

Pursuing Quality and Excellence in Higher Education: Is there an obsession with university rankings?

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Which Are The Best Universities?

Are the best universities those which best match the criteria established by the different rankings OR those that help the majority of students earn the credentials for sustainability living and employment?

Are the best universities those that contribute to new scientific discoveries and highly trained PhDs OR those that “emphasize the obligations students have to serve their communities and the nation at large”?

Are the best universities those that reinforce an elite knowledge society (where progress depends on the cutting-edge knowledge of the few) OR those that help build-up a mass knowledge society (where progress depends on the “wisdom of the many”)?

Themes

1. Pursuing Quality and Excellence
2. Do Rankings Measure Quality?
3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Rankings
4. What the Research Tells Us
5. Implications for Policy and Society

1. Pursuing Quality and Excellence



Pursuing Quality

- Quality and excellence are the main drivers impacting on and affecting higher education, nationally and globally;
- Recognition of key role higher education plays within society and as an economic driver;
- Quality assurance provides needed confidence for prospective students and employers;
- Growing necessity to regulate the global marketplace – especially as more providers appear and talent is mobile;
- Society has a right to know whether its institutions are capable of meeting its expectations: value-for-money and investor-confidence.

Quality is Concern for all Stakeholders

- National geo-political *positioning and pride*;
- Beacon to attract/retain *investment, business and talent*;
- Institutional *reputation and status*;
- Performance *assessment of scientific-scholarly research*;
- Graduate *capability and opportunities*;
- Link between qualification and *career opportunities and life-style*;
- Value-for-money and return-on-(public) *investment*;
- Growing importance of *global networks*.

What is Quality?

- No internationally agreed definition of education quality;
- No objective or value-free set of indicators;
- Rather context is important:
 - Which university is best depends upon who is asking the question, what question is being asked and the purpose;
 - Different societies have different priorities, and higher education systems produce different results depending upon what is measured, and the purpose.

2. Do Rankings Measure Quality?



Why Rankings

- Rankings **appear** to be a simple and easy way to measure and compare performance and productivity;
- Satisfy a "public demand for transparency and information that institutions and government have not been able to meet on their own" (Usher & Savino, 2006, p38);
- Global rankings reflect the realization that in a global knowledge economy, national pre-eminence is no longer enough;

How Rankings Work

- Compare institutions by using a range of indicators:
 - Indicators are chosen by the designers of each system;
 - Different indicators are weighted differently.
- Final score aggregated to single digit in descending order;
- Each indicator is considered independently from each other - with no consideration as to context, history, mission, etc.

Understanding Rankings

- There is **no such thing as an objective** ranking
- Because:
 - The evidence is never self-evident;
 - Measurements are rarely direct but consist of indicators;
 - Choice of indicators and weightings **reflect value-judgements** of the rankings organisations.
- Each indicator is considered independently from each other - with no consideration as to context, history, mission, etc.
 - In reality, there is a relational aspect to the indicators or multi-collinearity

Evolution of Rankings

- Global Rankings emerged in 2003 –
 - Part of US academic system for 100 years but today popularity is worldwide;
 - Significant force impacting and influencing policymakers and the academy;
- **Four phases:**
 - Phase 1 (1900 -1950s) Sub-National/Elite Rankings
 - Phase 2 (1959 – 2000) National Rankings
 - Phase 3 (2003-) Global Rankings
 - Phase 4 (2008-) Supra-national Rankings
- Today, 10 major global rankings and 150+ national/specialist rankings.

Global Rankings

(red = government sponsored)

- Academic Ranking of World Universities (*ARWU*) (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China), 2003
- **Webometrics (Spanish National Research Council, Spain), 2004**
- National Taiwan University Rankings (formerly Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for Research Universities, HEEACT), 2007
- Leiden Ranking (Centre for Science & Technology Studies, University of Leiden), 2008
- SCImago Journal and Country Rank (SJR) (Spain), 2009
- University Ranking by Academic Performance (URAP) (Informatics Institute of Middle East Technical University, Turkey), 2009
- *QS* World University Rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds, UK), 2010
- *THE* World University Ranking (Times Higher Education, UK), 2010
- **U-Multirank (European Commission, Brussels), 2014**
- Best Global Universities rankings (USNWR, US), 2014

Select National Rankings (red = government sponsored)

