

## University Rankings Under the Spotlight

The Academy of Science of South Africa's (ASSAf) first Presidential Roundtable on University Rankings and their place in the South African higher education context came under the spotlight this week at a high-level discussion held in Stellenbosch.

Moderated by ASSAf President, Prof Jonathan Jansen, four experts offered views on this critical and somewhat controversial subject under the theme University Rankings: Helpful or Harmful?

University rankings provide insights into how universities compare globally. They place a major emphasis on research productivity and impact, the ability to attract research grants, the quality of staffing, internationalisation and perceptions of the quality of graduates by the international community

Questions interrogating the place (if any) of global university rankings in the South African context, whether they lead to unethical behavior/practices, whether they are biased towards science and technology to the neglect of the humanities, and whether they give a skewed picture of excellence at universities were probed during the discussion.

ASSAf Council Member and Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Postgraduate Affairs at the University of Witwatersrand, Prof Zeblon Vilakazi, held the view African-specific university rankings are not viable and that South Africa need to subject itself to the global rankings in order to compare itself to the rest of the world.

Prof Dr Robert Tijssen who holds the Chair of Science and Innovation Studies at Leiden University and leads the Science, Technology and Innovation (STIS) research programme at the *Centrum voor Wetenschap en Technologische Studies (CWTS)* acknowledged that there's still room for improvement in the ranking system despite their diversity.

Prof Nico Cloete, Director of the Centre for Higher Education Trust (CHET) and Coordinator of the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA) contented that

higher education institutions should rather be focusing on strategies to develop research than university rankings.

Prof Lis Lange, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at the University of Cape Town highlighted some advantages of the ranking system, such as that they provide students with choices and information on where to study.

The discussion was held at The Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University.