



AFRICA

The great global rankings debate

Munyaradzi Makoni 09 March 2018 Issue No:496

Like 0

Tweet



Share

Join us on



Follow us on



News Feeds

[Global Edition](#)

[Africa Edition](#)

Disclaimer

All reader responses posted on this site are those of the reader ONLY and NOT those of University World News or Higher Education Web Publishing, their associated trademarks, websites and services. University World News or Higher Education Web Publishing does not necessarily endorse, support, sanction, encourage, verify or agree with any comments, opinions or statements or other content provided by readers.

The jury is still out on whether African universities should ignore international university rankings or create their own, but most agree there's room for improvement.

At a roundtable organised by the Academy of Science of South Africa, held at Stellenbosch University's Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology on 7 February, Professor Eugene Cloete, vice-rector for research, innovation and postgraduate studies at Stellenbosch University, noted that while global rankings were "inevitable", they were sometimes at odds with the national agenda and local conditions.

He said while many global university ranking systems rewarded the number of international staff at each institution, South Africa's own transformation imperatives placed an emphasis on employing black academic staff. "So for every international colleague that we employ, we actually are undermining our own strategy as a country; the same goes for international students," he said.

He said rankings were also insensitive to the relationship between size and density of a university and research output. "If you think what it takes to produce a paper at Harvard or Oxford, they should be producing a lot more," he said.

Senior academics and administrators at the roundtable, chaired by Academy of Science of South Africa President Professor Jonathan Jansen, seemed to agree that universities could not entirely ignore the rankings, but that they could be improved.

Professor Robert Tijssen, a scientometric researcher and chair of science and innovation studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands who has participated in the creation of two well-known rankings – the Leiden University rankings and the European Union funded U-Multirank – said rankings were based on combined indicators such as teaching, industry income, research, citation and international outlook, but some of the weighting accorded to indicators was sometimes arbitrary.

"There are many indicators out there that do not cover the crucial features of a university," he said. Some of the performance

NAFSA 2018
ANNUAL CONFERENCE & EXPO
MAY 27-JUNE 1 • PHILADELPHIA, PA USA

QS WorldClass 2018
Register NOW!
Changes in university/industry interaction
Connect with Top University Leaders & Key Industry Partners today!

Bring University World News on board as a **media partner** for your international conference

Join our partnership programme and reach over **850,000 readers globally.**

This Week

COMMENTARY



What are the implications of a

ADVERTISE YOUR CONFERENCES, PUBLICATIONS AND VACANCIES



Reach out to almost 58,000 registered colleagues worldwide

Click here for our competitive rates

metrics were chosen based on availability, and some were biased, not relevant, and ambiguous, he said.

Although he agreed that rankings could not be entirely ignored, Professor Zebon Vilakazi, deputy vice-chancellor, research and postgraduate affairs at the University of the Witwatersrand, said there was a mismatch between the rankings and the highly dynamic and complex structure of a university.

To take the language of mathematics, and to reduce an institution to one number was a bit dramatic, he said. "Whether you like it or not, even the most sophisticated algorithms in the world have the bias of the programmer. There are prejudices and stereotypes that come through the algorithm," he said.

Professor Lis Lange, deputy vice-chancellor of teaching and learning at the University of Cape Town, said rankings had the potential to enhance students' choices by providing information that helped students select their ideal university. They also had the potential to trigger international competitiveness and could exert positive pressures on individual institutions.

She said rankings were not only a measure of quality but formed an integral part of marketing strategies, and selection processes for staff and partners. As a result of globalisation, universities had become global actors in terms of production of knowledge, economic development and the production of global citizens, she said.

However, there were concerns. For some universities the idea of being "in the top" could become an overly-absorbing strategy with potentially serious implications for the wellbeing of the institution.

In addition, globalisation had created a huge gap in the accumulation of wealth between different institutions. And it is clear that ranking systems have a role in perpetuating these differences and hierarchy, she said.

"Rankings are a kind of report card for the disparities in investment and resources across the world ... but they are not going to change anytime soon. I sometimes think it's better to be off the grid, but we have to manage within the grid," she said.

Rankings had also become a proxy for quality, she said. "The problem is whether we call them rankings or something else, there has to be some level of accountability in terms of private and public investment in higher education," Lange said.

"We owe it to the society that we operate in and the government that funds us," Lange said.

Does it matter who does the ranking?

Professor Brenda Wingfield, deputy dean of research and postgraduate studies at the University of Pretoria, said African countries and the continent should not be sitting back and allowing outsiders to rank them. "We have to measure ourselves," she said.

Vilakazi disagreed: "There is no need for Africa-centric rankings, at a time when the world is developing rapidly with its set of rules and standards. Do we want to plug into the matrix or not? With Africa-specific rankings, we would find ourselves marooned," he warned.

For Nico Cloete, director of the Centre for Higher Education Trust which is overseeing the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA), aimed at strengthening knowledge production in a group of emerging research-intensive flagship African universities, the answer was far more clear-cut: "With our HERANA project, we decided that rankings are completely what we should not be talking about in African universities, as there are other serious problems."

'closing' of higher education as China changes direction?



More attention must be paid to pedagogy to improve higher education quality in Africa

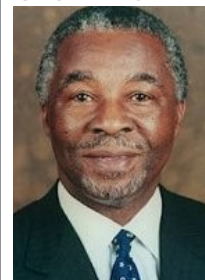


What could be behind the unremitting public and media attacks on UK universities?



The latest QS subject rankings highlight some challenges for universities in India

SPECIAL REPORT



Top stories from our previous edition

VIETNAM

Why don't Vietnam's universities rank higher in Asia?

EUROPE

How to get to automatic recognition of qualifications

GLOBAL

Rise of Asia slows in university subject rankings

CHINA

Xi Jinping power grab disturbs students, scholars abroad

AFRICA

Why we should train scholars to think across disciplines

UNITED STATES

Rising concern over influence of Confucius Institutes

GLOBAL-UNITED STATES

Universities need to confront their past, not omit it

GLOBAL

Subject data show areas Asian universities must work on

CHINA

China's equal status policy causes Taiwan brain drain

UNITED KINGDOM

Raising standards in student safety and security

He said it was difficult to get to the rank of a professor in many African universities, and classes for students are usually overcrowded. "We are not in a world-class competition. Our issue is to improve; to make our universities more productive," he said.

Receive UWN's free weekly e-newsletters

Email address *

First name *

Last name *

Post code / Zip code *

Country *

Organisation / institution *

Job title *

Please send me UWN's Global Edition Africa Edition Both

I receive my email on my mobile phone

I have read the [Terms & Conditions](#) *

I'm not a robot reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Thabo Mbeki on the importance of developing centres of HE excellence across Africa



Universities will play a vital role in helping people to retrain in the future world of work



What place has anti-globalisation in universities and how can it be challenged?

WORLD BLOG



Achieving equity and inclusion in higher education requires a change in mindset and practices

FEATURES



The great global rankings debate from the perspective of African universities



Love Ekenberg is appointed to chair for massive-scale higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa
