

# COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Number 28  
March 2024

## A Critical Look at the University Ranking Industry

### Abstract

With more than 47 university ranking systems around the world, they are both prolific and influential. This *Briefly Speaking* piece provides a critical review of these systems. The industry is a billion-dollar one which primarily makes its money from selling the data it receives for free. The methodologies used by these systems vary slightly but all have in common the use of proxies for complex social activities which, despite the fact that such metrics pertain to unrelated activities, are then added together according to arbitrary weightings. The piece goes on to argue that the ranking industry is both neocolonial and neoliberal- in that it reinforces historical divides, pits universities against each other, and drives university resource allocation in the direction of some university activities at the expense of others. The piece ends with a look at the ways in which universities around the world are gaming the system to improve their placing in the ranking systems. As more and more institutions publicly reject rankings, so it becomes easier for other institutions to follow suit.

**Keywords:** Gaming, higher education, index, industry, research, university rankings

### Introduction

The ranking of universities has been around since the early 2000s, though it arguably started when the *US News* launched its national university rankings in 1983. There are five main ranking systems:

- *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (also known as Shanghai Ranking, began in 2003);
- *QS World University Rankings* (began in 2004);
- *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* (previously part of QS, separate since 2010);
- *Ranking Web of World Universities* (also known as Webometrics, began in 2004); and the
- *Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities* (also known as the NTU Rankings, began in 2012).

These are accompanied by at least 42 smaller ranking systems.

The proliferation of university ranking systems can in large part be explained by the fact that rankings are a global multibillion-dollar industry. The money comes from various sources. Initially, rankings served to increase the circulation of the newspaper or the prestige of the university that ran them. But the industry has grown through several lucrative spin-offs, including what Holmes (2023) terms “prestigious events in spectacular settings”. These extremely costly events raise millions of dollars each year and have now been extended to include other revenue streams: consultancies, advertising, various pay-to-access reports and even, increasingly, participation costs, such as the very pricey ‘gold star service’ of the QS rankings (Redden, 2013).

But the real money is in the data (Fonn, 2024). Ranking systems sell the data they collect, often to the very universities from which they collect them. Indeed, it can be argued that rankings are primarily a vehicle by which to sell data (Usher, 2022).

One example of the extent to which this is indeed a major industry is a look at *Times Higher Education* which has credibility from its deliberations about higher education through its online newspaper, much of the content of which is written by academics. But this is not where its profits come from. Its real worth is in its ranking system and the sale of the data it collects to produce these rankings.

In 2013, *TPG Capital* bought *Times Higher Education* for \$500 million, and then in 2019 sold it on to *Inflexion* for an undisclosed amount (Tezuka, 2019). The investment firm that managed

the acquisition, Houlihan Lokey, clarified where the value of the organisation lies when it stated that “The *Times Higher Education* team will respond to demand for data and branding products and look to cross-sell to existing customers”.

In 2022, *Times Higher Education* purchased another online higher education newspaper, *Inside Higher Education*, this time in the United States of America (USA), from private equity firm, Quad Partners, again for an undisclosed amount. Usher (2022) has argued that this purchase was an attempt by *Times Higher Education* to make incursions into the American rankings market, currently dominated by US systems.

Despite the rapid growth of this industry and the enormous hold it has over the media, the public, and the university sector itself, there is broad agreement that it is highly problematic in multiple ways.

### Rankings are poor science

Several researchers (for example Nassiri-Ansari & McCoy, 2023; Independent Expert Group (IEG), 2023; Gadd, 2020) have demonstrated why the methodology underpinning rankings is such poor science that it would not pass muster as an honour’s level research project.

The calculation of university rankings varies from company to company, but all are based on the conversion of complex qualitative issues into simple metrics. For example, the quality of teaching and learning might be allocated a single number based on student-to-staff ratio. Student-to-staff ratio is however more likely to be an

indicator of the wealth of the university and therefore the wealth of its student body than an indicator of quality. While massive classes are undoubtedly a risk to the provision of quality teaching and learning, there is no guarantee that the quality of education in small classes is high. And the quality of teaching and learning emerges from a much more complex set of issues than class size.

This is but one example of how proxy measures are used to produce a numeric measure of a complex issue. The extent to which the proxy measures authentically correspond to that which they are meant to represent is often tenuous.

