

Chapter 3

A Ranking Framework for Higher Education Institutions: A Students' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The use of league tables and rankings (LTRs) as a tool to rank or measure the performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) has grown in popularity. Research indicates that these ranking criteria are often discussed from the standpoint of governments, the HEI management, and the ranking institutions producing these LTR publications. The opinions of the students on the suitable ranking criteria used by ranking institutions are generally omitted. This chapter investigates the applicable criteria for ranking HEIs in South Africa, from the perspective of students. A survey was conducted to determine the most relevant university ranking criteria considered by university students. The results indicate that the students perceive resources and infrastructure, accreditation, international orientation, research output, faculty quality, and teaching and learning as the most relevant criteria for ranking HEIs. Managerial recommendations are provided for HEIs to address the ranking criteria rated important by students.

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has changed the higher education landscape and the competition between universities, specifically attracting national and international students has intensified. The use of university league tables and rankings (LTRs), as a decision-making tool to rank academic institutions, has become a global

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practice in higher education (HE). Researchers argue that the focus on global university rankings can be attributed to the internationalisation of HE, the growing competitiveness amongst higher education institutions (HEIs) and the need for HEIs to build a world class university (WCU) with a good reputation (Dowsett, 2020). The internationalisation of the student body is highly integrated into the concept of a WCU (Soysal, Baltaru & Cebolla-Boado, 2020). Research indicates that a relationship exists between internationalisation and the reputation of an institution (Delgado-Marquez, Escudero-Torres & Hurtado-Torres, 2013). A longitudinal study on LTRs indicated that the criteria used to construct the major university rankings primarily measure two underlying factors, namely a university's reputation and the institution's research performance by academics (Selten, Neylon, Huang & Groth, 2020).

Rankings foster growing international competition amongst universities and influence decision-makers, including students (Dowsett, 2020). Ranking institutions further perform a quality assurance function through the external assessment of the HEI's performance (Federkeil, 2008). LTRs are used to chronologically arrange and order academic institutions, based on qualitative and quantitative attributes. The attributes include some indicators that cannot be accurately measured, such as employer perceptions. However, the use of ranking information to base decisions on is biased, because the interpretation of LTRs is often subjective and depends on the criteria and weightings applied (Selten et al., 2020). In order to avoid partiality in LTRs, it is recommended that prospective students avoid over reliance on university rankings (Fauzi et al., 2020).

In the case of LTRs, HE ranking systems use qualitative indicators, such as the quality of HE to arrange universities in a descending order. The use of LTRs in HE thus becomes subjective and as such, LTRs serve the needs of HE stakeholders differently and their use, rationale and acceptance differ amongst HE stakeholders (Hazelkorn, 2007). While some HE experts defend the use of LTRs as a measure of HE quality and a source of information for the stakeholders (Hazelkorn, 2007; Selten et al., 2020), others criticise the practice, arguing that LTRs are inadequate and subjective performance tools, which fail to provide a comprehensive view of diverse higher education systems and sectors (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Olcay & Bulu, 2017).

By using a similar set of criteria to rank universities, ranking institutions assume a biased and narrow scale to define the quality of education (Kehm, 2014). A major criticism of LTRs is that only resource endowed and highly reputable universities are amongst the top ranked universities. LTRs tend to favour the same universities over time, with little or no deviation appearing lower in the ranks (Hazelkorn, 2007). Rauhvargers (2013) maintains that whereas all HEIs are judged based on particular ranking criteria, for example the research output, only the top research universities in the world can afford to assuredly participate in the ranking practice. Lo (2013) further argues that based on the requirements to be ranked, global ranking outcomes favour universities from the global North over those from the South, which is a major cause for disparities in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

In order to circumvent the criticisms of global university ranking, the production of LTRs and the pressure to meet the myriads of demands from HE stakeholders, different ranking systems and institutions have been established (Rust & Kim, 2016; Selten et al., 2020). Each of these institutions use systems that attempt to account for the varying types of higher education systems. Butler-Adam (2018) estimates that 30 global university ranking institutions exist, whereas over 31 countries have their own internal university ranking institutions, some of which have multiple institutions (Butler-Adam, 2018). However, three commonly acknowledged ranking institutions namely, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education (THE) World University Ranking and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Ranking exist and their ranking criteria are used as a basis for this chapter (Hazelkorn,

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