



RANKINGS AND REPUTATION

Presentation to Russell Group DVCs, 9 Nov 2023

- Universities and prestige
- Autobiographical note
- Mechanisms of rankings
- Rankings and performance
- Rankings as capture
- Global politics of rankings
- Politics inside rankings
- Conclusions

UNIVERSITIES AND PRESTIGE

pecking order noun

 Save Word

variants: *or less commonly* peck order

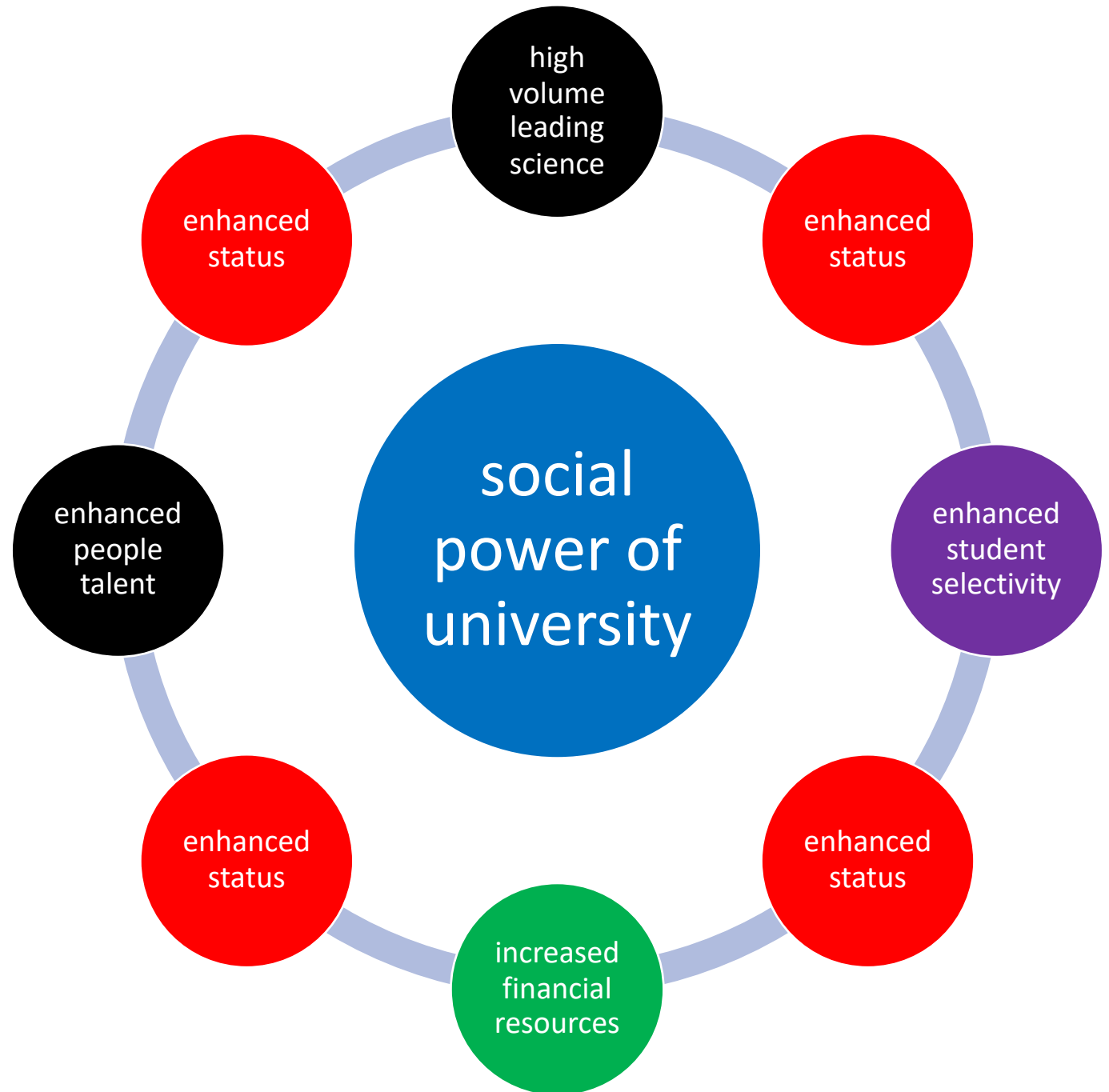
Definition of *pecking order*

1 : the basic pattern of social organization within a flock of poultry in which each bird pecks another lower in the scale without fear of retaliation and submits to pecking by one of higher rank