Research output is inevitably weighted heavily in these systems but even this is problematic. Research is understood purely in terms of patents, intellectual property, and research publications. Ranking systems continue to push the idea that the number of academic publications is what counts. This is happening even as the scientific community raises concerns about how the publish-or-perish mentality has driven predatory publications, rapid increases in article retractions, and an enormous number of articles that are never cited and likely never read.

Research output is typically calculated from databases that privilege Global North, English language publishing houses. The idea that research output might best be directed towards regional publications, community projects, newspaper articles, policy briefs, and information pamphlets is beyond the calculations of these one-size-fits-all ranking systems.

Another problem with the use of simple metrics is that the weighting of each category is entirely arbitrary (Usher & Savino, 2006). Should research output be worth 5%, 10%, or 20% of the final tally? If the weighting of any of the proxy measures is changed there is a rearrangement of the order of universities. The question is whether the quality of these institutions has somehow changed or whether this is simply a reflection of the methodological weaknesses?

As Marginson and van der Wende (2006) argue: “It is dubious to combine different purposes and the corresponding data using arbitrary weightings. Composite approaches muddy the waters and undermine validity.”

Several of the metrics that are used have been argued to be especially questionable. For example, many of the major ranking systems rely heavily on reputation surveys.

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 (Independent Expert Group (IEG), 2023).

These surveys ask academics and other stakeholders from around the world to comment on the quality of universities within or beyond their own fields. The question is, of course, whether reputation is indeed an indication of quality or if

instead it is a measure of status, wealth, and history. It is unlikely that many people would rate the quality of Nottingham Trent or Villanova University above Oxford or Yale University. But it is equally unlikely that the people offering such ratings have any experience of the actual quality of Oxford or Yale.

Much of the methodology of ranking systems is not publicly accessible. Qian Tang, the Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO has argued that ranking companies “should make perfectly clear what criteria they are using to devise them, how they have weighted these criteria, and why they made these choices” (Marope et al., 2013) and yet many methodological decisions pertaining to rankings remain veiled in secrecy.

Perhaps most problematic of all is that the ranking systems are premised on a generic notion of the university. There is a clear assumption that all universities aspire to serve the same purposes, that this can be quantified in a simple metric, and that the resulting listing indicates the order of quality from highest quality institution to the lowest. While ranking systems all use their own particular formulae for calculating quality and their own arbitrary allocation of weighting within the various metrics they collect, they generally all privilege the one ideal of the research university (Marginson & van der Wende, 2006).

### **But what about rankings that measure societal impact?**

A range of newer ranking systems has emerged in the last decade, which purports to overcome the problems inherent in the more traditional versions by placing more value on impact. Ranking systems that look at sustainable development goals (SDGs), for example, are arguably a vast improvement in that they focus on the range of goals that the global community has set for itself and allow seeing which universities are seriously contributing to their achievement.

But these are still premised on the idea that universities should be in competition with each other. And the methods still assume that there is a way to meaningfully allocate numeric measures to complex activities and to combine unrelated metrics through arbitrary (and often hidden) weighting systems to reach a singular measure.

It is important to note that most of these newer systems are run by the same multimillion-dollar companies that run the older versions. Questions are being asked about whether these newer rankings are indeed measuring impact and providing contextual insights or are simply monetising data under a new guise (Hazelkorn 2022). The *Times Higher Education (SSA University Rankings, 2023)*, for example, aver that their new *Sub-Saharan Africa University Ranking* system is developed:

specifically to assess the impact of universities in addressing some of the toughest challenges faced in the region. We use carefully calibrated indicators to provide comprehensive and

balanced comparisons across three vital areas: teaching, research and societal impact.

Critics might argue that these new rankings are simply a case of Global North ranking systems extending their market reach into the South. After all, “profit-driven companies will inevitably drive ranking systems towards making more profit rather than towards the public interest and social functions of universities” (Fonn, 2024).

### **Rankings are inherently neoliberal and neocolonial**

The history of colonisation severely depleted higher education in the Global South and shaped its structures and values in the twentieth century. Independence sadly did little to rectify this, hindered, as it has been, by various events. The Structural Adjustment Programme of the World Bank, for example, caused untold damage to the growth of universities in the Global South. Brain drain, the politics of academic publishing, and the ongoing use of extractive research methods, all serve to reinforce the weaknesses in many Global South University systems.

