older, larger, and more research-intensive universities from the Global North and reinforce various inequalities and prejudices rooted in colonial histories. [11] None of the major rankings apply methods that control for the resources available to a university or that adjust for challenging and unstable political and policy contexts, thereby helping to reproduce existing inequalities and structures of privilege within and across countries and regions. By creating a self-reinforcing system of winners and losers and working against efforts to raise standards across the board, global rankings further risk widening historic and geographic inequalities.

[5] This conceptual invalidity is especially pronounced for global rankings, but also applies to regional and national rankings.

[6] Among academic publications on the subject of global university rankings, those criticising their methodologies and pointing out to their fundamental flaws are likely among the most numerous. For further information on the global rankings' methodologies, see Nassiri- Ansari & McCoy (2023). More recently (July 2023) Universities of the Netherlands published a recommendation paper titled 'Ranking the University: On the effects of rankings on the academic community and how to overcome them' which also contains a useful overview of ranking methodologies by QS, THE and Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. https://www.universiteitennederland.nl/en_GB/f_c_rankings.html.

[7] 50% of the total score in the QS World University Rankings is based on a survey of subjective opinions provided by anonymous individuals. In the case of Times Higher Education's World University Rankings and the U.S. News Best Global Universities, subjective opinions make up 33% and 25% of the total score, respectively.

[8] Gadd E (2020). University rankings need a rethink. *Nature*, 587, 523. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-03312-2>.

[9] See for example: (a) Mustajoki A (2013). Measuring Excellence in Social Sciences and Humanities: Limitations and Opportunities. In Erkkilä (Ed.), *Global University Rankings: Challenges for European Higher Education* (pp. 147–165). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137296870_9; (b) Safón V (2013). What do global university rankings really measure? The search for the X factor and the X entity. *Scientometrics*, 97(2), 223–244. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-013-0986-8>.

5. Global university rankings undermine the development of higher education as a sector

The focus on the performance of individual universities diverts attention away from that of the higher education sector as a whole. Rather than foster shared responsibility and cooperation, rankings incentivise universities and academic staff to compete and prioritise activities that enhance their own positions. As a result, they can undermine systemic improvements and limit higher education's ability to address societal challenges collectively.[12] By judging all universities according to the same universal set of performance measures, global university rankings homogenise the sector, reduce institutional autonomy,[13] and diminish the benefit of a more diverse mix of institutions with the capacity to determine priorities that are needs- and context-based.

6. Global university rankings pressure universities to adapt to frequent and short-term ranking cycles

All major rankers publish their global university league tables frequently and regularly, typically annually. This creates an environment in which universities are pressured to constantly strive to improve their standing relative to other universities, even if improvements from one year to the next are statistically or in real terms insignificant.[14] This is costly and can consume vast amounts of scarce time and resources.

The focus on short-term strategies to improve their rank also comes at the cost of universities neglecting deeper and longer-term goals, as well as objectives that are not as easily quantifiable, in particular in the short run.[15]

7. Global university rankings produce reputational anxiety that negatively affects university behaviour

The often acute, constant, and exaggerated preoccupation with rankings can lead to a state of constant anxiety and stress within universities.[16] Commercial rankers are in particular invested in fostering and mobilising such collective emotional states.[17] This can lead to a range of perverse behaviours such as universities paying their scientists to publish in high-impact journals or prioritising citation scores when hiring academic staff. It can also lead to unhealthy levels of attention to comparisons with other universities (instead of to one's institutional mission), excessive corporate branding, and engaging in data manipulation and fabrication (and other forms of 'cheating' or 'gaming').[18] All this comes at the detriment for the quality of teaching, staff wellbeing, and student learning.[19]

[10] See for example: (a) Muller SM (2017). Academics as rent seekers: Distorted incentives in higher education, with reference to the South African case. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 52, 58–67. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0738059316304436> (b) Soudien C (2014). The Influence of Rankings and Incentive Systems on Academic Publishing in South African Universities. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22, 33–33. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v22n33.2014>