broadly : a dominance hierarchy in a group of social animals

2 : a social hierarchy

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pecking%20order>





RANKINGS AND THE LURE OF LISTS

An autobiographical note

**KEEP IT
SIMPLE**

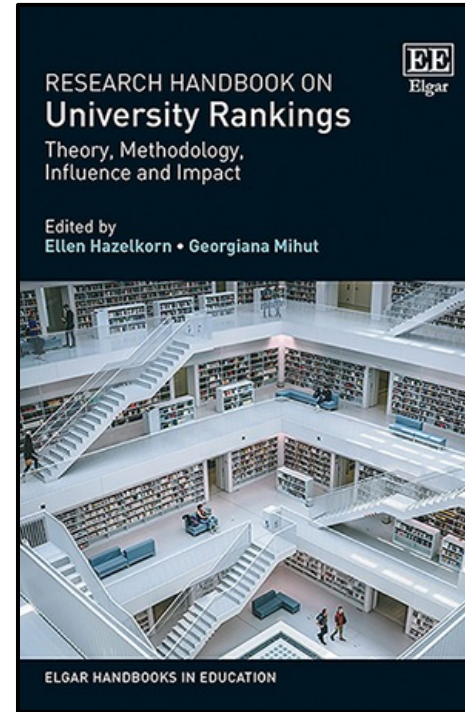
The rankings era begins, 2003

In 2003 Liu Niancai, an engineering professor, university planner and later Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China, released the first Academic Ranking of World Universities, comparing the research performance of the top 500 universities using largely open access data. The global ranking era began. The ARWU ranking was overhauled and set in its present form in 2004



The ARWU focus attention on investments in basic science. The Times Higher Education (THE) which started in 2004 was a different creature. Unlike Shanghai which was concerned with research performance and used public data, in 2004 the THE focused on the global market in cross-border students and used multiple elements, including surveys. QS did the business research for the THE ranking: later they split.

Global ranking formed world higher education as a field of information and comparison. It transformed perceptions of the purpose and activity of institutions, shaping incentives and behaviours. Ranking quickly gained authority in the media and public mind (though it varies by country). Rankings are now the ‘master’ performance indicators for many leaders.



Ranking has triggered an avalanche of thousands of strategy papers, reports, business services and academic books and papers. Many have built careers on it. There are specialist PVCs for rankings

Perhaps the best recent academic compilation is E. Hazelkorn and G. Mihut (eds.), *Research Handbook on University Rankings: Theory, methodology, influence and impact* (Edward Elgar, December 2021).



MECHANISMS OF RANKINGS

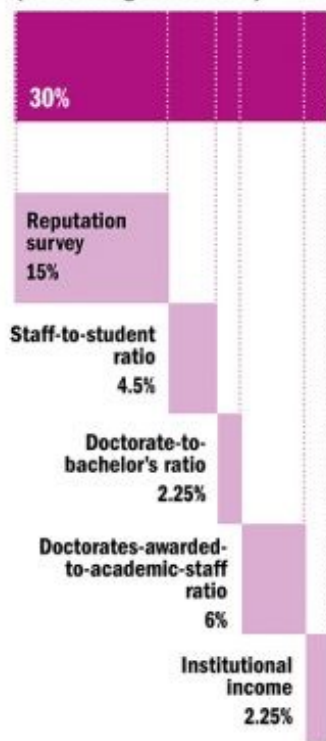
Main global ranking systems

Coverage and validity

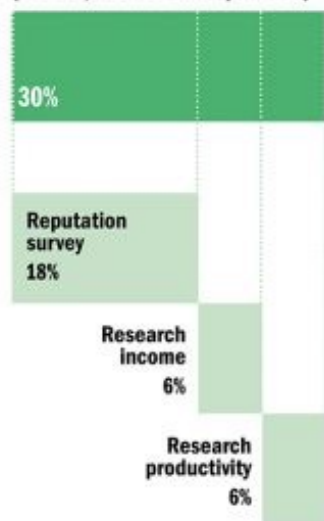
| | Shanghai ranking (ARWU) Indicator | Weight | Bibliometric Data |
|-------------------------------|--|--------|---|
| Quality of Education | Nobel Prizes and Field Medals won by alumni (sliding scale, more recent prizes score higher) | 10% | |
| Quality of Faculty | Nobel Prizes and Field Medals won by current members of academic staff | 20% | |
| | Members of academic staff who are HiCi researchers, in top 250 in world field by citations | 20% | Clarivate (SCI, SSCI) |
| Research Output | Number of papers published in <i>Nature</i> and <i>Science</i> in previous five years | 20% | <i>Nature</i> (UK) <i>Science</i> (US) |
| | Articles indexed in Science Citation Index (SCI) and Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) in previous year | 20% | Clarivate (SCI, SSCI) |
| Per Capita Performance | Per capita indicator: above indicators divided by number of full-time equivalent academic staff | 10% | |