INSTITUTIONAL	DISCIPLINE/ SUB-CATEGORIES	SPECIALIST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University Ranking System (Bulgaria) • CHE-HochschulRanking (Germany) • Expert University Ranking (Russia) • Good University Guide (Australia) • Guardian University Guide (UK) • University Rankings of Islamic Countries (Iran) • Higher Education Commission Rankings (Pakistan) • La Repubblica Grande Guida Università (Italy) • Maclean's On Campus (Canada) • National Rankings of Best Universities (Kazakhstan) • Netbig Chinese University Ranking (China) • Nigeria Universities Commission Ranking • OHEC (Thailand) • Perspektywy University Ranking (Poland) • Ranking U-Sapiens (Colombia) • Sunday Times Good University Guide (Ireland) • Times Higher Education University Guide (UK) • Top 200 University Rankings (Ukraine) • URANK-rank (Sweden) • US News and World Report (USNWR) College Rankings (US) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dataquest (India) • India Today (India) • Outlook (India) • Le Nouvel Observateur (France) • Sherif Magazine (Iran) • National Research Council Ranking of Doctoral Programmes (US) • Toplawschools.com (US) • American Universities Admission Programme: Undergraduate American Universities Rankings for International Students (US) • US News and World Report (USNWR) Top Med Schools (US) • WPROST MBA (Poland) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CollegeNET Social Mobility Index Ranking (US) • Georgetown Public Policy Review Placement Efficiency Ranking (US) • Metroversities (US) • New York Times Most Economically Diverse Top Colleges (US) • Online Study Australia Online University Ranking List (Australia) • Princeton Review (US) • Saviours of Our Cities (US) • Social Mobility Index (CollegeNet and Payscale, US) • Washington Monthly College Guide (US) • Washington Monthly Ranking of Community Colleges (US)

3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Rankings



Do we **measure what we value?** or Do we **value what we measure?**

Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted. (Einstein)

“Wise decisions are needed about **what** and **how** to measure the proficiencies demanded by the 21st century”. (Kuh, 2013)

Who Uses Rankings

Students, public opinion and government are **biggest users of rankings** & more likely to be negatively influenced

- Domestic undergraduate students
- Internationally mobile students and faculty
- Postgraduate students
- Government/Polycymakers
- Academic partners and academic organisations
- Employers
- Sponsors, philanthropists and private investors
- Industrial partners
- Higher education institutions
- Public opinion

What People Want To Know

- Teaching and learning: environment and quality;
- Fields of specialisation/department: level of intensity, expertise, quality and competence;
- Faculty quality: qualifications, expertise and track-record, research,
- Efficiency level: how much output vis-a-vis funding;
- Graduate expectations: career, salary and lifestyle;
- Employability of graduates: trends and competences;
- Research capacity of HEI & research team;
- Research infrastructure: level of use and efficiency;
- Performance benchmarked regionally, nationally & internationally;
- Attraction capacity and internationalisation;
- Etc.

