

Global University Rankings and the Mediatization of Higher Education

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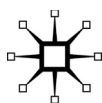
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Global University Rankings and the Mediatization of Higher Education

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I of course take all responsibility for any errors in the following work.

Glossary

ARWU Academic Ranking of World Universities, also called the Shanghai Ranking. It was the first of the “Big Three rankings.”

The Big Three refers to the ARWU, QS and THEWUR rankings.

BRICS Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. THEWUR and QS developed a separate BRICS ranking.

Elsevier owns Scopus, ScienceDirect, and a number of journals.

HEI Higher Educational Institutions

IREG International Ranking Expert Group – was formed to evaluate and certify rankings. The IREG advisory includes representatives from major rankings, academics and consultants.

ISI Institute for Scientific Information was a citation management system developed by Eugene Garfield in the 1960s. It was bought by Thomson in 1992 and became Thomson ISI; now it is called the Web of Science. It is part of Thomson Reuters’ suite of intellectual property and business products.

QS Quacquarelli Symonds was founded in 1990. Nunzio Quacquarelli is the managing director of QS. The company provides software services to universities for monitoring and benchmarking, as well as consulting services; they have a number of products related to business education, including a world MBA tour.

Scopus Owned by Elsevier, this is a large citation index used for 2014–2015 Times Higher Education ranking and other rankings.

Shanghai Consultancy is associated with the ARWU ranking.

THES The Times Higher Education Supplement is owned by TES.

THEWUR The Times Higher Education World University Rankings, sometimes referred to as THE ranking or THES ranking.

TPG Capital owns TES and has \$70.2 billion of capital under its management. (1)

TSL Education Group Ltd owns TES Connect, THEWUR. <http://www.bloomberg.com/profiles/companies/8393052Z:LN-tsl-education-group-ltd>.

WOS Web of Science, previously called Web of Knowledge. It is owned by Thomson Reuters and is a citation indexing service; it continues to be used by a number of rankings to determine the research productivity ranking of universities.

Introduction

Rankings are not passive instruments; nor do they convey neutral messages. They actively reshape narratives of and about higher education. They refigure discursive spaces of what it means to be a university, and a “good” one at that. Within these spaces there is need for active contestation – for debate to expand beyond the measurable to the broader issues of what is a good and worthwhile education in both local and global contexts. I hope this book will be of use to students and parents looking at higher education options, to media and policymakers wanting to be part of expanding public conversations about education and to academics interested in the intersections between media and educational policy.

I argue that understanding rankings requires a form of media education. Often media education is thought of as a subject for children to learn about how advertising is constructed or why some stories make it to the front page and others are ignored, but media education should be more than this. Media are ubiquitous, yet the roles of media in setting the parameters for debates and policies about education, including the role of rankings, are not well understood.

Rankings, with all their flaws, have been extensively documented and studied. But what has not been analyzed is how rankings are part of the larger metaprocess of mediatization (2) through which social, educational, business and political organizations come to organize and communicate through media logics. These logics encompass a belief in commercialization as common sense for public and private spaces. In fact, media and educational institutions have faced similar restructuring: Both media and educational institutions have closed or merged

to survive; both get less government support than in earlier eras; both media and educational institutions are perceived as products to be freely traded (for instance, as framed in General Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS)). Deregulation has also allowed for more and larger mergers in both sectors (3, 4).

The mediatization of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is happening concurrently with the growing marketization and globalization of education. Within this context, a good education is tied to the commercialization of teaching and research. In the 1960s, the term “internationalization” brought to mind peaceniks and yippies hanging out on many university campuses; today, Philip Altbach argues, internationalization in higher education is a push that could “lead to homogenizing knowledge worldwide” and will “decrease diversity of themes and methodologies” (5: p. 6). Similarly, writers argue government deregulation of media has resulted in fewer media companies with massive holdings that include print, radio, TV and online outlets (6). For instance, Thomson Reuters provides data and analytics to rankers and also owns the Web of Science citation indexing service used for determining research productivity (a major indicator for ranking) and newswire services to distribute ranking news to thousands of media outlets. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 3, rankers collect free information from universities and then package and sell this information back to universities in the form of various tools for benchmarking and monitoring (7). Throughout the book, I will show how different aspects of higher education are being mined to produce new products and services.

