

Using Rankings Strategically

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ERASMUS+ WEBINAR: IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS ON
THE PERFORMANCE OF LEBANESE HEIS AND NEW U-MULTIRANK
APPROACH

15 JUNE 2021



Themes



Are Rankings the Appropriate Instrument for Achieving Excellence? Some Case Studies



What Kind of University Do You Want To Be?



Using Rankings Strategically

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Griffith University, Australia

Australia highly influenced by rankings – geopolitical position & demographic/economic issues;

- Governments have highlighted rankings as int'l benchmark and strategic target;
- But – pandemic has heightened worry of over-dependence on int'l student revenue.

Strategic target: to be “one of the most influential universities in Australia and Asia-Pacific Region” - global issues subsumed within national objectives

Rankings formed part of strategic planning but not to set targets or formal reporting;

- Use rankings for benchmarking.

Improvement is burden – increasing expectations and slippage is problem.



(Sheils in Altbach et al., 2016, 12-37)



University X, China

Chinese government set ambition to establish world-class universities: 211, 985 Projects
Rankings identified huge gap between current status and ambition.

- Initially, gap was infrastructure; Today, gap is academic qualifications and ability

Attention focused on targeted actions has improved rankings:

- Recruit more overseas PhD graduates, and in-service/professional development of Chinese academics without PhD;
- Reforms incl. tenure system; classification of academic positions;
- Increased competitiveness within/between academic staff.

Internal tensions emerge:

- Teachers without PhD at grave disadvantage; Preferential treatment/positions given to returnees.

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

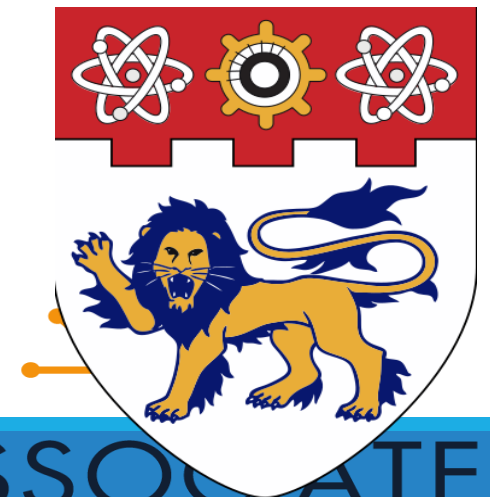
Establish 1981, research-intensive university on rapid global rise, due various factors:

- Political support and investment in higher education and R&D;
- Introduction of tenure track, alongside flexible labour laws;
- Recruitment of international “stars”;
- Collaboration with international corporates and universities.

Actions aligned with attributes promoted by rankings:

- Staff-student ratio, 16:1
- 32% international students
- Research publications and citation impact
- Student selectivity index.

Ranked 1st amongst *THE* under 50 years.



Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Spain



Established 1991 – decision of Catalan Parliament to divide U Barcelona;

- Create “knowledge pole” to contribute “decisively to the involvement of Catalonia and Spain in the cultural, social and economical development of the world”;

Align teaching, research & innovation along 5 strategic areas: chemistry/chemical engineering; classical/prehistoric archaeology; oenology; tourism/leisure; nutrition/health;

Position in “knowledge areas” broadly corresponds: Arts/Humanities, 251-300 (THE, 2021); Chemical Engineering, 201-300 (ARWU, 2020); Food Science & Technology, 51-75 (ARWU, 2020); Chemistry, 76-100 (ARWU, 2020); Archaeology, 151-200 (QS, 2021).

Leverage local expertise for global recognition.

- Research performance in key fields → good position in rankings (rather than vice versa)



University of Kentucky, USA

State legislature set goal to reach Top-20 by 2020 according to *USNWR*.

University identified need to: recruit additional 6200 undergraduates, 750 graduate & professional students, 374 post-doc researchers, 625 faculty, award 3065 BA & 189 PhD, and raise research expenditure by \$470m [EUR 345.5m]

University had to alter student entry criteria and become more selective to meet completion/employment level, including graduate salaries:

- As a land-grant university this meant changing its mission and becoming more prestigious and exclusive.

Post-2008, state & university faced difficult economic/budgetary problems;

By 2009-2010, university fell behind targets and major funding gap \$420m [EUR 309.8m].

The strategy was abandoned.



It is easy to rise in the rankings, if...

