

BRIEFING

Key considerations for the use of rankings by higher education institutions

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Introduction

University rankings have become a fact of (university) life. Since their emergence several decades ago, they have come to feature prominently, and often controversially, in discussions about demonstrating university performance and measuring quality and excellence in higher education.

Rankings have arguably led institutions to place greater focus on collecting and analysing data along multiple indicators and in a comparative setting, thereby contributing to building their reputation and increasing their international visibility. This, in turn, may have affected institutions' approaches to international student recruitment and strategic partnerships. By encouraging institutions to gather and publish more data than they did before, rankings may also have helped foster institutional acceptance of the fact that universities are accountable to a variety of audiences.

However, it should be noted that the quality and credibility of the data feeding into rankings is often difficult to verify and leads to inaccurate comparisons. Data is collected and presented for only a fraction of all higher education institutions. Moreover, these tend to be concentrated in certain countries and regions, meaning that only a select few benefit from rankings' potential uses.

While rankings may thus have had some positive impact (for some institutions), they continue to face sustained criticism for their choice and use of indicators, data collection methods, promotion of a single model of excellence, and lack of transparency on what they can – and cannot – tell their users about institutional quality and excellence. With this short paper, the European University Association (EUA) aims to raise further awareness and foster constructive discussions of some of the potential pitfalls of rankings and provide its members with guidance towards their responsible use.

WHICH RANKINGS?

For the purpose of this text, the term 'rankings' is used to designate the mainly large-scale international or 'global' rankings on which EUA's work and analysis has focused in the past. Though several of the observations that follow below may also apply to regional or national rankings, these often tend to use different methodologies, which is why they do not form the focus of this paper.

Caveats in the use of rankings: methodological weaknesses and unintended consequences

- Most rankings state the identification and demonstration of excellence as a key purpose. However, the picture is clouded by the **commercial interests of many rankings providers** and by a lack of transparency around their methodologies.
- Many rankings rely heavily on data that is collected and made available by one or more data collection entities, such as the Thompson Reuters datasets; others complement the information with additional surveys or other data sources. Thus, rankings are effectively summary scores based on data that happens to be available internationally. This leads to a **high risk of a 'proxy dilemma'** or the risk that *available* rather than *relevant* data is used as a proxy for quality.
- Ranked institutions frequently do not contribute their own information, as data is taken from other (pre-existing) sources. The fact that **institutions often do not have any control** over the use of this data and, consequently, their inclusion in rankings, is obviously problematic.
- The approach of rankings is by nature a comparative one between institutions, when one institution moves up, another moves down. This **'zero-sum game' effect** is maximised when results are combined into a single ranking. An institution's movement up or down the ranking will not provide information on its longitudinal improvement in a particular area, which might support its own institutional development, but only its relative position compared to others at a given moment.
- The **use of 'reputation' as a proxy for quality** – as well as the considerable weight assigned to this indicator by some rankings providers – is highly dubious.
- Rankings describe institutional quality according to a **very limited set of parameters**, which are – by and large – the same for all institutions, independent of their size, location, mission, and financing model, among other factors. The immense diversity of higher education systems and institutions can neither be accounted for nor reflected.

Key considerations for the use of rankings by higher education institutions

- Concerns have also been voiced that rankings lead to **declining diversity in higher education**. League table results are often presumed to direct institutional strategies to improve future performance in rankings, which largely focus on research and put forward one institutional model. Smaller and specialised institutions tend to be excluded or rank lower. Activities to strengthen community outreach or promote diversity, for example, do not tend to be considered in traditional rankings, placing institutions with strong engagement on such issues at a disadvantage.
- The use of rankings in informing study choices has also been debated. While rankings may provide students with a general impression of an institution's strengths or weaknesses, they do not provide an adequate assessment of educational quality. **Students and parents must be aware of the methodological limitations** described above in order to assess whether the metrics used reflect their individual needs and interests.
- Within research and innovation, the problematic features and effects of rankings, namely the use of metrics and indicators as imperfect proxies for research quality, negatively affect efforts to acknowledge a broader and more diverse definition of institutional success by ensuring more responsible, transparent and sustainable assessment systems. Global university rankings, together with other forms of international benchmarking frameworks, can **dissuade institutions from promoting the use of a broader set of evaluation practices for academic careers**, including Open Science, social outreach, innovation, and knowledge transfer, and from deploying a wider definition of impact beyond traditional bibliometric indicators. What is more, institutions may even be constrained to limit their engagement to activities that can be summed up using simple quantitative indicators.

Key considerations for the use of global rankings

by European higher education institutions and other actors

- 1 | There is **no single definition of quality for university activities**. Success must be considered in the context of national, institutional, and departmental or subject-specific parameters. To acknowledge a broader and more diverse definition of institutional success going beyond university rankings and to strengthen transparency and accountability, academic institutions and sectoral organisations might consider supporting the [More Than Our Rank initiative](#), launched by the [International Network of Research Management Societies \(INORMS\)](#) and supported by EUA.
- 2 | (Highly diverse) universities are dependent on and function within highly diverse national funding and governance systems, thus further compounding the fact that **rankings do not compare like with like**. These fundamental differences need to be acknowledged and accounted for.
- 3 | Rankings may be consulted in different ways, by a variety of stakeholders. Before considering the use of rankings, it is essential to understand the purpose, scope, and coverage of rankings, as well as the data they use. This is essential in order to gauge what information they can – or cannot – adequately provide and what they can – or cannot – be used for. **Methodological limitations and weaknesses must be clearly acknowledged** whenever rankings are being used.
- 4 | It takes critical analysis to identify what kind of indicators are used in rankings, and what they are intended to measure. Some of the most influential university rankings use indicators that exclusively or predominantly relate to research activities and research outputs. This is not a problem per se, **if users know what product they are getting and how they should go about using it**: a research-based ranking system should not be used to select a taught undergraduate programme, for example.
- 5 | Specifically with regard to study choices, students should be encouraged to conduct their own research, consider their personal preferences and goals, and weigh up a range of factors before making a decision. **International rankings are one possible source of information, at best**. In this context, the use of alternative, more multi-dimensional tools, such as [U-Multirank](#), or at least use of several rankings, should also be considered.

- 6 | **Institutional decisions should not be driven by rankings.** Universities should follow holistic institutional strategies, instead of investing considerable time and energy in improving rankings results.
- 7 | The **use of rankings should be avoided in the context of research assessment.** In line with the [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#), the rankings most often referred to by research organisations and the criteria they use should not inform the evaluation of individual researchers, research teams and research units.

RANKINGS AND RESEARCH ASSESSMENT REFORM

This key consideration refers to one of the four core commitments of the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment which has already been signed by 500+ organisations, forming the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), co-founded by EUA.

- 9 | An institution's **decision for or against participating in a ranking exercise should be clearly explained and communicated**, as should the meaning of any given outcome or score. Actors both internal and external to an institution should be made aware of the limited value of a score – be it high, low, or non-existent.
- 10 | Universities also have a **duty to educate external stakeholders in the uses and misuses of rankings.** Governments, the media, and other sectors tend to have limited understanding of rankings but interpret and use them extensively, regularly admonishing institutions for 'poor performance'.

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.