Times Higher Education (THE) World University Ranking

Teaching (the learning environment)



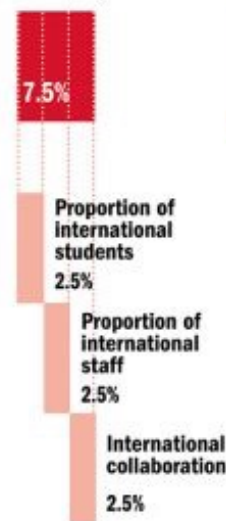
Research (volume, income and reputation)



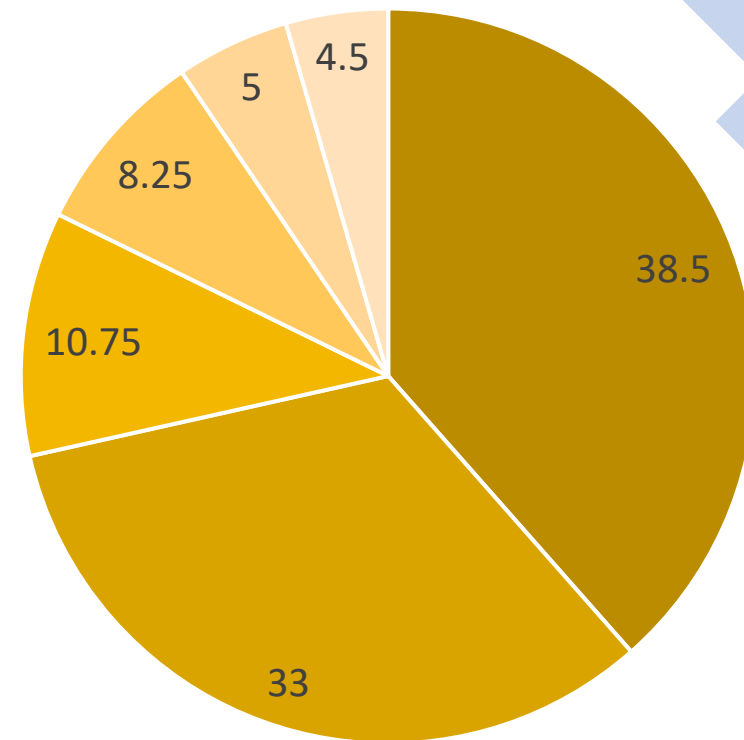
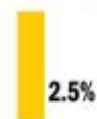
Citations (research influence)



International outlook (staff, students, research)



Industry income (knowledge transfer)



- Bibliometric indicators (data supplied by Elsevier/Scopus)
- Reputation surveys
- Income
- Doctorate studies
- International students and staff
- Staff-student ratio