[11] See for example: (a) Lloyd M & Ordorika I (2021). International University Rankings as Cultural Imperialism: Implications for the Global South. In Stack (Ed.), *Global University Rankings and the Politics of Knowledge* (pp. 25–49). University of Toronto Press; (b) Shahjahan RA, Blanco Ramirez G & Andreotti V de O (2017). Attempting to Imagine the Unimaginable: A Decolonial Reading of Global University Rankings. *Comparative Education Review*, 61(S1), S51–S73. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690457>; (c) Lo WYW (2011). Soft power, university rankings and knowledge production: Distinctions between hegemony and self-determination in higher education. *Comparative Education*, 47(2), 209–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.554092>

[12] For several years, THE and QS have been publishing rankings that aim to measure and compare how universities perform on various 'third mission' indicators (THE Impact Rankings and QS Sustainability Rankings, respectively). While different in focus, these rankings are no less resource-extracting, methodologically deficient, or substantively problematic than other rankings produced by these organisations. See: (a) Bautista-Puig N, Orduña-Malea E & Perez-Esparrells C. (2022). Enhancing sustainable development goals or promoting universities? An analysis of the times higher education impact rankings. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 23(8), 211–231. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-07-2021-0309>; (b) Calderon A (2023). Sustainability Rankings: What they are About and How to make them Meaningful. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153231172022>.

[13] See for example: (a) Anafinova S (2020). The role of rankings in higher education policy: Coercive and normative isomorphism in Kazakhstani higher education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 78, 102246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102246>; (b) Erkkilä T (2014). Global University Rankings, Transnational Policy Discourse and Higher Education in Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 49(1), 91–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12063>.

[14] See for example: Brankovic J, Ringel L & Werron T (2018). How Rankings Produce Competition: The case of global university rankings. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 47(4), 270–288. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfs02-2018-0118>.

8. Global university rankings are extractive and exploitative

The major global rankers are primarily private businesses, whose interest in higher education is driven or at least strongly influenced by the need to maximise profit.[20] This effectively aligns rankers with major publishing companies, such as Elsevier, Clarivate, Wiley, and Springer, that have in recent decades transitioned into data analytics firms with growing profit margins.[21] Extracting data, time and other resources from universities and the public sector, while generating demand for analytics and consultancy products and services, are at the heart of their business model. The diversion of resources away from core academic functions that is created by this business model also places universities and governments with limited budgets at even more disadvantage.

9. Global university rankers have a conflict of interest

Due to the business model in place, the major global rankers are clearly in a position of conflict of interest.[22] Although they claim to provide impartial judgement about performances of universities, they are primarily driven to sell advertising and performance-related products and services to the very same universities they are ranking. This conflict of interest is aggravated by the absence of adequate transparency that would allow some basic level of accountability and public scrutiny of their operations. By selling consultancy services to governments and other stakeholders, the major global rankers are also able to further reinforce their salience and role in the sector.

III. Recommendations

Many in higher education, including academic experts themselves, agree that the elimination of university league tables is not immediately achievable. There is a growing consensus, however, that more must be done to unmask, prevent, and avoid their negative effects and that the disproportionate and unhealthy influence that the major rankers wield over higher education should be curtailed.

The influence of commercial rankers is symptomatic of the broader marketisation and corporatisation of higher education – a trend that has diminished the public-interest functions and social responsibilities that universities have in society, both nationally and globally. Yet, more than ever, there is a need to harness the qualities of higher education to better respond to the urgent and complex challenges facing the world and serve equitable and sustainable development. Instead, global university rankings drive higher education towards becoming a homogenised but unequal market of winners and losers based on arbitrary, dubious, and simplistic criteria.

A more valid, de-colonial, context-specific, and sophisticated approach to the evaluation of university performance is required. Such an approach would promote quality and improvement in all universities, encourage sector-wide planning relevant to national and regional contexts, accommodate a more diverse ecosystem of differentiated universities, and preserve and strengthen the mandates of universities to serve the global common good.

We thus call on government ministries, national evaluation and funding agencies, university administrators, media, academics, students, and relevant international organisations to act in three ways.

[23] Over the past two decades, national and international actors have questioned rankings. For example: a) Remarks on College Rankings and Data by U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona at the Conference on Best Practices for Law School Data (March 2, 2023), <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/remarks-college-rankings-and-data-us-secretary-education-miguel-cardona-conference-best-practices-law-school-data>, retrieved on 9 October 2023; (b) UNESCO: Marope, Wells & Hazelkorn (Eds.). (2013). *Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses*; (c) European University Association (EUA): Rauhvargers A (2011, 2013). *Global University Rankings and Their Impact. Reports I and II*. Most criticism coming from the authorities, however, tends to focus on methodological weaknesses of rankings, while glossing over the more systemic implications of the practice.