- Fire all academic staff/researchers who fall below a certain threshold;
- Hire new academic staff/researchers – especially international staff (e.g. ignore domestic talent);
- Focus on STEM subjects, and reduce/close down humanities and social sciences;
- Teach only elite students who graduate on time and go-on to have high-paying/influential jobs;
- Teach mostly post-graduate students;
- Recruit international students and ignore domestic students;
- Publish only in “top” journals listed in Scopus/Web of Science;
- Publish only in English;
- Have endless resources.**



What Kind of University Do You Want To Be?



What Kind of University Are You?

What is your institution trying to achieve?

- What are your institution's profile, mission and goals?
- Do your ambitions/targets match those of rankings?

How is your institution trying to do it?

- What are your institution's goals? How is progress measured?
- Are rankings the most appropriate measurement?

How does your institution know its strategy is working?

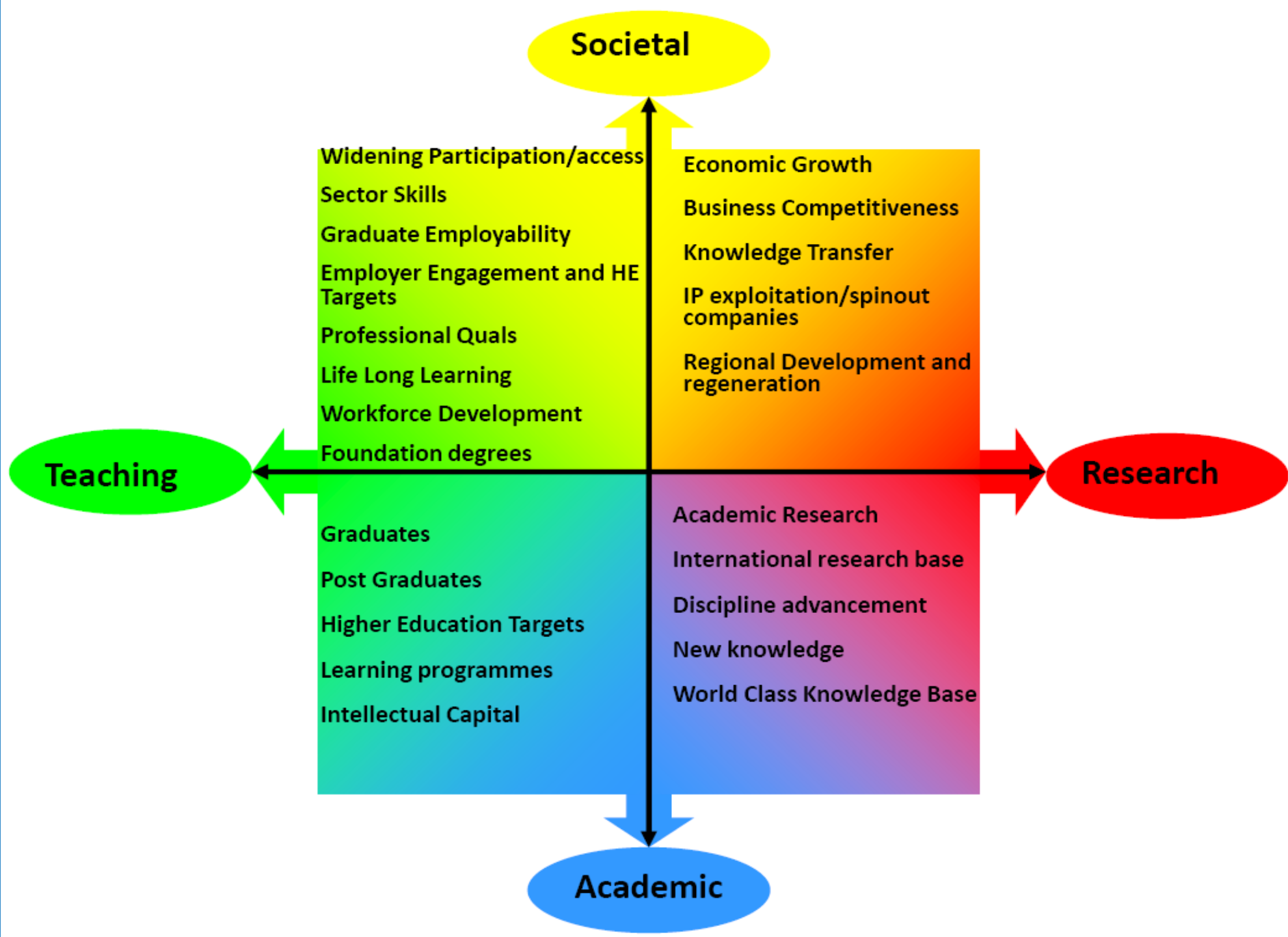
- How can you improve the quality of T&L, Research, Engagement & Societal Impact?
- How does your institution monitor and assess its performance?