Ranking systems not only ignore these realities, but also actively contribute towards them. They are inherently neoliberal in nature in that evidence of all three of Sayer’s (2015) characteristics of neoliberalism in their functioning can be discerned in the ranking systems: rankings are based on the premise that status and power should be accorded to the wealthy, that students are customers, and that universities are best managed as business enterprises maximizing their brand value in competition for an increased market share.

Closely associated with the ideology of neoliberalism is that of neocolonialism. Ranking systems are arguably a perfect example of neocolonialism in that they are premised on the notion that high status universities in the ‘developed world’ are the generic ideal to which all universities should aspire. A panel of international experts, under the auspices of the United Nations University, International Institute for Global Health, concluded that:

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. 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 (Independent Expert Group (IEG), 2023).

Universities that position themselves as being in service of society, responsive to their contexts, and focused on overcoming historical injustices may find themselves ill-served by the priorities in ranking systems. Rankings “fall woefully short for many with a vested interest in the long-term health of higher education institutions and systems—and the societies they serve” (Yudkevich et al., 2015).



As the ranking industry increasingly peddles its wares to universities in the Global South, so such institutions need to become more astute in asking whose interests are being served by these systems.

### Opting out of the rankings

It is almost impossible to opt out of ranking systems entirely. While universities can make it clear that they are not submitting the data called for by various ranking organisations, these organisations often simply rely upon incomplete, publicly available data. Several researchers have called for ranking organisations to make explicit which universities have refused to participate but they seem loathe to do so.

It is tempting to assume that universities that refuse to participate in rankings are simply concerned about their poor showing in these systems. And it is true that certain universities will perform badly on these systems regardless of their efforts to do otherwise. Small universities, universities without medicine or engineering programmes, universities that focus on teaching and learning, universities that focus on community engagement, and universities that serve working class students will inevitably perform worse in ranking systems.

It is therefore especially noteworthy that several high-profile institutions that perform consistently well in ranking systems have now opted to withdraw from these processes. Increased critique by university leaders of the ranking industry makes

it easier for other universities to follow (Ansedé, 2023).

In 2022, 17 medical schools and 62 law schools, including Yale and Harvard, withdrew from various ranking systems. Heather Gerkin, Dean of Yale Law School, stated, "We have reached a point where the rankings process is undermining the core commitments of the legal profession" (Harris, 2022). Universities such as Utrecht, Stillman, and Colombia are among those that have publicly withdrawn from rankings; though to date, Rhodes University is the only African university that has explicitly stated it would not participate in ranking systems.

### Rankings bring negative consequences

The participation by universities in ranking systems is not innocent. Goodhart's Law posits that when a measure becomes a target, it is no longer a good measure. This has certainly been the case with rankings because ranking organisations are not just collecting data that pre-exist them but are exerting enormous influence on the actions of universities to shape their activities to produce favourable data.

Several negative consequences emerge when institutions begin to place such value on ranking systems that they change their behaviour in ways that they hope will improve their position. Hazelkorn's (2011) influential book, *Rankings and the reshaping of Higher Education*, stresses that these systems have had an enormous influence on university strategy and have also had effects on individual careers.

There are numerous examples of universities prioritising funding for research over community engagement on the basis that the former counts in a way that the latter does not. Universities battle each other to lure Nobel Prize winners onto their staff in the knowledge that this will accrue them points in several ranking systems, even though a Nobel Prize winner's affiliation likely speaks to issues of politics and money as much or more than it does to institutional quality, especially years after the award has been won. Whether Nobel Prize winners actively enhance the quality of an institution is another matter.

Universities invested in the rankings race become increasingly brand conscious and deeply concerned about criticisms that may tarnish their reputation and thereby their positioning on the rankings. The idea that a university should be full of people willing to speak truth to power, to be outspoken on issues of social justice, and be committed to serving the public good, becomes a dangerous idea given the extent to which such people might impact negatively on the scores allocated by the ranking industry.

Many universities now have full-time staff members and even whole units dedicated to driving the institution's place on the rankings. The job of such units is not only to polish the institution's brand and ensure that risk aversion is built into its processes, but also to make recommendations to management as to which actions will most likely lead to improved positioning on the rankings. The extent to which such actions align with the institution's academic project,

mission and vision, and contextual responsibilities become irrelevant in the drive for improvement on the rankings.

