CESAER

Reimagining university rankings

Exploring strategic priorities and alternatives

Workshop report dated 25 November 2024

This report is based on a workshop which took place on 18 June 2024, kindly hosted by KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden.

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Introduction

We observe a growing debate about the validity and methodology of commercial rankings. Universities are exploring alternatives that prioritise quality over quantity and recognise practices such as open science. User-driven alternatives to traditional rankings are gaining attention, and their integration with existing rankings is a key focus. This evolution is happening alongside efforts to reform research assessment, highlighted by the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment signed by our association in November 2022.

Despite the criticisms of traditional rankings, said rankings continue to have a significant influence on student decisions, where academics choose to work, and how sponsors and governments allocate funding and investments (Gadd,2022, 2020). At the same time, some institutions have found ways to leverage rankings effectively for outreach and engagement.

In this context, our Task Force Benchmark and our Board of Directors held a joint workshop 'Reimagining university rankings: exploring strategic priorities and alternatives' on 18 June, hosted by KTH Royal Institute of Technology, in Stockholm. This workshop provided a platform for in-depth discussions on the role of commercial rankings.

Session 1: Developments in the landscape of commercial university rankings

In the first part of the workshop, participants discussed developments in the landscape of university rankings, including decisions by major universities to opt out of rankings. Peter Elspass, Chair of the Task Force Benchmark and moderator of the workshop, outlined the purpose, added value, and shortcomings of commercial rankings, offering insights into the practical implications of rankings in his daily work as Head of the President's Staff Department for University Development & Controlling at Leibniz University Hannover. He emphasised their ambiguous role in trying to simplify complex institutional evaluations while ensuring comparability across diverse university sectors through standardised metrics and methodologies. Beyond internal assessments, in the daily work of universities rankings serve as critical benchmarks for stakeholders evaluating university quality and reputation. They also function as strategic marketing tools to attract students, faculty, researchers, and funding, despite the criticism they face.

Our association then invited contributions from Paul Boselie (Chief of Open Science at Utrecht University) and Manuela Höfler (Co-Director Open Science Office, University of Zurich) and Rüdiger Mutz (Senior Researcher at CHESS, University of Zurich) on their strategic decision to not submit data to Times Higher Education World University rankings (THE).

Paul highlighted that Utrecht University had made a strategic decision to opt out of the Times Higher Education rankings as part of its open science programme, outlined in the university's strategic plan. Paul expressed scepticism about the validity of commercial rankings, due notably to their commercial biases, noting that institutions often hire ranking agencies to improve their position. Discussing the benefits and drawbacks of opting out, Paul pointed out

that, while the decision garnered media attention and was viewed as bold, it was not primarily driven by this consideration. He emphasised the enthusiasm from universities in the Global South, which are often disadvantaged by common biases in ranking systems. Paul stressed that Global North institutions opting out could lead to greater inclusion and equality in the global academic landscape.

Paul also highlighted challenges and noted the importance of updating all universities' departments of the decision to prevent internal confusion. In the Netherlands, Paul mentioned that rankings are used by immigration offices for visa applications, impacting students and staff. Additionally, Paul pointed out that some colleagues value rankings for personal recognition and communication purposes.

Manuela underlined that UZH's decision to opt out of THE rankings aligns with much of what Paul has already presented. At the University of Zurich, this decision reflects a strong commitment to creating good conditions for research, teaching and learning and open science practices, where opting out of rankings is integrated into their broader open science strategy of being open by default. The university has developed a comprehensive open science policy involving staff and students through a survey and signed the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, which explicitly states that using rankings to assess research should be avoided. Opting out of THE ranking is part of the University of Zurich strategy to adopt more holistic measures in research assessment reform. Manuela highlighted the positive feedback received from the press and national authorities regarding this approach. She also referenced the LERU position paper on next-generation metrics in April 2024, emphasising the importance of making a deliberate and informed decision in this evolving landscape. Importantly, she clarified that the stance is not against rankings in general but rather a strategic decision to make scientific quality the decisive factor in all research policy decisions. Open science practices make an important contribution to said scientific quality, and rankings should not be allowed to have a negative influence in this regard. It is key to keep long-term sovereignty over strategic decisions. Internally, some individuals were using rankings, such as for identifying international partners and it is important to support them to make decisions on a better information basis than rankings.

Paul added that these developments are part of a broader global movement, forming a coalition of willing institutions. He mentioned the anticipation of a tipping point where universities collectively transition away from the current ranking system. Paul noted that benchmarking was originally intended to inspire and facilitate mutual learning among organisations and questioned why learning, a core aspect of university missions, should be tied to a ranking system. He, however, observed that benchmarking has evolved into a tool for organisations within the same sector or population to compare performance indicators. This shift has led to a more oversimplistic, one-dimensional approach, with little or no focus on fostering learning and development—key elements that should remain central to a university's mission.

In evaluating the impact within the realm of open science and transitional movements over the years, Paul discussed whether these initiatives have influenced funding and grants. He highlighted that the number of grants has increased, clarifying that an open science

approach does not oppose achieving success in grant acquisition. He stressed the benefits of interdisciplinary approaches aligned with significant societal challenges and the evolution of evaluation methods.

Paul acknowledged that the shift towards open science is not a sudden change but rather a continuation of efforts initiated years ago, suggesting it was not a major surprise within the internal community. He noted indicators regarding interest in joining or leaving the university based on these decisions, observing that while some individuals have left, many more are interested in joining. He underscored the university's strategic decision-making and its success in enhancing its attractiveness in the labour market.

- [Presentation](#) by Paul Boselie (UU)
- [Presentation](#) by Manuela Höfler and Rüdiger Mutz (UZH)

From these initial inputs and experiences, participants were asked to visually map their position on a scale ranging from "This is the beginning of the end of commercial rankings" to "Status quo: nothing much will change" to highlight how they perceived the landscape. Participants were divided into groups of like-minded individuals and tasked with collectively discussing the reasoning behind their similar choices and impressions. The aim was to develop a common rationale for their group. Following the discussion, each group had 2 minutes for restitution on their discussion and conclusions, presented by a volunteer rapporteur. We highlight below the key points from each group.

Group 1: Status quo group

- Rankings are widely used and often seen as a 'necessary evil' in the academic world.
- Although rankings are constantly evolving, there is a need for them to move towards open science and greater transparency.
- Financial considerations play a significant role, as universities rely on rankings to attract students and shape their public and global image through communication strategies.
- The way universities are measured by rankings heavily influences their behavior. Quantitative metrics carry significant weight in political decisions, influencing national funding decisions in many countries.
- International students, particularly from Asia, frequently use rankings to decide where to apply, and this cultural mindset on rankings is difficult to change.
- While rankings foster competition among universities, they also enable comparison between universities.

Group 2: Tending towards status quo

- Ranking results are appealing to international students, which influences university budgets, and are also valuable to companies, contributing to local or national wealth.

- While rankings provide useful data, there is no obsession with them. After initial efforts to gather data, the process becomes manageable, allowing universities to focus on specific areas and make meaningful comparisons with others.
- Current ranking organisations, such as THE and QS, face conflicts of interest as they rank universities while also profiting from offering guidance on how to improve rankings. This dual role, along with the lack of transparency in data scoring, needs reform.
- Adopting open science practices within institutions could coexist with participation in rankings: there is no clear reason why open science and ranking participation should be mutually exclusive as it is sometimes implied.

Group 3: Tending towards revolution

- University strategy should remain independent of rankings.
- The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) may have a greater influence on the evolution of rankings than the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA).
- Despite ongoing discussions, there has been little change in the nature of rankings over the past 20 years.
- Rankings are often criticised, yet they still play a significant role in attracting students to European universities, particularly from important countries outside of Europe like India and China.
- Some countries use rankings as a factor in budget allocation, immigration policies, and visa decisions.
- Open science is not a definitive reason to opt out of rankings, institutions can embrace it while still participating in rankings.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) could be a transformative force in the future of university rankings.

Group 4: Revolution group

- Rankings are inadequate for capturing the full complexity of universities, as most indicators are incomplete and fail to encompass all aspects of an institution.
- Ranking organisations hold excessive power over universities, with commercial interests often conflicting with academic values.
- The ranking system operates as a 'black box' with opaque methodologies: there is a need for reform in indicators and their weighting.
- The current ranking system is seen as corrupt, fostering unnecessary competitiveness and underrepresenting institutions from Eastern Europe, while favoring some Global North, and particularly American, universities.

- There are ethical concerns about rankings, including manipulation of data and the influence of consultancy companies, which contradict the principles of open science and initiatives like CoARA and DORA.
- A shift is needed from focusing on quantitative metrics to evaluating the societal impact of universities, aligning with emerging approaches like those from the European Commission.

Session 2: the rise of alternatives and future outlook for the association

Ludo Waltman (Scientific Director of the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS), Leiden University) opened the second part of our workshop by presenting the new Open Ranking of the CWTS Leiden Ranking. Ludo underlined the importance of providing universities with statistics and benchmarking aligned with open science principles.