[24] It's important to note that media organisations also profit from reporting on rankings. Many report on rankings while simultaneously selling advertising space to universities, often in ways that blur the distinction between information and marketing. See also: Shahjahan RA, Bylsma PE & Singai C (2022). Global university rankings as 'sticky' objects and 'refrains': Affect and mediatisation in India. *Comparative Education*, 58(2), 224–241.

1. Raise awareness about the problems and harms of global university rankings

We ask policymakers, evaluation agencies, university leaders, and others to recognise the systemic negative effects of university rankings and the undue and inappropriate influence and power of commercial rankers. In particular, we ask university administrators and national and international higher education policymakers to prevent the negative long-term effects of global university rankings on national higher education systems, students, graduates, staff, and society as a whole.[23]

We also call on international and national media to cease sensationalist reporting when new rankings are released, and instead open up space for critical and reflexive commentary on rankings and promote a better-informed public discourse on higher education and its role in society.[24]

We specifically call on national and international evaluation and funding bodies to not use standings in global rankings as a criterion in their assessments and decisions on competitive funding, and to discourage universities from using rankings to signal prestige and quality in their evaluations and funding applications.

Finally, we call on universities to adopt a more critical stance when displaying their rankings in promotional material, to enable prospective students and the wider public to understand the biases, limitations, and arbitrary nature of global university rankings.

2. Encourage and adopt positive alternatives

There are better ways to evaluate universities and to help prospective students and research funders assess the standards and relative strengths and weaknesses of different universities and departments. There is no need to be trapped by the reputational anxiety that is strategically manufactured by rankers, especially given their use of invalid, costly, and top-down performance metrics.

We call on university administrators and ministries to support and engage with initiatives promoting better ways of assessing university performance. We urge them to ensure that universities are incentivised and adequately supported to deliver their social and public interest mandates. Higher education should also be regulated to ensure that those universities that provide important public service functions (be they public or private) are not disadvantaged. Several initiatives that deserve greater attention include:

- More Than Our Rank is an initiative that acknowledges a broader and more diverse definition of university success or quality and provides an opportunity for universities to highlight the multiple and various ways they serve society that are not reflected in their ranking position.[25]
- U-Multirank is a non-commercial initiative primarily funded by the European Commission that does not produce a league table based on a single composite indicator, but rates universities across five areas of performance in order to provide a fairer picture of performances and show specific strengths and profiles of universities.[26] The experience of this regional and public initiative may be used to inform similar approaches to university evaluation in other regions.
- African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) is another regional and public initiative, spearheaded by the Commission of the African Union and developed by the Association of African Universities. It provides a self-assessment tool to help higher education institutions rate themselves against set standards, such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.[27]

- A Universities of the Netherlands Expert Group on university rankings has called for universities in the Netherlands to be more responsible in their use of rankings, provide better communication about the limitations of league tables, and make greater use of existing alternatives. They highlight the need for coordinated action at the national and regional level to minimise the negative impacts of global university rankings.[28] A similar approach could be taken by other countries in other parts of the world.

In addition, there are several initiatives that specifically promote better research metrics:

- The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) works to eliminate the use of journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, in funding, appointment, and promotion considerations; to assess research on its own merits rather than on the journal where it is published; and to explore new indicators of significance and impact.[29]
- The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) works towards assessments of research, researchers and research organisations that recognise diverse outputs, practices, and activities and that are based primarily on qualitative judgement, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators.[30]
- The Humane Metrics Initiative works to develop impact indicators that demonstrate how core values are enacted in academic practices and products.[31]

3. Disengage from practices that are extractive, exploitative, and non-transparent

There is a need to re-balance the dynamic between universities and commercial rankers and to address the conflicts of interest currently built into the rankings industry. Systems to compare and evaluate universities should exist to serve the missions and needs of higher education institutions, not the other way round.

Presently, rankings organisations collect vast amounts of data from universities and publicly accessible sources, which they then privatise in order to market them back to universities, governments, and other interested parties in the form of performance analytics.[32] This practice is both ethically and economically questionable.