What Rankings Measure

Rankings Measure

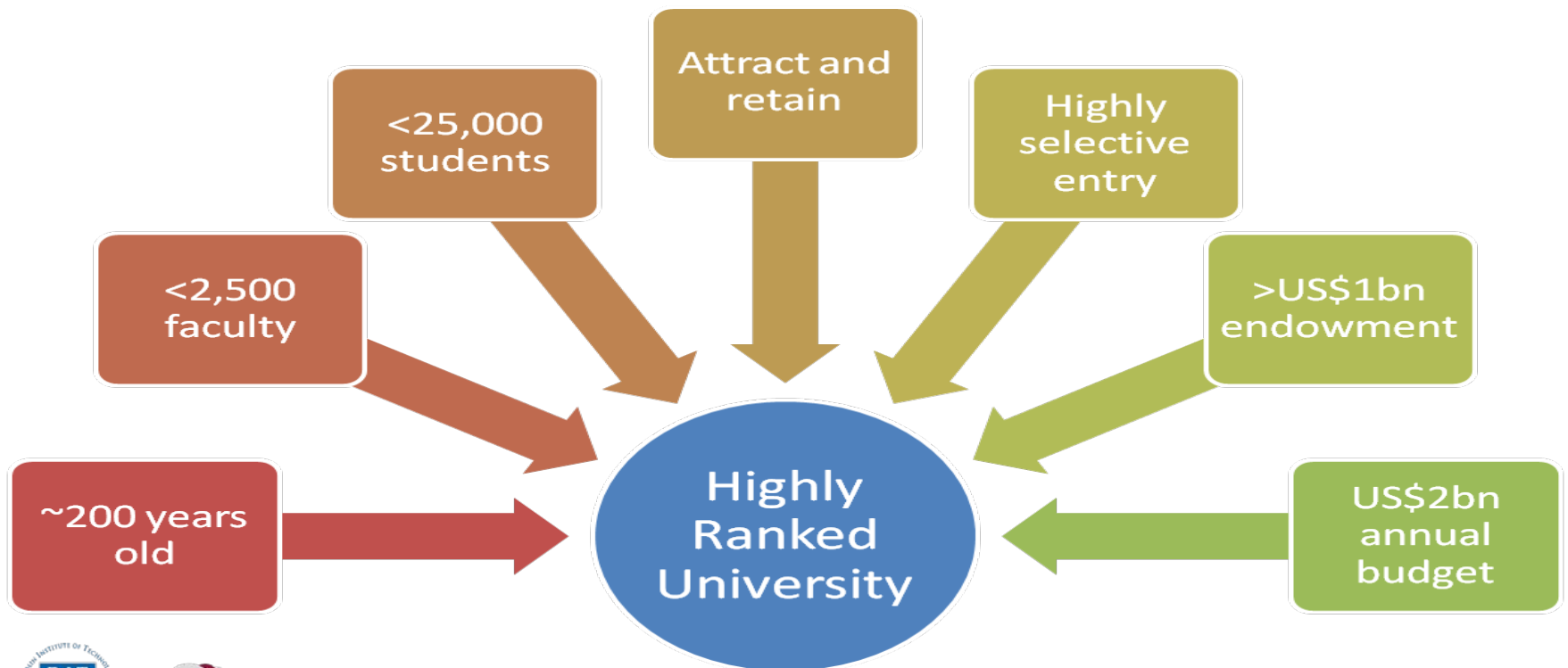
- Bio- and medical sciences Research
- Publications in *Nature* and *Science*
- Student and Faculty Characteristics (e.g. productivity, entry criteria, faculty/student ratio)
- Internationalization
- Reputation – amongst peers, employers, students

Rankings Do Not Measure

- Teaching and Learning, incl. "added value", impact of research on teaching
- Arts, Humanities and Social Science Research
- Technology/Knowledge Transfer
- Impact and Benefit of Research
- Regional or Civic Engagement
- Student Experience

What Global Rankings tell Us

Because age and size matters, there is a super-league of large, well-endowed, comprehensive universities, usually with medical schools and in English-language countries.



Advantages

- Provide simple, quick and easy way to measure/compare HE performance and “quality”;
- Place HE within wider comparative and international framework;
 - Inform student choice and stakeholder opinion;
 - Beacon to attract/retain mobile capital and talent;
 - Performance assessment of scientific-scholarly research;
 - Signal of what to expect upon graduation and from graduates;
 - Value-for-money and return-on-(public) investment;
- Accountability tool, esp. in societies/for HEIs where QA culture/practices weak or immature;
- Heighten attention to quality and drive-up performance:
 - Accelerate modernisation agenda;
 - Emphasize institutional strategic decision-making and data collection/analysis:

Disadvantages

- HEIs are complex organisations meeting diverse needs, but rankings usually measure/compare “whole institutions” using same set of indicators;
 - Undermines mission diversity, and ignores diversity of student cohort;
 - Drives isomorphism/norming around single model of HE or quality/excellence;
- Academic quality is complex and not easily reduced to quantification;
 - Use of proxy variables can misrepresent and lead to unintended consequences;
 - Difficulty obtaining meaningful indicators and (international) comparative data;
 - Bibliometric data is unreliable for all disciplines, and doesn’t capture the impact or benefit of research;
- Leads to simplistic comparisons: whereas, statistical differences between institutions are insignificant;
- International differences can be very great;
- Indicators can encourage perverse behaviour – over-emphasis on small set of indicators.

