

Chapter 1

Ranking World Universities: A Decade of Refinement, and the Road Ahead

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ABSTRACT

One of the recurrent criticisms levelled against rankings is that they are simplistic and reductionist. Yet, from the user perspective, this ‘simplicity’ yields important advantages when rankings are contributing to decision-making. To encompass these two opposing views, QS has sought to maintain a critical and self-reflective stance, continuously concerned with methodological improvement to its portfolio of rankings and ratings, while striving to provide an accurate and practical representation of the complexity of higher education institutions worldwide. Over the last decade, such analysis, both critical and salutary, has resulted in key refinements in the QS Rankings methodology, including the introduction of new regional and subject-driven rankings. Our 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.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important decisions facing students, and their families, is choosing the institution through which their academic journey will be travelled. Historically, university choice was motivated by factors such as reputation, the history of the institution and, to a lesser extent, its marketing, and word of mouth. Today, such decision-making is increasingly complex with ever expanding internationalisation

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in the higher education sector providing a growing horizon of potential university alternatives across the globe. Geographic boundaries are less relevant today, and this, against a landscape of transitional political geography. With the increase in the number of both potential study destinations, and students considering studying overseas, reliable intelligence and information to aid decision-making has become essential. Clearly, better comparison tools were, and are, needed to help in making those important decisions, which will define the social and professional development of new generations.

The QS World University Rankings®, and other rankings platforms, were launched to address this need - and urgency. Unlike reputation and word of mouth, these tools and the intelligence through which they were, and continue to be, designed, provide a more structured and objective insight into a university. This helps students and their families identify the most pertinent and meaningful institutions for them. University rankings play an important role in establishing a comparative framework that brings into play both quantitative and qualitative factors, which help define the virtues of an institution and the challenges it faces. In fact, universities themselves draw upon rankings to assess their competitive position and to inform strategic design and improvement. To this end, rankings can be a box of useful tools; governments and agencies also leverage rankings indices as ‘reliable’ intelligence input for development agendas, as markers for policy or budgeting, and as a comparative measure to evaluate and benchmark the evolution of universities in other countries.

However, as the importance and use of rankings has become increasingly apparent, the greater attention paid to them has also resulted in more structured commentary and critique of their concept and methodology. One such recurring criticism is that they are simplistic and reductionist. Yet, from the user perspective, this yields important advantages for the decision-making process. QS has constantly sought to maintain a critical and self-reflective stance, concerned with both methodological improvement, and providing an accurate and practical representation of the complexity of higher education institutions worldwide. Such analysis over the last decade, both critical and salutary, has resulted in key refinements in the QS Rankings methodology, and the introduction of new regional and subject-driven rankings.

BACKGROUND TO RANKINGS

How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress. (Niels Bohr, Physicist, 1885-1962)

Bohr’s principles of correspondence and complementarity hallmarked the scientific adventure into the unity of human knowledge, a place where the development of methods of ordering and surveying human experience was not without paradox. The chief paradox which faces rankings is that a university is a fundamentally complex construct, with a unique blend of assets and strengths which emerge through socio-historical, socio-economic and geo-political influences. These can all be both complementary and contradictory, yet ultimately they are necessary to ascertain that very thing which we call ‘universities’. Policies and the peoples they address, shape nations and the world, and these also define the identities of institutions. The biography of an institution, and its destiny, thus unfolds through a series of factors which, to be truly understood, require comparison and measurement: the hallmarks of scientific method and historical enquiry.

The interrogation of what, precisely, represents quality for a university has escalated dramatically over the past fifteen years, and relevant data has emerged through a complexity of factors. This has informed

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