He introduced the Leiden Ranking Open Edition, launched in January 2024. Unlike traditional rankings that rely on closed data often from commercial sources such as the Web of Science, the Leiden Ranking Open Edition uses open data sourced from OpenAlex. Ludo referred to the key initiatives in the sector, such as the report from the University of the Netherlands "Ranking the University" and CoARA (discussed here). Ludo also highlighted the Barcelona Declaration on Open Research Information, a collaborative effort involving over 25 research information experts from organisations involved in research funding, evaluation, and open infrastructure, which was published in April 2024.

Ludo encouraged participants to move away from a ranking system dominated by a few entities and instead encouraged universities to focus on rankings that align with their specific purposes and goals. He expressed hope that increased transparency would lead to improvements in ranking methodologies and outcomes.

Following up on a short report on the 'More than our rank' initiative, Aldo Torrebruno (Senior Officer, Planning and Control unit, *Politecnico di Milano*), mentioned that his university is currently evaluating its participation in the initiative. He emphasised the importance of providing universities with benchmarking opportunities without the pressure imposed by traditional rankings.

- Presentation by Ludo Waltman (CWTS Leiden Rankings)

Participants were then divided into several groups to address a specific question.

Group 1 - How to answer the national demand for evaluations of university performance?

In the context of advancing globalisation and the race for talents, rankings answer a demand from national governments for easily interpretable information on the standing of higher education institutions. They identify, differentiate, and are easily marketable numbers. Rankings also provide some rationale for allocation of funds in performance-based models.

They also contribute to defining the "quality" of higher education institutions within a particular country, complementing the rigorous work conducted by public and independent accrediting agencies in the context of quality assessment and review. Rankings place higher education performance on the policy agenda, and underscore the necessity for continuous investment in higher education.

Key points from the group discussion:

- National demands for university performance evaluations vary by country. In some cases, they are formal and directly linked to funding, while in others, they are informal but can nevertheless be influential.
- Universities continuously evaluate their own performance, primarily relying on peer review by experts from within or outside the institution to ensure quality, improvement and accountability.
- CESAER should consider providing recommendations on enhancing the appreciation and understanding of university performance evaluations. This could include offering more detailed information on performance metrics. Additionally, CESAER could explore how the higher education sector understands these rankings.

Group 2 - How to improve the approach of traditional ranking agencies to cater to the changing role of universities in society?

Overall, evidenced impacts of rankings have been found on student recruitment and admission, higher education marketing, the reputation and legitimacy of higher education institutions, governance and operation of higher education institutions, and academic publication practices. However, higher education is constantly evolving. Its development is influenced by policy priorities at the national and European levels, as well as by other overarching factors such as demography, immigration, global and national economy, the changing needs and dynamics of the labour market, digitalisation, as well as internationalisation and globalisation. All these factors influence institutional and national policies and strategies in higher education, and, naturally, have an impact on quality assurance systems and the work of external quality assurance agencies. Global rankings effectively emphasise the importance of measurable research outputs indexed in selected database. Other meaningful indicators, particularly those that reflect the teaching and learning quality and the third mission ("service to the community and society") are harder to assess and often use proxies. Higher education is closely connected to the different ecosystems of society and is increasingly perceived as a global common good. In this sense, there is also growing attention to the training provided by universities in the context of lifelong learning. Other trends in higher education, such as massive open online courses, e-learning, the increasing focus on learning outcomes, and cross-border education, add to the complexity of quality assurance - and how it translates into a simplified number in league tables.

Key points from the group discussion:

- Traditional ranking agencies should enhance the transparency of their methodologies, making it easier for universities and stakeholders to understand how rankings are calculated and what factors are prioritised.
- Agencies should offer more open access to the datasets used in their rankings. This would allow universities and the public to better assess the underlying data and how it reflects institutional performance.
- The commercial nature of rankings is problematic, as the same organisations that create rankings often offer consultancy services to help institutions improve their positions, raising concerns about transparency and conflicts of interest.

Group 3 - How can league tables be more rigorous, reliable, and valid?

In their assessment, ranking agencies use companies such as Elsevier to get data, which shapes the quantity, quality, validity, and geographical, linguistic and disciplinary coverage of the data used. Publications written in English will perform better, alongside natural sciences. For reputation surveys, sampling frames and representativeness of the responses are crucial for the quality and validity of the data collected for the rankings, especially when the response rates of the surveys are known to be low and varied on an annual, geographic or discipline basis. None of the global rankings announce the response rates and representativeness of the survey responses despite the claim that many people were surveyed.