3. What the Research Tells Us



Institutional Reaction: Some Findings

- 83% HEIs **unhappy** with their rank compared with 58% in 2006;
- 32% HEIs **want to be first nationally** compared with 19% in 2006;
- 29% HEIs **want to be in the top 5% internationally** compared with 24% in 2006;
- Overwhelming majority HEIs **use rankings to inform strategic decisions**, set targets or shape priorities, and inform decisions about international partnerships;
- 84% HEIs use rankings to **monitor peer institutions** in their own country, and ~77% monitor peers worldwide;
- 84% HEIs have a **formal internal mechanism to review** their institution's rank, and 40% - this is led by Vice Chancellor, President or Rector;

Student Reaction: Some Findings

- **80% undergraduate and postgraduate** (taught and research) students **have a high interest in rankings**, with no real difference between undergraduate and postgraduate students (i-graduate, 2014);
- **High achieving and high socio-economic students** are most likely to make choices based on non-financial factors, e.g. reputation and rankings;
- **International students continue to rate reputation and position** in rankings as key determinants in their choice of institution, programme and country;
- **Strong correlation between rankings, perceptions of quality, institutional reputation and choice of destination**, at the national and institutional level;

Stakeholder perceptions

- EMPLOYERS have implicit rankings based on own experience:
 - US accounts claim law firms regularly use *USNWR* rankings to "determine the threshold for interviews" (Espeland and Sauder, 2007, 19);
 - 25% of UK graduate recruiters interviewed "cited league tables as their main source of information about quality and standards" (University of Sussex, 2006, 87, 80, also 87-92);
- ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS:
 - 40% say rankings integral to decision-making about international collaboration, academic programmes, research or student exchanges;
 - 57% think rankings influencing willingness of other HEIs to partner with them;
 - 34% say rankings influencing willingness of other HEIs to support their institution's membership of academic or professional organisations.

Impact on Faculty and Academic Work

- Increased emphasis on academic performance/outputs:
 - Contracts tied to metrics/performance;
 - New salary and tenure arrangements;
 - Active head-hunting of high-achievers.
- Rankings used to identify under-performers and ‘reputational’ disciplines;
- Can impact negatively or positively on staff morale;
- Faculty not innocent victims:
 - Faculty use rankings to identify partnerships;
 - Rankings confer social and professional capital on faculty in high-ranked HEIs.

Government Responses

- National governments and supra-national organizations interpret rankings as a proxy for capacity/capability to be globally competitive in a world dominated by new knowledge generated by talented people;
- Deliberate steps to restructure HE/research systems and institutions to create “world-class” or flagship universities (France, Germany, Russia, Spain, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Finland, India, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam and Latvia, etc.)
 - Concentrate excellence and resources in small number of elite universities (Neo-liberal Model);
 - Create greater vertical or hierarchical (reputational) differentiation;
 - Greater differentiation between teaching and research universities;
 - Link resource allocation to competitive processes, often informed by rankings.

Policy Impact beyond HE

- Serbia, Albania, Romania, Jordan, Czech Republic use rankings to classify universities;
- Russia, Brazil, Chile, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Qatar restrict state scholarships to students admitted to high-ranked universities;
- India, Russia, Singapore use rankings as criteria for collaboration;
- Dutch (2008) and Danish (2011) immigration laws target foreigners from top universities (150, and 20 respectively);
- Macedonia: Law on HE (2008) automatically recognises top 500 Times QS, SJT or USN&WR, and uses rankings to evaluate university performance.
- US states benchmark salaries (Florida and Arizona) or ‘fold’ rankings into performance measurement system (Minnesota, Indiana and Texas).

4. Implications for Policy



Rankings changing how we think about HE

- Cross-national/jurisdictional comparisons are inevitable by-product of globalization and will intensify in the future;
- Creating sense of urgency and accelerating modernisation agenda;
- Driving up institutional performance and providing some public accountability and transparency;
- Pushing HE to focus on quality and accurate data collection/benchmarking;
- Good quality, international comparative information is essential to underpin strategic leadership and decision-making at the institutional level, and to demonstrate value, impact and benefit.

What Are You Trying To Achieve?

- Is the aim to create **World-class universities or a World class system** –
 - Should the aim be to *improve* the capacity and quality of the whole system OR *reward* the achievements of elite flagship institutions?
 - Should resources be directed to the few universities which perform best against rankings OR should national policy avoid distortions in resource allocation and ensure resources meet the needs of the wider tertiary education sector?
- Does a rankings-led strategy strengthen national competitiveness OR undermine national sovereignty?
- Should you use indicators chosen by rankings organisation OR develop indicators which meet the strategic requirements of your country or institution?
- Should HE data be collected and monetised by commercial organisations or by an independent international organisation?