Ranking systems have even affected national level initiatives. Russia and China, for example, have both invested billions of dollars in specific universities with the explicit aim of increasing their national showing in ranking systems. While countries such as “Germany and France—with a tradition of funding their universities fairly equally and in contexts of limited domestic competition between institutions—do not score well on the rankings” (Yudkevich et al., 2015).

While negative consequences abound from the influence of the pseudo-science of university rankings, many more occur as institutions figure out how to play the game.

### **Gaming the system**

Underpinned by poor science and a distinctly uncollegial notion of the university, rankings are inevitably going to be gamed. Some forms of gaming the ranking systems are slightly dubious but nonetheless within the broader requirements set out by the ranking systems themselves. Other forms of gaming the system are outright fraud.

One of the most common forms of gaming is by buying publications. There have been numerous instances of universities in Saudi Arabia paying scientists to include the name of their institution as the researchers' affiliation (SIRIS Academic, n.d.). One scientist who has been very vocal about this is Mira Petrovic, who turned down an offer of

\$77000 a year to list a Saudi institution as one of her affiliations. Several exposés by Spanish newspaper, *El País*, have revealed the extent of this fraud whereby academics are paid to use false affiliations. Besides the perks of luxury hotel accommodations, first class travel and a lecture fee, all intended to legitimate the process, some of these highly cited researchers have managed to buy “houses on Costa Brava” with their suspicious earnings (Ansede, 2023).

In most cases, the payment to highly cited researchers to include illegitimate affiliations has not been met with any consequences for the researchers themselves or for the universities buying their name. But in the case of Spanish Chemist, Rafael Luque, his switching primary affiliation from the University of Córdoba to King Saud University saw his university plummet 150 places in the Shanghai Rankings and he was effectively dismissed by being placed on 13 years without pay (Ansede, 2023).

Perhaps the most explicit reporting on gaming the system has been by the president of Northeastern University in the USA, Richard Freeland (Kutner, 2014; Corricello & Myles, 2021). Freeland has reported in detail on the lengths to which he went to get his institution in the *US News* top 100. This included capping class sizes at 19 wherever possible (points are given for classes with fewer than 20 students), monitoring how “moving” graduation rates might improve ranking, moving to common application systems to increase application and rejection rates, and glad-handing colleagues at other universities to increase their

performance on the reputation surveys. Most importantly, he changed the reporting of student numbers to exclude those who were taking a break to gain professional experience or raise funds to continue their studies. The change in the way in which they reported on their student numbers made a big difference to the university’s ranking.

Many other examples exist of gaming the system by manipulating the ways in which the data is provided. Claremont McKenna College misreported its students’ SAT scores, Baylor University offered money to its students to retake SAT tests, George Washington University and Emory University falsified students’ school results (Corricello & Myles, 2021). Columbia University admitted to using “outdated or incorrect methodologies” to gather the data they reported, and several US colleges joined large application clearing houses so that they could report a higher rejection rate.

Even though rankers verify the data supplied by universities, there are several ways in which institutions shape the metrics in their favour (Calderon, 2020). There are ways in which institutions can manipulate the data that they submit, which include being generous in how institutions define ‘academic’ to include zero-hour contract lecturers; reporting application numbers from large application businesses; and including general application queries making the institution seem more selective than it actually is.

There is little research on how universities in Africa are gaming the system, but it happens. In South



Africa, increasing the number of publications not only improves an institution's place in the rankings, but it also accrues subsidy within the institution's block grant. It is unsurprising therefore that many universities have increasing numbers of 'research associates' that cite the local institution as one of their affiliations on their publications despite having little or nothing to do with that university (Nordling, 2021; Andrason & Van Den Brink, 2023).

### Moving forwards

Rankings are ubiquitous but they are based on poor science and pit institutions against each other in ways that do harm to the sector as a whole. Despite widespread acknowledgement that these systems are flawed, they continue to exert enormous influence over a sector that fails to sufficiently interrogate the extent to which this is a billion-dollar data industry focused on sale of data rather than a credible evaluation of higher education quality.

As more and more high-profile universities reject rankings, so it becomes easier for other institutions to follow suit. Ultimately, however, critique of the rankings industry needs to be accompanied by far deeper questions as to the purposes of higher education and how it might be safeguarded from the degrading effects of industries milking the sector for profits.

### References

Andrason, A., & Van Den Brink, J. (2023). Publishing (mal)practices and their (re)colonising effects: Double affiliations in academic publishing.