Key points from the group discussion:

- Ranking agencies must be more transparent about their data sources and methodologies. Clear and accessible explanations will help stakeholders better understand how rankings are calculated and what influences the outcomes.
- League tables should incorporate additional bibliometric data to provide a more objective and comprehensive measure of academic and research performance.
- Ranking results should be reproducible to ensure they can be validated and trusted.
- Differences in ranking results can stem from how data normalisation is applied. Greater transparency in the normalisation process is needed to clarify why certain universities rank differently under similar metrics.
- Rankings like THE and QS heavily rely on reputation indicators that lack transparency. The weighting of these indicators should be reviewed, and the process behind reputation scoring made more transparent.
- While QS rankings are widely used, there are concerns about their methodological approach and transparency. Compared to THE, QS provides less clarity and does not offer institutions the option to opt out of the ranking.

Group 4 - What are the emerging needs of data-driven analysis of universities' impacts?

When considering the renewed role of universities and their impact within their ecosystems, a new model for evaluating performance emerges. This model acknowledges the evolving

landscape where universities are seen as dynamic contributors to regional development and innovation. This paradigm emphasises universities' dynamic roles in regional development, innovation, and socio-economic growth, beyond academic and technological achievements or research outputs. New methodologies explore universities' roles within local knowledge ecosystems, focusing on geographical proximity to industrial partners. Studies have emphasised the multiple benefits of university activities, particularly knowledge spillovers, for economic development near the universities.

Key points from the group discussion:

- The need for data-driven analysis of universities' impact raises two fundamental questions: *what specific measures should be quantified?* and *how to quantify these measures?* These questions highlight the necessity of developing consistent, reliable metrics that capture the multifaceted roles universities have.
- Universities have diverse priorities and focus areas, making it essential to accommodate varying perspectives when assessing the impact of universities. Data analysis must be adaptable to reflect these differences, ensuring that universities are evaluated on metrics aligned with their specific goals and missions, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
    - For example, universities operate on both local and global levels, but the balance between these impacts can vary significantly depending on the institution's mission, size, and focus. For some universities, local economic and social impact may be more critical, while others may focus on their global impact. Data-driven analyses need to account for these variations, offering flexible frameworks that cater to both scales of impact.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) offers powerful tools for collecting and analysing large datasets. Using AI to screen and gather data through keywords or text mining could improve the efficiency and scope of university impact analysis.
- One crucial metric for universities' societal impact is the employability rate of their graduates. Data on short-term and long-term employment outcomes are trackable through online platforms like LinkedIn, and can provide valuable insights into how well universities prepare students for the workforce. It would be useful to explore how CESAER Members currently track these outcomes and share best practices for data collection and analysis on this specific topic.
- Another critical dimension of university impact is their economic contribution, both locally and nationally. Universities can drive economic growth through job creation, innovation, and partnerships with industries. Reliable data-driven methods are needed to quantify this economic impact accurately, ensuring that the full scope of a university's contribution to society is understood and valued.

Group 5 - What metrics should be prioritised in evaluating universities beyond traditional rankings?

Emerging demands identified in our previous white paper on next generation metrics are: 1) acknowledging knowledge as common good, 2) promoting a culture of quality, risk-taking and

trust and 3) measuring the contribution to sustainability. For now, there is no single internationally agreed definition of what constitutes quality, especially in learning and teaching quality. The choice of ranking indicators depends on existing data, particularly international academic publication data that are readily available through a few global data brokers, or other national data drawn from national surveys.

Key points from the group discussion:

- Rankings are invaluable for universities outside the top percentile that aim to improve their performance. While established institutions may already have a strong reputation, rankings are crucial for smaller or lesser-known universities seeking to enhance their position, secure funding, or form partnerships.
- A major challenge in university evaluation is the lack of a consistent international definition of metrics and indicators. Varying criteria applied by ranking agencies makes global comparisons challenging. As highlighted in the white paper 'Next generation metrics' (2020), there is a demand for internationally recognised definitions.
- A clearer distinction is needed between traditional metrics (e.g., student numbers, citations) and quality-focused measures (e.g., teaching excellence, community engagement). To improve evaluations, there should be a shift toward prioritising quality over quantity.
- Peer reviews and narrative-based evaluations offer valuable insights into a university's quality. However, these methods require sophisticated analysis and currently lack transparency in traditional rankings, making them vulnerable to manipulation.
    - The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) is an example of a peer-reviewed system consistent with CoARA's principles and follows government protocols. However, its high implementation costs raise concerns about its feasibility for broader use across different countries.
- While AI can assist in data analysis, it is not free from bias. Universities and ranking agencies should be cautious when using AI-driven tools, ensuring they do not reinforce existing inequalities or introduce new biases in university evaluation.