Rankings-led Strategy

- **Quality traditionally assessed via “self-regulating” QA and peer-review, but:**
 - QA can be difficult to compare internationally;
 - Interest in going beyond measuring and evaluating quality to linking performance and productivity to resource allocation.

- **Rankings have filled gap:**

Many governments and institutions have adopted a **rankings-led strategy**:

- Restructure HE/research systems/HEIs to create “world-class” or flagship universities;
- Embed indicators in strategic planning, and use to measure performance and reward success;
- Use indicators for scholarships, and to target collaboration and professionals;
- Re-orientation in research priorities towards "reputational" disciplines,
- Etc.

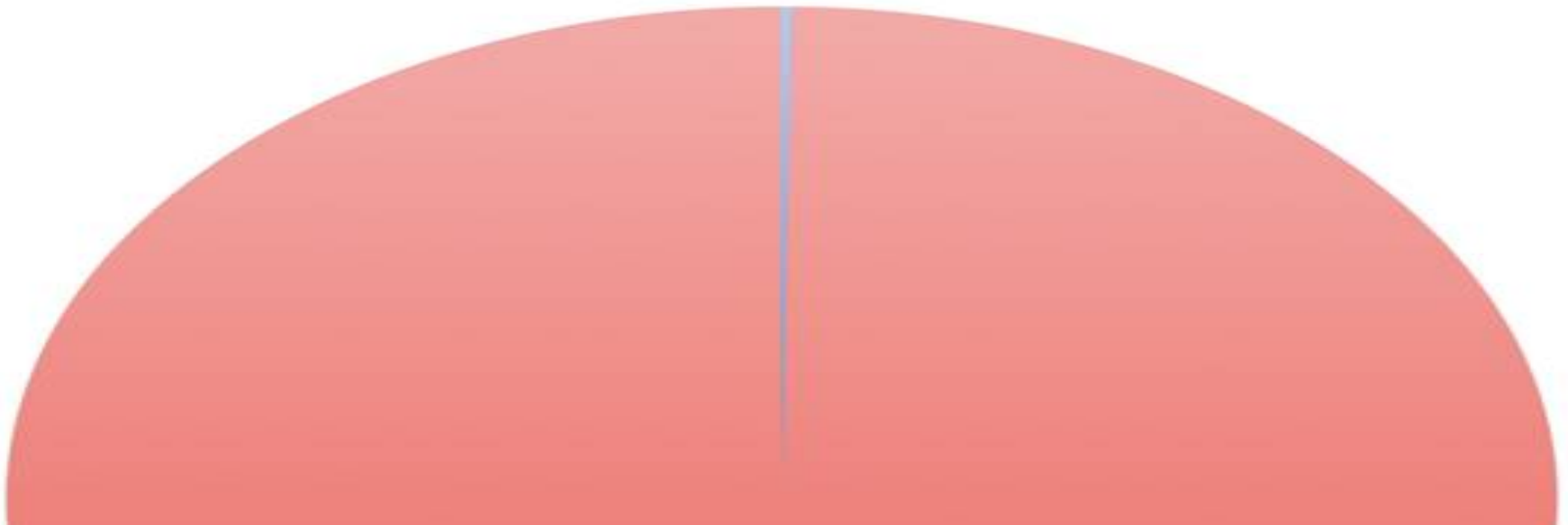
Beware Unintended Consequences (1)

- Prestige and reputation become dominant drivers of the “system” leading to steep(er) hierarchy – rather than pursuance of equity and diversity;
- Quality is a complex concept:
 - Many indicators measure wealth/socio-economic advantage, and privilege the most resource-intensive institutions/students;
- Concentrating resources and research activity may be counter-productive and undermine national economic capacity
 - Widens privilege gap, affecting other HEIs and their students, but may also threaten the cities and regions in which they reside, exaggerating long-standing inequality issues;
 - No evidence more concentrated national systems generate higher citation impact;
 - Financial costs can be very high – and threaten other policy goals.

Obsession with Elites

- ~18,000 HEIs worldwide (as per WHED data).
- 196m worldwide student enrolments 2012 (WB)
 - 20m HE students in EU28 (20.5m w/ Switzerland)
- Rankings as top 100 = 0.5% HEIs or 0.4% students worldwide
- **Obsession with rankings is skewing our understanding of student cohort;**

Number of HEIs



Beware Unintended Consequences (2)

- International comparisons not always appropriate or relevant;
 - Why should a country or institution align itself to indicators chosen by others?
- Adopting a rankings-led strategy can affect/reorient priorities and practices, leading to perverse behaviour and “gaming”;
- Because rankings incentivise behaviour, what is measured is critical.

