Global University Rankings and Institutional Strategic Positioning

ABSTRACTS

Virtually no executive team in a contemporary multi-faculty university can ignore the publication of national and global rankings.

One way or another, these ranking publications affect student demand and recruitment, the perceptions of staff candidates during the recruitment process, institution-to-institution networks and alliances, and universities’ general reputation.

At best, a good performance in rankings can contribute to an ambitious institutional zeitgeist, or at the very least have a positive impact on staff, student and alumni morale. But crafting an institutional strategy with an over-focus on improving performance in rankings is fraught with dangers. Staff often find it de-motivating and shallow; the statistical complexity and capriciousness of rankings often make them difficult to predict; and gaming the system to achieve rankings success may even divert leadership energy and resources from real strategy. And yet.....nearly all universities use rankings to varying degrees in their global positioning.

Our seminar assembles an experienced array of speakers to help us grapple with these strategic tensions.

Topics and questions to be traversed include:

• what actions are needed to embrace rankings within universities management and leadership systems in a helpful and proportionate way?
• how should institutions' stakeholders expectations be managed with regard to rankings?
• what are some examples of good practice where institutions integrate their rankings tactics into their wider and real academic strategy?
• and what is the role of leadership in successful strategic positioning in a world where rankings loom large?

These and other topics will be debated over the course of the Conference.
Stephan van Galen
Secretary General, University of Groningen (NL)

Conference Chairman

Stephan van Galen has been the Secretary-General of the University of Groningen since September 2015. Previous to that he worked as a senior policy officer at the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), and later he became General Secretary of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO).

Stephan has a BA in Imperial History from King's College London and continued his studies in Leiden (Master diplomas in History and in Dutch Law) and London, resulting in a MA in South Asian history. The topic of his Leiden PhD thesis (defended in 2008) was "Arakan and Bengal. The rise and decline of the Mrauk U kingdom (Burma) between 1500-1700".

Helen Watson
Director of Planning and Resource Allocation, University of Oxford (UK)

University Rankings - the Oxford perspective

The University of Oxford consistently appears at the top end of international and national rankings. Is this a direct reflection of the quality of academic work at the institution, or are other factors at play? How does consideration of national and international league table ranking play a part in University decision-making and does the University have a strategy it operates to ensure its position is maintained?

Helen has worked in the UK higher education sector for over twenty years. She joined the administration of Oxford University, where she is currently Director of Planning and Resource Allocation, in January 2011. She was Director of Planning at City University London prior to taking up post in Oxford. Her previous roles at City included that of Deputy Academic Registrar and Head of Administration for the School of Allied Health Sciences. She has also worked for the medical school at Imperial College and for the University of London.

Helen is a member of the Executive Committee of the UK’s Higher Education Strategic Planners Association.

Helen has a Masters in Higher and Professional Education from the Institute of Education, University of London. As an undergraduate, she read Music at Exeter College, Oxford, where she is now a Fellow.
Jules van Rooij
Senior Advisor Research Policy & Institutional Research, Coordinator Research Assessment, University of Groningen (NL)

Ranking versus Benchmarking

University Boards (and their advisors) are confronted with a prisoner’s dilemma: they cannot ignore rankings due to their impact on international reputation, the ‘rep race’, whereas the general lack of methodological robustness does not warrant the attention they receive.

Since 2005, Dr Jules van Rooij, co-ordinator Quality Assurance and Institutional Research at the University of Groningen, has been responsible for analysing the major international university rankings and for providing the requested data. Nationally, he was one of the first to advocate the advantages of exchanging best practices among Dutch universities.

In his presentation he will share his vision on prudent 'coping tactics' and stress the necessity of serious benchmarking and quality assurance procedures and methods, not to be replaced by rankings or simple indicators.

Russian Academic Excellence Project

Alexander Grudzinskiy
Director - Institute of Economics and Entrepreneurship

Alexander Bedny
Vice-Rector for International Affairs

Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod (RU)

Enhancement of university's global competitiveness is one of the key priorities of Russian Government in the sphere of Higher Education. The goal of Russian Academic Excellence Project “5-100” is to maximize the competitive position of a group of leading Russian universities in the global research and education market.

The key principles and stages of Russian Academic Excellence Project implementation will be presented with reference to the case of Lobachevsky University as one of its participants.
Nannette Ripmeester

Director Client Relations Europe for the International Graduate Insight Group (i-graduate) and Director & Founder of Expertise in Labour Mobility (ELM) (NL)

The Student Voice may have gone missing in ranking – what matters most to students

University management is focused on getting their university into the top of the global rankings because that is ...........

Whatever word you will fill in on those dots is something for discussion during the HUMANE conference, but sometimes it seems we have forgotten the importance of the student voice.