We thus call on evaluation agencies and funding bodies to not rely on the data from ranking organisations and other analytics companies (e.g., Elsevier and Clarivate). Instead, evaluation agencies and funding bodies should use the data provided to them directly by universities, which is ideally also open access, and not controlled by commercial businesses.

We also call on university administrators, relevant ministries, media, academics, students, and international organisations to question and properly evaluate the social benefits and economic value of commercial rankers, and curtail the extractive, exploitative, and manipulative practices of the industry. We specifically call on universities and academics to 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.

[25] For more information see: <https://inorms.net/more-than-our-rank/>

[26] For more information see: <https://www.umultirank.org/>

[27] For more information see: <https://www.aqrm.aau.org/>

[28] For more information see: <https://go.unu.edu/bLClz>

[29] For more information see: <https://sfdora.org/read/>

[30] For more information see: <https://coara.eu/>

[31] For more information see: <https://humetricshss.org/about/>

Finally, we call on academics, universities, experts, and scholars researching rankings to be more mindful of the ways their choices and activities contribute to the further grip of rankings and related extractive practices on higher education.[33] Rather than perceiving themselves as powerless victims and bystanders of the developments described in this statement, they can act more proactively as 'upstanders' and inspire change in the sector – and society as a whole.

Conclusión

An adequate response to the growing influence and harms of global university rankings requires simultaneous and ideally coordinated actions by multiple stakeholders at all levels. Actions may be undertaken by individual academics and administrators, universities working independently and collectively, and national and international institutions responsible for higher education policy and management.

Given the globalised nature of higher education, international organisations such as UNESCO and the International Association of Universities are ideally positioned to foster greater transparency and accountability of ranking organisations, as well as to encourage the development of better and more holistic ways to measure higher education quality and impact. They can also play a key role in providing guidance to national governments and other relevant higher education institutions when it comes to orienting their policies in view of international trends and developments.

We also stress that the data collected on universities – and in particular data submitted by universities themselves – should be considered a public good, and not a good to be privatised, commoditised, and commercialised. These data should be collected and managed nationally and internationally by appropriate organisations with adequate expertise and a public-interest mandate. An example of such an initiative is the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER),[34] as well as the recently announced European Higher Education Sector Observatory, under the auspices of the European Commission.[35]

Governments and other national bodies should embrace a more holistic and context-sensitive view of higher education quality – in contrast to the reductionist, one-size-fits-all model promoted by global rankings – and should stimulate universities to develop their own strategies in this direction. Ministries of education and national university associations are critical in directing sector-wide change to empower universities and incentivise them to strive not only for their own improvement but for the betterment of society as a whole. To this end, governments should stop using rankings to guide policy and instead develop and implement a more coherent, needs-based, and context-specific strategy and plan for higher education improvement.

Finally, universities themselves should ensure that the quest to improve their standings does not compromise the quality and diversity of their offerings or put certain individuals and groups at (even greater) disadvantage. At the individual level, administrators, academics, students, and their parents should strive to avoid the allure of prestige, by becoming better acquainted with the conceptual, methodological, ethical, and other limitations of global university rankings.

We hope you will join us in taking action.

[32] Chen G, Posada A & Chan L (2019). Vertical Integration in Academic Publishing: Implications for Knowledge Inequality. In Mounier (Ed.), *Connecting the Knowledge Commons—From Projects to Sustainable Infrastructure: The 22nd International Conference on Electronic Publishing – Revised Selected Papers*. OpenEdition Press. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.oep.9068>.

[33] See for example: (a) Brankovic J (2021). Academia's Stockholm Syndrome: The Ambivalent Status of Rankings in Higher Education (Research). *International Higher Education*, 107, 11–12. <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ihe/article/view/14557>; (b) Brankovic J, Ringel L & Werron T (2022). Spreading the gospel: Legitimizing university rankings as boundary work. *Research Evaluation*, 31(4), 463–474. <https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvac035>; (c) Hamann J & Ringel L (2023). The discursive resilience of university rankings. *Higher Education*, 86(4), 845–863. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00990-x>

[34] <https://www.eter-project.com/> See also: Lepori B, Borden VMH & Coates H (2022). Opportunities and challenges for international institutional data comparisons. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 12(sup1), 373–390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2022.2094817>.

[35] https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/first-steppingstone-towards-creation-european-higher-education-sector-observatory-call-tenders-2023-07-03_en, retrieved on 22 August 2023.