QS: The 'gold standard' in building a business on the back of rankings

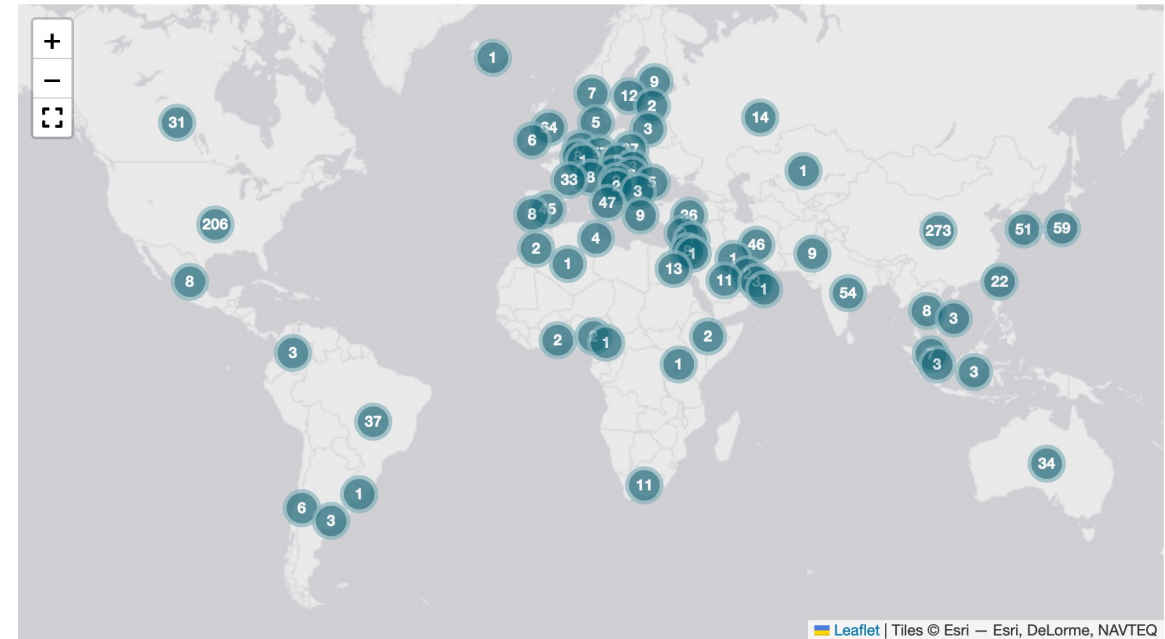
| | |
|---|-----|
| Academic reputation (survey) | 40% |
| Employer reputation (survey) | 10% |
| Student-staff ratio | 20% |
| Citations per faculty (Elsevier/Scopus database) | 20% |
| Internationalisation (faculty 5%, students 5%) | 10% |



Leiden Ranking

<https://www.leidenranking.com/ranking/2023/list>

- A subset of publications in the Clarivate/ **Web of Science** database (SCI, SSCI)
- Only include **articles and reviews**, excluding books and other formats
 - Must be in English.
 - Must have one or more authors.
 - Not been retracted.
 - In a core journal (an international scope, and a sufficiently large number of references to other core journals)



Time period, field, and region/country

Time period: 2018–2021

Field: All sciences

Region/country: World

Min. publication output: 100

Indicators

Type of indicators: Scientific impact

Indicators: P, P(top 10%), PP(top 10%)

Order by: P(top 10%)

Calculate impact indicators using fractional counting

| | University | P | P(top 10%) | PP(top 10%) |
|----|-----------------------------|-------|------------|-------------|
| 1 | Harvard Univ | 36355 | 7285 | 20.0% |
| 2 | Zhejiang Univ | 33090 | 3990 | 12.1% |
| 3 | Stanford Univ | 17958 | 3658 | 20.4% |
| 4 | Shanghai Jiao Tong Univ | 31789 | 3592 | 11.3% |
| 5 | Tsinghua Univ | 23152 | 3486 | 15.1% |
| 6 | Univ Toronto | 25295 | 3447 | 13.6% |
| 7 | Huazhong Univ Sci & Technol | 24435 | 3213 | 13.1% |
| 8 | Univ Oxford | 17065 | 3073 | 18.0% |
| 9 | Univ Michigan | 20120 | 2875 | 14.3% |
| 10 | Johns Hopkins Univ | 18416 | 2779 | 14.8% |