In this presentation Nannette Ripmeester will cover what matters most to students and how they make their choices. We will look at study choice, arrival process, support services, and the actual learning. Based on research findings Nannette will illustrate what defines students' choices for an institution and what actions an institution can take to make the most of benchmarked data. Current day students have expectations of what their degree is going to offer them, and employability is high on their agenda. A higher education degree is no longer a final goal but a mean to an end. To cater for this generation, we need to understand what defines their choices and data is an essential tool is understanding what defines the student's choice.

Lambert Verveld

President, Amsterdam University of the Arts (NL)

“Ranking" Studies in the Arts

Ranking is about defining your place in the world. Ranking is about how you do your job as an institution or as a program compared to your peers and as evaluated by others.

Ranking is mostly not about why you do the things that you do as an institution or as a program. Why you do what you do determines though in many cases how you are doing compared to others.

This is especially true for higher education in the arts. There are many different reasons for people to teach or study what they have chosen in arts education: becoming an excellent performer or servicing regional needs in education - or contributing to the complex urban society - or criticizing the global economic development - or combinations of these or other reasons.

Ranking in arts education is therefore related to the why and is not simply counting the 'what' of publications or other items that can be measured. It is about how good you are in fulfilling your promises and goals. In some cases this can be compared internationally, in many cases nationally.

In the presentation we will discuss what we do and how we do it related to why we do it and how this can be compared to peers.
Kurt Deketelaere

Secretary General, LERU (League of European Research Universities) and Professor of Law at KU Leuven (BE)

LERU's View on Rankings

International rankings of universities influence the perceptions and priorities of governments, of businesses and students. Rectors and university councils see the achievement of high ranking as a strategic imperative.

However, their value and benefit is questionable. The fundamental problems are two-fold: - Most seek to capture characteristics that cannot be measured directly, and require indirect proxies. How good are the proxies? - Different universities fulfill different roles, which a single monotonic scale cannot capture. How can different roles be compared in meaningful ways?

None of the current ranking systems have the validity, rigour or meaning to be of real value, except those based on citations to evaluate research, and even here, they fall short in assessing research in the humanities and the social sciences.

Institutions tend to target a high score irrespective of whether the metrics are good proxies for the underlying value of the institution. Rankings will at best be irrelevant to those values or, at worst, undermine them. They encourage convergence towards a research-dominated model, reducing system diversity and undermining the potential to contribute to society in other ways.

But rankings have such a hold on the public imagination that they are likely to be permanent features of the landscape.

Rainer Heuer

Head of the Strategy Development and Controlling Unit, University of Göttingen (DE)

University Rankings: An Excellent Source of information for Excellence Universities?

The talk will start with a short overview over the position of the University of Goettingen in rankings. Second, a drop of the University of Goettingen in the THE ranking in 2014 / 2015 led to an analysis that revealed shortcomings of the ranking. Last, the talk will sketch the role rankings played in the recent discussion about how to continue the German so-called Excellence Initiative.
Rankings & Recruitment - the truth behind the myth

Collette Lux
Director of Marketing
King's College London (UK)

Greta Maiocchi
Head of Marketing and Recruitment
MIP Politecnico di Milano (IT)

Whether you’re in London or Milan, at a business school or multidisciplinary, full-service university, recruiting tens or thousands of students, marketing practitioners face parallel challenges posed by their institution’s rankings in their quest to secure the most talented students.

In a globally-connected world, King’s has to respond to parent queries over its UK-domestic rankings at recruitment fairs in Beijing. Milan faces an ever-increasingly discerning business school applicant who wants to know about rankings as well as ‘proof’ of enhanced employability prospects.

And when departments’ comparative rankings fall, what’s the impact on recruitment? Is part of the problem that academics won’t engage with prospective students or when they do they transmit a negative culture and turn them off?

In a tour-de-force, Collette Lux and Greta Maiocchi will share some of their real-life dilemmas, demonstrating the practical impact of rankings on recruitment.

Marijk van der Wende
Dean of Graduate Studies and Professor of Higher Education,
Utrecht University (NL) and Member of the ARWU (Academic Ranking of World Universities) International Advisory Board

“Made in China”: the impact of global university rankings

Global university rankings have been powerful in shaping the global higher education landscape, with a particular role played by the “Shanghai ranking”. It emerged as the first such global effort and from a country that primarily aimed to learn from it for its own growth and development. However, it quickly became the perhaps most globally impactful higher education project undertaken by China.

After more than a decade, its pervasive and transformative impact can be observed and analyzed, including the system-wide reforms resulting from the ensuing “World-Class University Movement”.

What are the implications for system diversity and institutional missions and profiles? And what are the particular challenges for European universities?

This contribution is based on research undertaken in 2015 as a visiting scholar at Harvard University (Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies) and Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Graduate School of Education)