Rankings have become powerful mediators of the meaning of educational quality. Perhaps the most significant reason for this development relates to the intersecting rise of media/technology conglomeration in an era of marketization of education. University rankings are circulated through networks of media including newspaper websites, blogs, software, recruitment companies and proprietary databases for collecting information about publications for research productivity indicators. The Internet enables the rapid flow of capital and information that allows rankings to be exploited by different corporate and social actors to promote market-related ends. This book examines the growing importance and impact of rankings within the wider context of mediatization and its role in the global convergence of higher education policies.

What does it mean to be ranked?

An important question is whether the focus on mediatized rankings is expanding or narrowing debates about knowledge and what is and could be a good and worthwhile education. Studies that focus on the role of media in education are recent and still relatively rare; higher education policy is often studied in relation to the state and industry. In contrast, I argue that policymakers have the “meta-capital” to determine education policy, but they must do so within a highly mediatized context. How does the threat of not measuring up to the outcomes determined by external forces influence the ability of government and university policymakers to create institutions that are sensitive to the context they work within? Are there ways that these leaders could be proactive in the context of mediatized higher education?

For previous studies, I have interviewed journalists and policymakers about the role of media in educational policy. A participant who was a communications director explained to me that the media aren’t literally in the room, but they are always present; ideas that would not fly with the media are rarely even voiced. The debate about policy options – implicit or explicit – goes through media lenses: How will media perceive this story? Will the proposed policy seem like common sense? University leaders go through a similar process: If we don’t participate in the rankings what will happen? What will prospective students think of us and will they even know about us if we do not have the visibility rankings provide? Mediatization plays an active role in constructing discourses about what stands for a “good”, “excellent” and “bad” university; however, other logics are also at play, in particular intersecting market and political logics.

What does it mean to be ranked in the 21st century? Rank and rankings mean different things in different contexts as they have over the centuries. Indeed, the etymology of the word “rank” represents the conflicting definitions of university rankings. Rank is defined as to “put in order, classify” or “a social division, class of persons.” In Old English, “ranc” was used to describe someone or something that was “proud, overbearing, showy”; and in Middle English, “rank” referred to something “excessive and unpleasant.” The word “rancid” is believed to come from the influence of Middle French. The term “rank folly” came into use in the 16th century, which could be the “source for the verb meaning to reveal another’s guilt” (1929, underworld slang) (8). Rank went

from something unpleasant to hierarchies visualized through military and school uniforms, using stripes and other accouterments to denote distinction.

One to three percent of universities in the world are deemed to be worthy of appearing in popular, global, predominately media-generated rankings (7). Are the 97 to 99% of universities that are not ranked composed of low-class people or are they harassed and abused by overbearing, rancid institutions? We do not know. We do know, however, that the highest-ranking institutions – determined by the media – are richer, whiter, English speaking, and concentrated in Western Europe and North America. We also know that many HEIs compete much more vigorously than ever before for public and private funds to sustain themselves or grow, and that acquiring a high ranking is a coveted asset in this endeavor. And we know media companies own the majority of popular ranking systems, but that universities and governments also create rankings.

What is mediatization?

Rankings operate in mediatized contexts in which media act as “moulding forces” (9) Through the process of mediatization educational and political institutions come to employ “media logics” (10) that include media norms and practices such as writing or speaking in sound bytes and pitching stories that fit within media framing of issues. Universities often use media logics to “brand” themselves, affecting, for example, what they pitch as important research to media, and what they display on their websites. In that sense, how university websites represent their status and prestige, and represent others, including the publics they serve, raises questions about how they situate themselves in relation to ranking.

Mediatization is a contextual process that occurs within material conditions of politics and economics. It is part and parcel of how universities brand themselves in hopes of improving their rankings, but how they do this differs based on geopolitics, and national and local branding, as I will explain in the rest of this book. A relatively miniscule number of faculty and students work and study at ranked universities, yet rankings are widely read and used by policymakers, faculty, students and university administrators around the world. To name but a few countries, China, India, Russia, Germany, France, Malaysia, and Korea have programs and policies aimed at developing at least one world-class university (11).

