

Chapter 5

The Consequences of Ranking: Theory and Reality

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ABSTRACT

Digitization and the development of the internet has massively changed human behaviour. It has also impacted the way education is perceived. It has made the outreach of university education a lot more accessible to many stakeholders in particular those in the far corners of the globe. The last decade has also seen the significant rise and opening up of many emerging economies with affluence due to its GDP growth namely China, India, Africa, South America, Korea, South East Asia, Middle East, Central Asia etc. As a result of such economic development, one significant trend is the mobility of students within a nation as well as across nations. This trend of globalization in the last decade has given rise to the need for the development of global ranking exercises to inform different stakeholders both within countries and across different countries.

BACKGROUND

Digitization and the development of the internet has massively changed human behaviour. It has also impacted the way education is perceived. It has made the outreach of university education a lot more accessible to many stakeholders in particular those in the far corners of the globe (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). The last decade has also seen the significant rise and opening up of many emerging economies with affluence due to its GDP growth namely China, India, Africa, South America, Korea, South East Asia, Middle East, Central Asia etc. As a result of such economic development, one significant trend is the mobility of students within a nation as well as across nations. This trend of globalization in the last decade has given rise to the need for the development of global ranking exercises to inform different stakeholders both within countries and across different countries (Altbach, 2007). Many universities across the globe have accepted the idea of pursuing the “World Class University” (Downing, 2015).

It is important to recognise that global ranking exercises irrespective of whether they are conducted by private agencies or by universities, have an important role to play and impacted every part of higher

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education enterprise including university mission, governance, strategic planning, faculty recruitment and even public relations (Hazelkorn, 2007; 2008). It has started a completely new era in higher education characterized by global competition and transformed the global and national higher education landscape (Thakur, 2007). It is driven by the demand and need from relevant stakeholders. Otherwise, these private agencies which are not non-profit organizations would not be able to sustain themselves (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). Hence, these three major global ranking exercises obviously have been developed with various strengths, uniqueness and limitations as well controversies. Different stakeholders can rely on these diversified exercises to inform their own need for such information. One thing which is absolutely certain is that these systems are here to stay and will further solidify the concept of a world university market (Marginson, 2007b). One should also note that there is no one size that fits all, i.e. there is no perfect ranking exercise. There is no ranking that fits the purpose of all the stakeholders. Quite the contrary, stakeholders must be cautioned to view such information very carefully. This is because global ranking exercises may not be set up to determine the real value or quality of education. Instead, it may be seen to function as “politico-ideological technologies of valuation and hierarchisation” to result in those universities that are included and those that are not (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Bourdieu, 1998). They should delve into its methodology in more detail to understand how the ranking is derived before making decisions from such exercises. This detailed process of examining the methodology and its ultimate ranking is dependent on the sophistication of the stakeholders. Most often, relevant stakeholders just accept the headlines and positioning of each university without questions. Very often, even sophisticated stakeholders may not go through such process of evaluation before relying on the ultimate rankings of institutions. One can conclude that such well considered decision making is far from the reality. Yet, perception is key. It can reinforce the simplistic way in which key stakeholders use such ranking information.

A review of the literature shows that there are very few research studies that focuses on the comparison of these global ranking exercises and its impact on the various key stakeholders (e.g. Aguillo et al, 2010; Buela-Casal et al, 2007; Dill & Soo, 2005; Downing, 2015; Provan & Abercromby, 2000; Usher & Savino, 2006; van Dyke, 2005). Hence, this chapter focuses on the three major global ranking exercises which have been developed by private sector organizations and a government funded university. Firstly, the common criteria of the three major global ranking exercises are analyzed followed by a more detailed account of each ranking exercise. Finally, the consequences albeit intended and unintended are analyzed with a conclusion on the future of these exercises.

Common Criteria

The three major global ranking exercises have their own unique criteria. However, there are some common ones that we could consider and understand before we describe each of them in detail.

Since the focus of these exercises is on world class universities or top universities around the globe, research influence and impact is one of the most influential and important criteria amongst all. Citation is no doubt the most objective indicator as it helps stakeholders understand how each university being ranked contributes to new knowledge. The more often a research paper is cited by its fellow academics, the more influential the paper is. This peer assessment mechanism through its global scholarly community to push research frontiers is considered a most objective measure of research influence and impact. In principle, this should not differ across discipline. Yet, there are many more problems that can arise from this very objective indicator. It has to do with the developmental stages and practices of different

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