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RESEARCH

EDUCATION

University rankings are absurd

Rankings attract attention rather than assess academic excellence

University rankings fail to assess academic excellence. The parameters used to create university rankings reveal superficial quality and fail to examine the intangible factors influencing a university. The simplistic nature of university rankings reveals the unreliability and lack of validity inherent in the assessment. The multitude of university rankings published by media organisations throughout the world exists to attract public attention rather than a genuine attempt to investigate university education. Academic research published in English language journals are used to assess quality research. Academic journals published in other languages are not considered worthy. Academic reputation is an important factor in creating rankings.

Quantitative data is used to create the façade of an intellectual investigation. Two types of quantitative data are used. Institutions provide the data. The data may or may not be validated. Surveys provide the second source of quantitative data. The opinions expressed by academics in surveys become authority and symbolise expertise. However, the opinions expressed by academics are not necessarily reliable or accurate. The Halo effect describes the situation an academic's opinion of one department's reputation may inadvertently influence the assessment of the entire university. The academic is familiar with a specific department and unaware of other departments within the university. Academics may not be familiar with all the universities they are assessing. Academic survey responses tend to be questionable. Not all academics may approach the survey with a serious attitude.

Qualitative data tends to be ignored in the formulation of university rankings. Obtaining qualitative data is more difficult than quantitative data. Intangible factors are an important aspect of the university environment and education offered to students. Teacher quality is an important factor in determining the quality of a university. Teacher quality is largely ignored. Independent and objective teacher quality data requires considerable time to conduct the surveys and is expensive.

A complex mathematical equation is used to create the myth the experiment possesses intellectual and social merit. The parameters of the inquiry are applied to a complex algorithm adjusted to the weight of the variable. The outcomes of the investigation could be

statistically insignificant. The results tend to be very sensitive to small changes in the weight of variables. The weights used by different rankings indicate the arbitrary nature of the experiment. Small changes in the weight of variables can affect the results from year to year.

There are more than forty different rankings. Some rankings focus on a particular academic discipline, such as medicine, law or business administration or focus on an entire country or attempt to compare universities on a global scale. Different rankings attempt to accomplish different objectives. The Times Higher Education ranking is concerned with academic reputation. The Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranking is concerned with research. It uses faculty publication levels to determine its ranking. Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals received by graduates of current alumni is used to assess the quality of an academic institution. Not all universities are concerned with research. The emphasis on research neglects the arts and humanities.

The small number of universities considered for the rankings is a disadvantage. Between one and three percent of 17,500 universities throughout the world are assessed. It seems university rankings celebrate elite research universities and do not consider smaller universities with different objectives. The European University Association published a report in 2013 examining the impact of global university rankings. The report examined the criteria used to select universities. The Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranking selects highly cited researchers and papers published in *Nature* or *Science*. The CWTS Leiden ranking selected universities with at least 500 publications in the Web of Science (WOS) for five consecutive years. The number does not include publications in the arts and humanities.

English language academic journals are used to determine the quality of research. Research articles and citations published in academic journals not written in English are not considered. The dominance of English language academic journals is a result of fewer researchers reading research published in another language. American universities dominate the various rankings. Most English speaking academic journals are published in the United States. It creates an inclusive academic community. However, it does not examine whether American universities deserve their status.

Academic reputation is an important factor in all university rankings. It is a superficial and inadequate variable to determine academic excellence. In some circumstances universities can be nominated as 'excellent' in subjects they do not offer nor conduct research. Staff/student ratio is used to assess teaching performance despite the controversies surrounding the variable. Elite universities tend to have a lower staff/student ratio. The ratio reinforces the status of elite universities. Student graduation is used to reflect student success. Elite universities tend to have a high level of student graduation. Elite universities select the finest students and high student graduation reflects it.

The multidimensional nature of university education is reduced to a linear scale. Universities occupy a dynamic and evolving environment. Some aspects of academic life can be evaluated using quantitative data. There are many qualitative factors that are difficult to define and assess. Evaluating the quality of education, quality of faculties, academic

collaboration, the student environment and creating a renowned faculty are difficult to evaluate using quantitative data. The linear scale used in the algorithms transform quantitative data into weighted scores to create a simplistic ranking. The approach distorts intangible factors. The intangible factors may be important for a university.

Public attention seems to be an important objective and it can yield benefits for highly ranked institutions. The release of university rankings becomes a significant matter for media organisations. The rankings contribute to sales of newspapers and magazines. Many universities devote considerable effort to improve their position in the rankings. High ranking universities use the status to attract international students and donors. Those universities can benefit from research partnerships and collaboration with international institutions. The flawed rankings influence institutional behaviour and government policy concerning the allocation of resources to universities.

University rankings fail to provide an accurate assessment of academic excellence. The variables used to create the various algorithms are poorly defined and yield a superficial image of success. Research universities are preferred to universities with expertise in the arts and humanities. The exclusion of citations in academic journals written in languages other than English indicates the bias towards North American universities. The media attention surrounding the release of university rankings suggests the rankings exist to sell newspapers and magazines.