Conclusions and trends

The workshop on reimagining university rankings provided multifaceted perspectives on the evolving landscape of university evaluations. While there was a general agreement on the limitations of traditional rankings and a strong call for more transparent and open metrics, some participants acknowledged that rankings will likely continue to hold significant influence.

An increasing trend among universities is emerging, with institutions like Utrecht University and the University of Zurich opting out of conventional ranking systems in favour of approaches that align more closely with their internal values and strategic goals. These institutions are adopting practices that integrate open science strategies and broader reform efforts, addressing concerns about the validity and commercial biases of traditional rankings.

Conversely, some participants emphasised that rankings remain crucial for shaping perceptions, benchmarking performance, and securing funding, making it challenging for many universities to fully disengage from traditional systems. There is also a belief that open science practices and participation in rankings can coexist.

Despite the persistent use and even reliance on rankings, concerns about their transparency, appropriateness of metrics, and potential biases continue to grow. This has led to a call for more consistent, reliable, and nuanced evaluation frameworks that better reflect the diverse roles and societal contributions of universities. Rankings can significantly influence national funding decisions, institutional priorities, and student choices, underscoring the need for rankings to be fit for their purpose - or for rethinking their use altogether.

Recommendations for

Ranking agencies

- ➢ Incorporate greater transparency into the ranking methodologies. Provide detailed explanations of all ranking criteria, including data sources, weightings, and calculation methods, allowing stakeholders to understand how rankings are constructed.
- ➢ Allow universities to opt out of rankings if they choose to do so.
- ➢ Work with institutions across the globe to develop methodologies that provide a more equitable assessment of universities.
- ➢ Recognising the impact of rankings - including their influence on national funding decisions, institutional priorities, and students who use rankings to select their study destinations - clearly communicate the limitations and applicability of rankings to help ensure that national decision-makers, universities, funders and students understands how your ranking should be used most effectively.

Students

- ➢ Treat rankings as one piece of information, not the only factor in your study decision. Consider your own priorities, such as campus culture, career services, student support, extracurricular opportunities, student reviews, and graduate outcomes.
- ➢ Pay attention to the specific criteria used in rankings. Traditional overall rankings often emphasise research output, which might not reflect the quality of undergraduate teaching or student experience.
- ➢ Many rankings heavily weight reputation surveys, which can favour older, well-known universities. Global rankings often tend to favour the Global North educational models over those from the Global South. If you are considering institutions in different regions, understand how the ranking methodology might overlook strengths specific to those geographic areas.

National authorities

- ➢ Promote transparent communication and education regarding the limitations and biases of rankings, both internally and externally. Emphasise that no single ranking

> can capture the full value of a university, and use this understanding to help national decision-makers, students, institutions and funders make more informed decisions.

> Be cautious about overreliance on rankings when making national funding decisions, as well as in policy and institutional support, to avoid reinforcing biases and overlooking the unique strengths of institutions that may not be reflected in the rankings. While rankings can be a useful tool within a broader strategy for improving higher education, encourage universities to focus on their unique missions rather than merely chasing higher rankings.

> Acknowledge that universities have diverse priorities and focus areas. Evaluate institutions using metrics that align with their specific goals and missions, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

> Advocate for the development and use of alternative metrics and assessment tools that capture a broader range of institutional achievements and contributions, beyond traditional ranking criteria.

Universities of science & technology

> Consider endorsing the 'More Than Our Rank' initiative, which encourages academic institutions to acknowledge both their ranking achievements and the limitations of ranking indicators. This initiative is particularly suited for institutions that recognise their ranking positions while also feeling that rankings may not fully capture their strengths or align with their institutional mission.

> Consider adopting frameworks such as CoARA, DORA, and the Leiden Manifesto. These initiatives promote responsible research metrics and transparency, providing a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of academic performance and impact. They represent a public commitment to contribute actively and constructively to reforming research assessment and quality.

> Promote a culture of transparency and openness about how institutions are assessed and evaluated. Encourage exploration and sharing of best practices and strategies for aligning with frameworks like CoARA, DORA, and the Leiden Manifesto, enhancing the credibility and relevance of the collective evaluation approach.