HEIs have an ambivalent attitude towards rankings. Many universities argue they don't need rankings, yet at the same time many universities spend inordinate time and money to participate in rankings and very few universities opt out of rankings entirely. Universities are caught in a catch-22 of sorts, in which major policy dilemmas arise: If universities do participate in HEI rankings, they are reinforcing a system based in intersecting media, commercial and political logics and practices that have little to do with academic norms of research and inquiry; if they do not participate they risk losing public funding, students and donors in an increasingly competitive and globalized environment. Some universities have tried to push back on rankings by attempting to foster their own public image. Important questions arise at these junctures, including: Do universities have the power to navigate the mediatized context of ranking and educational policymaking? With the increased importance granted to ranking, how have positions of the same universities changed over the years?

There are many rankings that focus on everything from the fame and fortune of a university, to student-teacher ratio, internships, extracurricular activities, school spirit, undergraduate education, employment after graduation, and affordability. There seems to be a ranking to suit each institution. For some rankings, universities are selected by the rankers; for some, universities need to apply to be considered; and for others, universities pay a fee to get one or more stars. Other rankers require universities to spend substantial hours collecting and organizing information in the format required by the ranker. In these circumstances, how universities maneuver among media reports, public demands and policy requirements creates a terrain for a fruitful analysis of higher education's predicament. More particularly, how HEIs engage the mediatization of university rankings provides a conceptual framework for analyzing the growing marketization of education.

Book overview

This book has three parts. I start by providing a framework for understanding rankings and the way they operate in mediatized contexts. Chapter 1 provides a conceptual framework for understanding the nexus between mediatization, university rankings and the marketization of higher education; this chapter also explores the impact of rankings on universities and students in relation to university missions and how universities manipulate rankings. Chapter 2 examines branding in relation to the logic of university rankings. Branding is a tricky business

for universities: For example, they must situate themselves among global brands and services, but they also attempt to position the local as attractive and different.

Chapters 3–6 build on the preceding chapters by offering empirical analyses on the interplay between rankings and mediatization. Each chapter offers a snapshot into interconnections between ranking, mediatization and higher education. Chapter 3 investigates how the websites of major ranking sources represent excellence and the economic interests at stake. I focus on what are often referred to as the “Big Three” international rankings: The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the Shanghai Rankings, began in 2003; the *Times Higher Education* and Quacquarelli Symonds joined forces in 2004 to create a joint ranking, but in 2009 the two broke up, which resulted in The Times Higher Education World University Ranking (THEWUR) and the QS Ranking. These rankings are arguably the most prominent in relation to resource allocation whether through government or industry dollars or the ability to be highly selective in which students to admit (12). I will examine the products that ARWU, QS and TES Global Ltd offer to higher education institutions. Chapter 4 examines the semiotics of rankings using THEWUR as a case study. THEWUR engage a semiotics of objectivity through colorful tables and graphs that symbolize tradition, capital accumulation and responsible individual choice. In Chapter 5, websites of top-ranked institutions in Canada, China, India, South Africa, the UK and the US are analyzed; I consider how universities are representing themselves and their view of excellence in relation to rankings. There is a growing body of literature that examines the importance of universities from the perspective of branding, but much less research that critically examines websites as field sites. I will detail continuities in sites that are nation-specific and argue that we are witnessing the emergence of a global visual language (13). Chapter 6 will look at how public affairs offices use different rankings including lifestyle, livability, and higher education to recruit students, particularly international students. I draw on empirical findings gleaned from interviewing senior university public affairs/communications staff and analyze them as boundary workers.

The third part of the book includes the conclusion in which I argue that popular rankings are currently driven by corporations and are rife with conflicts of interest. I contend that rankings are an understudied economic sector and that more analysis of the cost of rankings is needed. Finally, I claim that the problem with rankings is they make universities much less responsible to diverse communities and, in fact,

discourage what Verna Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt refer to as the “4Rs”: respectful, responsible, reciprocal and relevant relationships (14) with diverse communities and the Indigenous territories that provide the space for many universities to exist. Universities need to expand – not constrict – ways of knowing and sharing knowledge. Here I will look to ways of creating spaces for different types of imaginings of what good and worthwhile post-secondary education could be.

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