How does the institution change in order to improve?

- Would other instruments be more useful to improve performance?



What kind of university do you want to be?



Lessons 1

1. Focus on your mission and your strengths based on a *realistic SWOT analysis*.
What are the key differentiators?
2. Concentrate on niche areas capable of achieving comparable excellence:
 - Collaborate with other universities to *build collective excellence and impact*:
e.g., graduate schools, research centres, share facilities;
3. Strengthen *data-analytic practices and capacity*:
 - Rankings have highlighted importance of internationally comparative data;
 - Embrace evidence-based, decision-making rather than relying on self-belief;
 - Establish “institutional research” unit to inform *all* decision-making.



Lessons 2

4. Strengthen internal quality assurance (IQA):

- Quality is a key differentiator in a global world;
- Most quality differences are *within* institutions rather than *between* (Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) .

5. Strengthen institutional governance and the quality of leadership and management at all levels in the organisation.

- Strategic capacity and capability is vital;
- Professionalisation and modernisation of system and institutional governance;
- Maintain a sense of urgency which can be sustained over a period of time.

6. Engage in peer/bench-learning with appropriate peers as a strategic tool



If Objective To Improve Learning Outcomes Strategy

If the objective is to improve educational outcomes for individuals and society, there are various actions to consider taking:

- Specialize and strategically focus on a small set of fields;
- Focus on improving the quality of the student learning experience;
- Develop a particular approach to T&L: problem & project-based learning, work-based learning, LLL, student-centered, civic engagement, etc.,
- Pool resources to strengthen the expertise and quality of education programmes and support services,
- Link teaching and research with engagement;



If Objective To Build Research/Science Capacity

If an objective is to boost or improve scientific-scholarly output and impact, there are various actions to consider taking:

- Develop a science/research strategy;
- Identify institutional priorities;
- Build Collaborative Research Clusters and Critical Mass via collaboration,
- Create Collaborative Graduate Schools
- Leverage Global Potential from Regional Specialization



Use Rankings Strategically



Have you costed your ambition?

1. Being comprehensively excellent is not possible, so choices matter:
 - Resources matter – but consistency over time matters more;
 - Strategic trade offs: rankings vs. mission? Balancing local, national and global ambitions; research which amplifies citations vs SDGs.
2. Consider organisational and human challenges of your ambitions:
 - Different policy context and social values;
 - Trade offs, e.g., differentiated treatment of faculty and impact of research KPIs.
3. Targeting particular indicators will only move the dial a small, statistically insignificant amount – BUT the cost can be very significant.
4. There will never been enough resources – so its a question of using the resources you have more strategically and effectively.



From Rankings to Data-driven Questions

Rankings and indicators must be contextualised and interpreted with respect to the challenges and strategic questions your university is facing (which can be very different from other universities).

In a mission-driven approach, an institution starts with questions and proceeds to search for data, which can help answer these questions.

Individual indicators should be like any other source of data. But, choose indicators carefully.

Strategy requires complex self-assessment and benchmarking/peer-learning, and building your own conceptual models.

Each university's approach should be unique, tailor-made to your questions to ensure the university fulfils its mission as successfully as possible.

Rankings should be tools to help institutions think, not league tables.



Dos and Don'ts

Do:

Change your institution's mission to conform with rankings;

Use rankings to inform policy or resource allocation decisions;

Direct resources to a few and neglect the needs of the university;

Manipulate public information and data in order to rise in the rankings.

Don't:

Ensure your university has a coherent strategy/mission;

Use rankings only as part of an overall quality assurance, assessment or benchmarking system and never as a stand-alone evaluation tool;

Be accountable and provide good quality public information about learning outcomes, impact and benefit to students and society;

Engage in an information campaign to broaden media and public understanding of the limitations of rankings.



Additional Slide