| | University | | P | P(top 5%) | PP(top 5%) | |
|----|------------------------|--|-------|-----------|------------|--|
| 1 | Univ Oxford | | 17065 | 1763 | 10.3% | |
| 2 | Univ Coll London | | 16247 | 1486 | 9.1% | |
| 3 | Univ Cambridge | | 14386 | 1407 | 9.8% | |
| 4 | Imperial Coll London | | 12864 | 1264 | 9.8% | |
| 5 | Univ Manchester | | 10652 | 792 | 7.4% | |
| 6 | King's Coll London | | 9524 | 802 | 8.4% | |
| 7 | Univ Edinburgh | | 8667 | 699 | 8.1% | |
| 8 | Univ Nottingham | | 8152 | 545 | 6.7% | |
| 9 | Univ Birmingham | | 6896 | 473 | 6.9% | |
| 10 | Univ Bristol | | 6735 | 521 | 7.7% | |
| 11 | Univ Leeds | | 6619 | 495 | 7.5% | |
| 12 | Univ Sheffield | | 6505 | 456 | 7.0% | |
| 13 | Univ Southampton | | 6334 | 460 | 7.3% | |
| 14 | Univ Glasgow | | 5555 | 511 | 9.2% | |
| 15 | Univ Liverpool | | 5507 | 403 | 7.3% | |
| 16 | Newcastle Univ | | 5044 | 367 | 7.3% | |
| 17 | Cardiff Univ | | 4857 | 315 | 6.5% | |
| 18 | Univ Warwick | | 4682 | 345 | 7.4% | |
| 19 | Univ Exeter | | 4239 | 383 | 9.0% | |
| 20 | Queen Mary Univ London | | 4125 | 373 | 9.0% | |
| 21 | Queen's Univ Belfast | | 3445 | 247 | 7.2% | |
| 22 | Univ York | | 3410 | 241 | 7.1% | |
| 23 | Durham Univ | | 3161 | 204 | 6.5% | |
| 24 | Univ Bath | | 2953 | 186 | 6.3% | |
| 25 | Univ Strathclyde | | 2888 | 153 | 5.3% | |

0 4500 9000 13500 18000

Leiden generates useful single indicators:

- Total papers and papers in five discipline clusters
- Total top 1%, 5% ,10% papers [science power]
- Proportion of papers in top 1%, 5%, 10%
- Proportion that entail international collaboration, industry collaboration

Problems of coverage

The three leading rankings:

- **Favour large comprehensive science universities** strong in (a) medicine/life sciences and (b) physical sciences/ engineering/computing
- Marginalise much applied research, non high-science disciplines, non-English languages
- **Marginalise the teaching/learning mission**
Student learning indicators are useless (surveys), or poor quality proxies (e.g. staffing ratios)
- **Say little about graduate employment**
- Ignore access/equity and other **social missions**, and contributions to global common good
- Blatantly install the Anglophone model as the norm, suborn and marginalise the global South

Problems of validity and stability

- Rankings claim to identify the ‘best universities’ but there are major omissions (e.g. teaching and learning)
- THE and QS arbitrarily mix subjective and objective data
- The surveys by The and QS are highly problematic: poor quality observations by returnees, low return rates, geographical bias, no consistent weightings of returns, intervention by institutions to influence returns, etc
- Lack of transparency in data collection and processing
- Changes in methods drastically affect institutions
- Small changes at the margin, often accidental products of data collection, generate undue volatility in position
- In the league table format small differences take large significance: a flat field becomes steeply hierarchical
- THE and QS outcomes are influenced by institutions *and* readily shaped by the rankers themselves

When we are not sure
which to choose as
best university, we just
put
‘Haaaaavaaaaaaard’!



Commercial rankers confirm the familiar pecking order

Good for us but is it good for higher education?

- “It is hard to escape the suspicion that rankers make their choices according to their own preconceived notions of where ‘the best’ universities are. If a ranking did not fit their preconceptions, they would change their parameters rather than adjust their preconceptions – as has, in fact, happened... Rankings create a reality as much as they reflect a reality.”

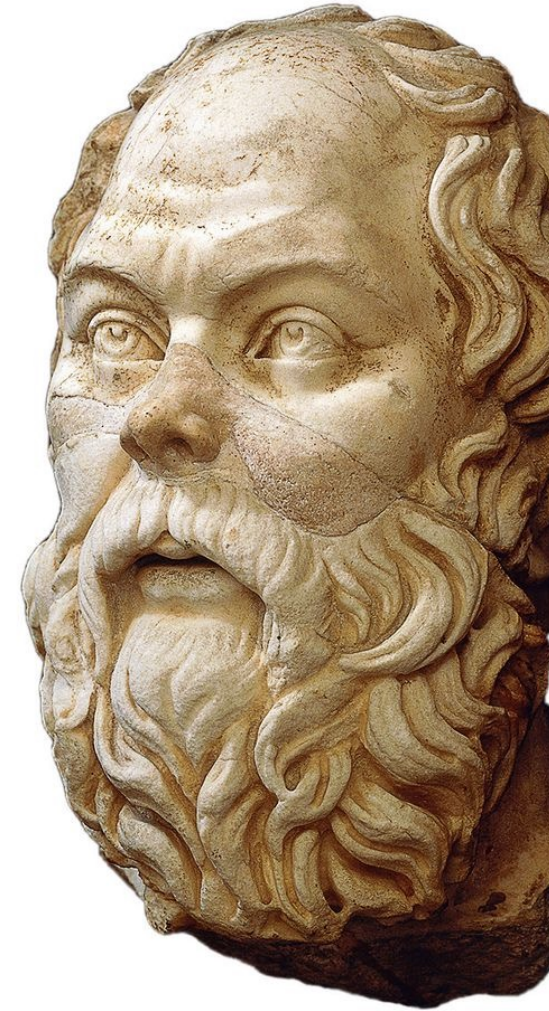
- Chris Brink, *University World News*, 24 October 2023

