

Academic Capitalism: Standing on the Shoulder of a Giant - and Playing the Giant's Racing Game?

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On the day this manuscript was prepared (April 2, 2024), one viral news on social media platforms was that the University of Zurich considered withdrawing itself from the University Ranking published by the Times Higher Education magazine. Before this, in October 2023, Utrecht University in the Netherlands had withdrawn from the ranking with concerns about the rankings' emphasis on scoring and competition. According to the mentioned universities, the ranking system mostly focuses on measurable output, which gives an incentive to increase the quantity of publications rather than high-quality academic work. Most universities in Thailand are currently in this horse racing game. A large amount of money was paid to the giant publishing companies each year in order to buy a place in high-ranking journals. For the researchers, more money and positional promotion will be given when they can publish in a high-Q journal. The university administrators' simple vision is to bring their university to a higher rank. But what and from whom shall we be rewarded when we do well? More students? More research money?

The ranking game is not a quality assurance program. In an assurance program like the Asian University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA), an academic institute needs to declare its compliance with the written quality matrix. University rankings commonly assess and compare institutions based on a range of indicators that aim to measure their academic quality, research output, reputation, and other aspects of performance. The specific criteria and their weightings vary among different ranking systems, but they generally include a mix of quantitative data and qualitative assessments. In the domain of reputation, surveys are conducted among academics and employers to gauge the perceived prestige of institutions in terms of teaching and research quality and to assess the employability of graduates and the value placed on degrees from specific institutions. To measure research capability, the volume, income, and reputation of research produced by the institution are often measured by publications in prestigious journals, research grants, and awards. The level of industry collaboration and innovation is measured by the university's ability to secure income from industry through partnerships, patents, and spin-off companies. Those sound good for the aim of benchmarking and quality assessment, being a decision-making tool for students and academics. Ideally, high rankings can enhance an

institution's reputation, attracting top students, faculty, and research funding. This visibility can be particularly beneficial for universities looking to establish themselves on the global stage. However, for a university in a low–middle income country that teaches mostly in their local language, does research with limited resources (and is pushed to pay a super–high page charge), what is the point of being a player in the rich man game?

There are many limitations of the current university ranking system. Firstly, the methodological limitations. The methodologies used in university rankings often emphasize research outputs and reputation surveys, potentially overlooking other important aspects of education quality such as teaching effectiveness, student satisfaction, and community engagement. By prioritizing research publications and citations, rankings may incentivize universities to focus disproportionately on research at the expense of teaching and learning quality. Rankings can reinforce the advantages of well–resourced, research–intensive universities in economically developed countries, making it challenging for institutions in lower–income regions to compete. However, pursuing higher rankings can lead universities to align their strategies and resources with ranking criteria, potentially diverting attention from their core educational and basic research missions and priorities. One of the sour facts is that giant organizations that provide ranking services also hold publishing business. Some even provide a 'rank boosting service' through their media. This meant that the more players in their arenas, the more income they received from the 'high Q' journal. Apart from comforting their university, what are the values the authors pay for when publishing their work in such a Rolls–Royce media? Higher visibility? Better reviewers? Shorter turnaround time or better support?

Different universities have different missions and core values. While university rankings offer valuable insights into the performance of higher education institutions, their use and influence should be balanced with an understanding of their limitations and each university's mission. Rankings are but one of many tools available to assess university quality, and stakeholders should consider a range of indicators and qualitative information when making decisions related to higher education. It is also imperative for ranking organizations to continually refine their methodologies and reduce their conflict of interest to more accurately reflect the diverse missions and strengths of universities around the globe.

REFERENCE

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