*Journal of Education*, 91, 70–93.  
<https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i91a05>

Ansede, M. (2023, April 18). *Saudi Arabia pays Spanish scientists to pump up global university rankings.* EL PAÍS English.  
<https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2023-04-18/saudi-arabia-pays-spanish-scientists-to-pump-up-global-university-rankings.html>

Calderon, A. (2020, June 12). *New rankings results show how some are gaming the system.* University World News.  
<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200612104427336>

Corricello, M., & Myles, K. (2021, December 7). *Gaming the rankings: Race to the top.* *The Epic.*  
<https://lhsepic.com/11474/in-depth/11474/>

Fonn, S. (2024, February 12). *University rankings are unscientific and bad for education: Experts point out the flaws.* The Conversation.  
<http://theconversation.com/university-rankings-are-unscientific-and-bad-for-education-experts-point-out-the-flaws-223033>

Gadd, E. (2020). *University rankings need a rethink.* *Nature*, 587(7835), 523–523.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-03312-2>

Harris, A. (2022, December 31). *Why Yale Law School Left the U.S. News & World Report Rankings.* *The Atlantic.*  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/12/us-news-world-report-college-rankings-yale-law/672533/>

Hazelkorn, E. (2011). *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Heffernan, T. (2022). Sexism, racism, prejudice, and bias: A literature review and synthesis of research surrounding student evaluations of courses and teaching. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(1), 144–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1888075>

Holmes, R. (2023). *Watching the Rankings: Selected Writings on International University Rankings and Related Topics*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Independent Expert Group (IEG). (2023). *Statement on Global University Rankings*. United Nations University - International Institute for Global Health. <https://doi.org/10.37941/PB/2023/2>

Kutner, M. (2014, August 26). How Northeastern University Gamed the College Rankings. *Boston Magazine*. <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2014/08/26/how-northeastern-gamed-the-college-rankings/>

Marginson, S., & van der Wende, M. (2006). *Globalisation and higher education*.

Marope, P. T. M., Wells, P. J., & Hazelkorn, E. (2013). *Rankings and accountability in higher education: Uses and misuses*. UNESCO Publishing.

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>

Nordling, L. (2021, October 28). South Africa considers affiliations crackdown for subsidy scheme. *Research Professional News*. <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-africa-south-2021-10-south-africa-ponders-affiliation-crackdown-for-publication-subsidy/>

Redden, E. (2013). *Methodology of QS rankings comes under scrutiny*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/05/29/methodology-qs-rankings-comes-under-scrutiny>

Sayer, A. (2015). *Why We Can't Afford the Rich* (Revised ed.). Policy Press.

SIRIS Academic. (n.d.). *The affiliation game between Spanish and Saudi Arabian higher education & research institutions*.

SSA University Rankings. (2023, June 16). Times Higher Education (THE). <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/sub-saharan-africa-university-rankings>

Tezuka, M. (2019, March 1). *Inflexion purchases university data provider Times Higher Education*. <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/trending/1p07txO4-BeQqJy2i7yBMg2>

Usher, A. (2022, February 2). *Two Rankings Stories You May Have Missed*. HESA. <https://higheredstrategy.com/two-rankings-stories-you-may-have-missed/>

Usher, A., & Savino, M. (2006). *A World of Difference: A global survey of university league tables*.

Yudkevich, M., Altbach, P. G., & Rumbley, L. E. (2015). Global university rankings: The “Olympic Games” of higher education? *PROSPECTS*, 45(4), 411–419. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-015-9365-y>

#### **Disclaimer and acknowledgements**

*Briefly Speaking* articles are prepared to stimulate discourses on topical matters of interest to higher education. The contents of *Briefly Speaking* articles do not reflect and/or represent the official position(s) of the Council on Higher Education on the subject matter addressed by the articles. Furthermore, the Council on Higher Education bears no responsibility for possible inaccuracies in the data and /or figures presented, nor for the possible gaps and/or flaws in the arguments proffered in the *Briefly Speaking* articles.

It is acknowledged with sincere gratitude that this specific issue of *Briefly Speaking* was researched and drafted by Prof Sioux McKenna. The CHE also expresses its profound appreciation to the peer reviewers who contributed immensely to shaping this specific issue of *Briefly Speaking*.

Comments should be addressed to [research@che.ac.za](mailto:research@che.ac.za)