The multi-indicator problem: this is fundamental

- Different indicators are relevant to different stakeholders – yet all are mixed in together and specific useful information is hidden
- Composite multi-indicator rankings use arbitrary weightings of different elements of institutional activity. These weightings are untheorized – there is NO rationale for them. Why should, say, internationalisation be 5%, or graduate employability 10%? Reverse those percentages and a very different rank order appears – which is ‘true’? There’s no intrinsic reason to prefer one over the other
- Because in multi-indicator ‘best university’ rankings the indicators are combined using arbitrary weightings, there is no *necessary* relationship between better performance, and better ranking. Only single indicators based on valid data can reward performance

As Socrates would have said, if he had thought about it:

‘I really hope the world does not get into composite multi-indicator ranking of universities! It’s total nonsense!’



World Cup football **single metric ranking**—
the winner is determined by

100.0% whichever team
scores most goals in
each match

World Cup football **multi-indicator ranking**—
the winner is determined by

40.0% whichever team
scores most goals in each
match
20.0% size of team's fan-base
12.5% player endorsement
revenues
12.5% amount of media
coverage for team
15.0% how much was spent
on Times Higher
consultancy fees

Authenticity:

A business that uses ranking to promote its services cannot be trusted to provide reliable data

QS sells **QS star ratings** to universities, after a nominal review, regardless of ultimate merit of the institution. Universities then promote the stars (and QS) on their website

The 27 May 2021 CGHE webinar by Igor Chirikov shows that QS favours universities with whom it has a business relationship –

<https://www.researchcghe.org/events/cghe-seminar/does-conflict-of-interest-distort-global-university-rankings/>

Times Higher Education is more subtle than QS but in the same game



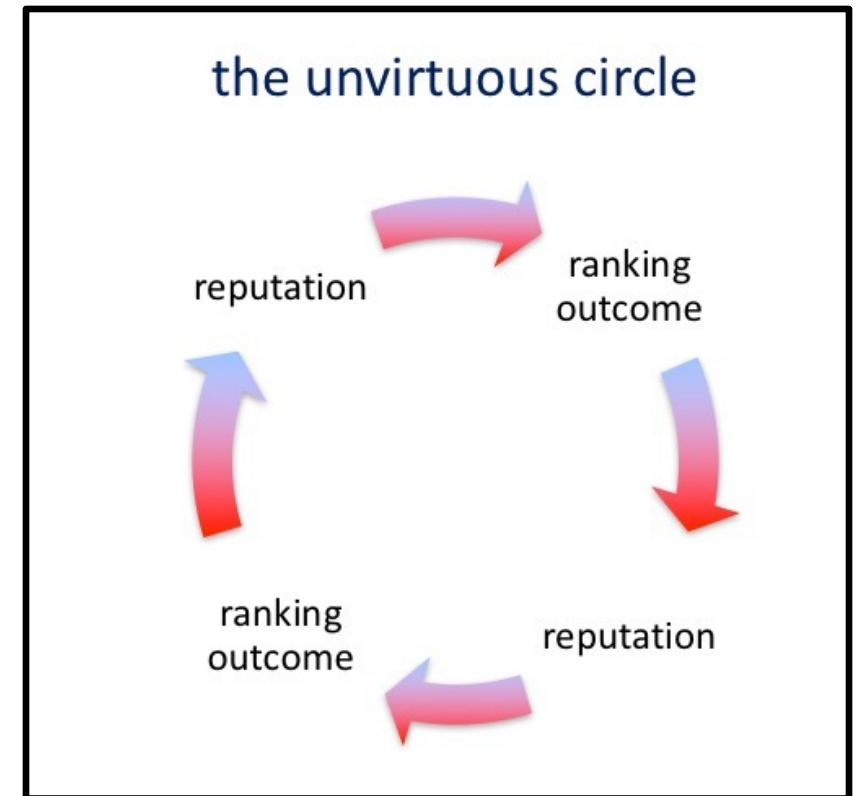
RANKINGS AND PERFORMANCE

Comparisons between institutions can contribute in a consistent manner to performance improvement only if:

- ratings based on absolute performance are used, not rankings based on relative performance - which create as many losers as winners, and in some circumstances reward winners whose absolute performance has declined
- criteria used in comparison are aligned with desired outputs and realistic in character
- processes of comparison and measurement are fully transparent

Meritocracy that isn't

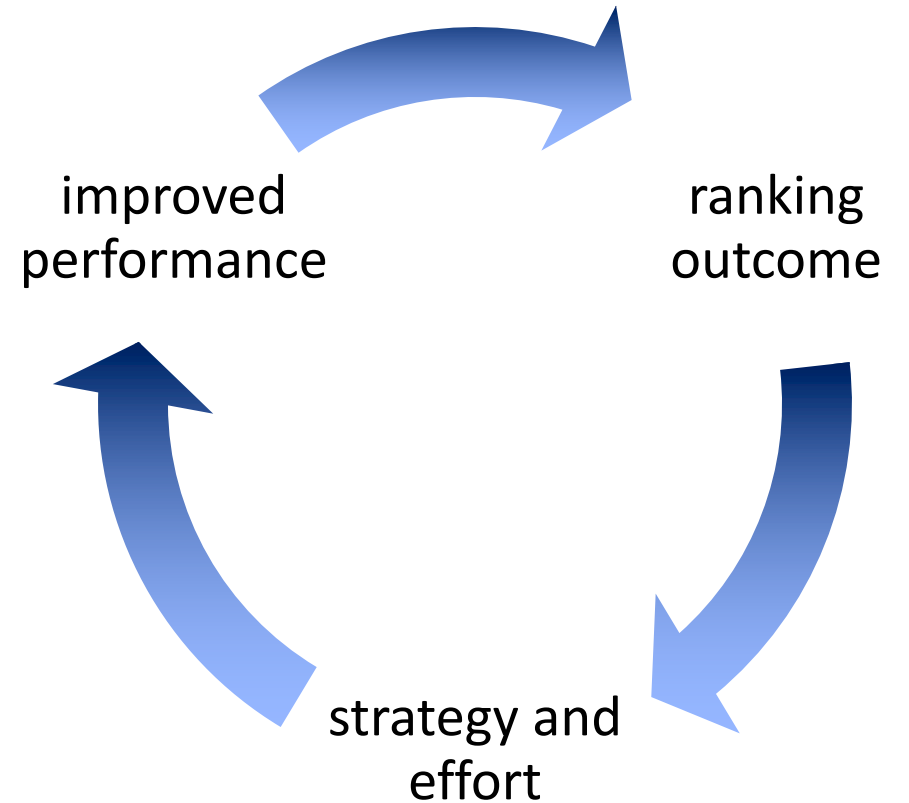
- **When reputational *surveys* are used, as in QS and Times Higher, ranking directly fosters reputation which directly fosters ranking** (the 'halo effect'). The university hierarchy is recycled and reproduced without necessarily being affected by real performance.
- This is good in the short term for the reputations of leading universities that benefit but not good for building their real capability (in fact it fosters complacency) and not good for the public interest
- This is the worst kind of ranking



The virtuous circle

A large and lasting rise in rankings that are genuinely performance-driven (e.g. Leiden) is secured only by major investments in research.