Dos and Don'ts

Don't

- Use rankings as a stand-alone evaluation tool;
- Change national policies or institutional priorities to conform to rankings;
- Use rankings to inform policy/priorities or resource allocation decisions;
- Direct resources to a few elite universities and neglect the needs of the wider tertiary education sector and society.

Do:

- Ensure rankings are aligned with national values and objectives, have a clear purpose;
- Use rankings **only** as part of an overall quality assurance, assessment or benchmarking system and not as a stand-alone evaluation tool;
- Ensure indicators are fit-for-purpose, and measure outcomes in preference to inputs whenever possible;
- Understand the limitations of rankings, and the unintended consequences.

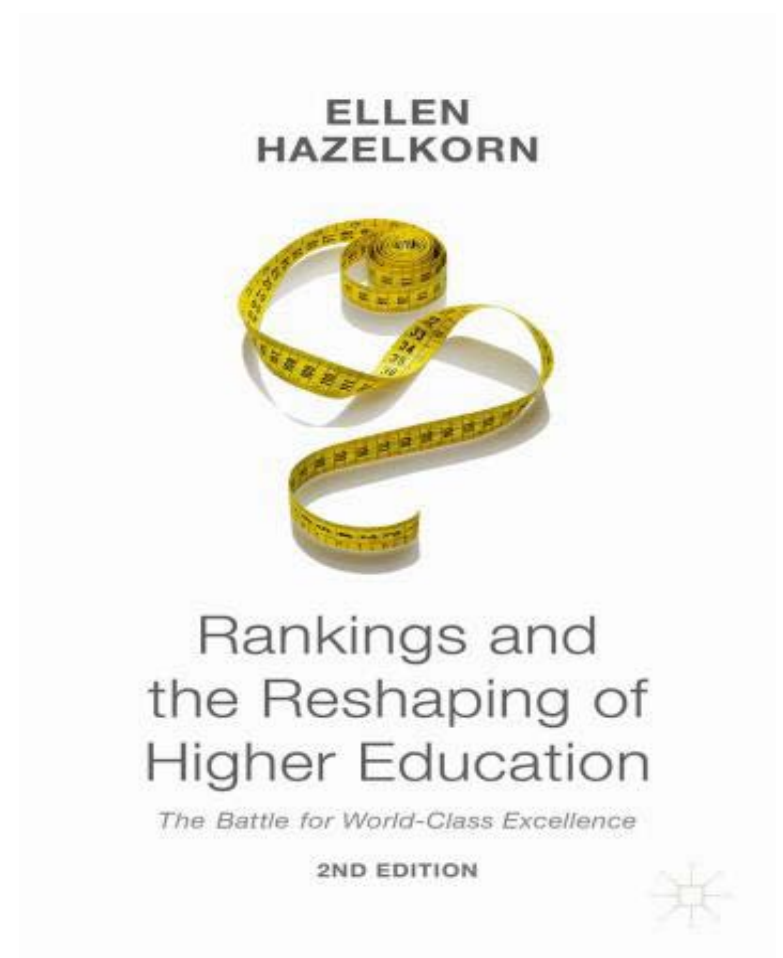
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Alternative Rankings

- Multi-dimensional Rankings/Banding
 - U-Multirank (EU)
 - CHE-HochschulRanking (Germany)
- System-level Rankings
 - Lisbon Council (Brussels)
 - Universitas 21 (Australia)
- Measuring Value to Community, Value-for-Money
 - Washington Monthly (US)
 - Postsecondary Institution Rating System (US Government)

Alternatives To Rankings

- Institutional profiling
 - U-Map (EU)
 - HE Performance Evaluation Framework (Ireland, Norway, Australia)
- Assessment of Learning Outcomes
 - Survey of Student Engagement (US + Canada, Australia, China, South Africa, New Zealand, Ireland)
 - Degree Qualifications Profile (Lumina Foundation, US)
 - AHELO: Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (OECD)
 - Learning Gain (Germany, Australia, Brazil, Colombia Canada, China, Russia, US, UK)
 - Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) (US)
- Open/On-line and Social Media
 - UniStats (UK), MyUniversity (Australia)
 - Rate-my-Professor