Sharper strategy and focused effort can get part of the way



RANKINGS AS CAPTURE

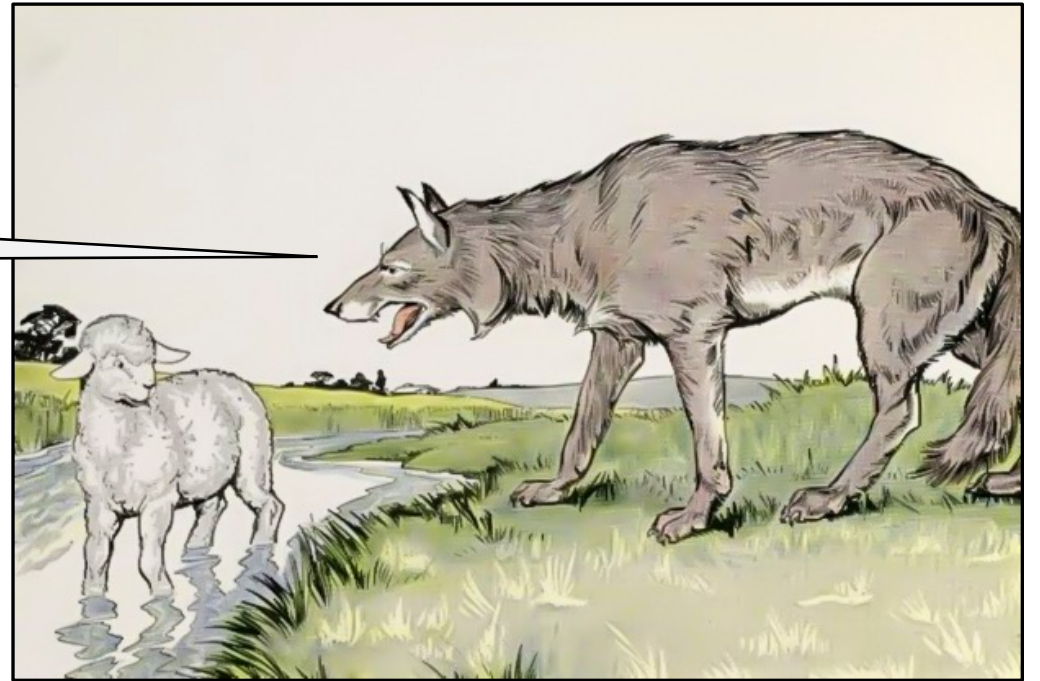
- Espeland and Lauder (2007) on US law schools – rankings closely shape behaviour, rankings get inside people’s heads and are not easily dislodged.
- The best known and most influential rankings in the public domains are the weakest (QS and THE). these have the least necessary relation to reality. These same rankings are used by immigration authorities to filter high-skill migrants.
- Most university leaders know the commercial rankings are rubbish. But they continue to comply with this arbitration of academic ‘quality’. Universities still fawn on these rankers, especially in the Anglophone world that benefits most.
- When the university does well it cannot resist claiming the marketing benefits and when it does badly, it cannot criticise the ranking because of the ‘sour grapes’ syndrome. Both ways the sector is locked in, captured. So much for autonomy.
- **BOTTOM LINE:** Are we truth tellers (in public? with students?) or not?

RANKINGS AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

It looks very bad from outside UK. Can we continue controlling the world in this way?

I'm sure we all benefit from healthy competition!

But I haven't got all my performance indicators in place yet!



FROM AESOP'S FABLES: THE WOLF AND THE LAMB

THE POLITICS MIGHT BE CHANGING

‘It’s a shame they really aren’t very good” – ANU Vice-Chancellor Brian Schmidt, Nobel Laureate in Physics on global rankings in 2020

Boycotts of the worst ranking systems are gathering momentum:

- 2022 Harvard, Yale, Berkeley Law Schools exit from US News
- 2022 Harvard, Stanford, Columbia and U Penn Medical Schools followed
- 2022 Renmin, Lanzhou and Nanjing in China exit from QS and THE
- 2023 Utrecht in Netherlands exit from rankings requiring university data
- 2023 report commissioned by Universities of the Netherlands states: “league tables use performance indicators that are often at odds with universities’ strategic priorities”. The Board of UNL endorses the report’s call for a ‘cultural change’ in Netherlands in relation to ranking

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- Universities have always and will always protect and build reputation, this is fundamental to the sector – but reputation should not set the whole framework of higher education and it needs to be balanced with other institutional and public goals.
- Rankings are very potent, locking universities into solely self-centred behaviour and dog eat dog competition with each other. They foster a climate of shameless marketing and public untruth.
- Russell Group universities will remain very strong in world terms and do not need to try to bury the global South to stay on top.
- UK institutions retain much authority and *can lead the world out of the present rankings era* into better methods. We need new systems of comparison that establish consistent, stable and virtuous relations between performance and ratings.
- We should do all we can to de-legitimize QS and THE.



Rene Magritte, *The difficult crossing*, 1965