BOOK REVIEW

GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

REVIEWED BY

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University and journal ranking systems have emerged as a key concern within higher education (Milian & Rizk, 2018), deeply influencing not only our campuses but also trade (Cantwell, 2016), immigration policy (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2013), and the decisions of various stakeholders including students, policymakers, and investors. However, the field suffers from a lack of empirical research on the topic. In this timely collection, editor Michelle Stack organizes ten chapters under three themes – geopolitics, knowledge, and institutional/individual wellbeing – to address this gap and initiate conversations on "what a good and worthwhile education could be" (p. 4). Because this book originated out of a four-day discussion by twenty-two researchers from five continents, it reflects a wide range of geographical and critical perspectives on knowledge creation and what being a "world-class" university entails.

The book's first theme explores geopolitics and how global rankings mainly use white, upper-class universities as the standard for excellence, overlooking the differing values, missions, and traditions of other institutions around the world. In the first chapter, Lloyd and Ordorika discuss cultural hegemony and how institutions within the Global South must cater to the demands of ranking systems in order to succeed. Because these demands are determined relative to the privilege of the Global North, they drive the policies of governments and institutions while further exacerbating existing inequity issues. The second chapter, by Sá, Kachynska, Sabzalieva, and Martinez, provides insights into the rankings of institutions in Latin America, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. The authors discuss how the increasing fixation on national ranking systems has resulted in growing efforts to respond to ranking metrics instead of bettering student experiences (Westerheijden et al., 2011). In the final chapter of this theme, Riyad, Shahjahan, Estera, and Vellanki analyze the role of ranking websites in promoting the "most desirable" (p. 9) universities through elements such as tourist landmarks and campus architecture, commonly favouring Global North institutions.

The second theme of the book examines the connection between rankings and knowledge production, with a particular focus on journal impact factors (IF). Research productivity significantly influences global rankings and is commonly determined by the quantification of research articles. However, this is hardly an unbiased measure, with publishers often pushing their own business interests. Heavily weighting IF causes institutions to prioritize research agendas over educational goals, increases pressure on faculty members to publish in top-ranking journals, increases incidents of plagiarism, reinforces a devaluation of the social sciences and humanities in comparison to the natural sciences, and favours English-language publications.

Chou examines the effect of rankings on departments at the National Chengchi University, where Taiwanese academics are pressured to publish English journal articles instead of books – the latter having a traditionally richer cultural association with knowledge in Taiwan. This pressure has devastating consequences, with Taiwanese academics "increasingly seeking opportunities abroad" (p. 97). In the

next chapter, Morrison examines prevalent article metrics in conjunction with research quality and academic opposition to the ways IF are used to determine university rankings. In the final chapter within this theme, St. Clair looks into the data of highly ranked institutions, the values that determine excellence in rankings, and Global South universities' attempts to improve their rankings.

The book's last theme discusses how rankings both augment privilege within universities and cause anxieties within institutions and individuals. Stack notes that not only are there no objective standards or regulations for rankings, they also do not consider ethics, equity, and affordability. The race to the top of global rankings among institutions only further exacerbates inequities by increasing tuition fees and spending on research priorities instead of student needs. In this theme, Ishikawa examines the influence of university rankings on job prospects for Japanese graduates, as well as on government policy. She discusses the increasing value of a global education in Japanese labour markets. In the next chapter, Barron touches upon universities' changing of data collection and analysis practices in order to match data categories used by rankers, noting that that rankings serve to reinforce the legitimacy and prestige of institutions. In the following chapter, Hall focuses on the overlooked association between rankings and mental health and recommends that student and staff motivation and well-being be considered in future university rankings.

The book concludes with a chapter emphasizing the ways rankings serve as a gatekeeper of higher education (Post et al., 2013). Stack and Mazawi offer areas for future research which might provide alternatives to the assumption that rankings are permanent fixtures in higher education systems. Ultimately, they convincingly argue, "rankings are not just – if ever – about excellence and quality of higher education" and "require an in-depth reclaiming of the roles and purposes of higher education institutions in contemporary societies" (p. 239).

This book is intended for a wide audience, including faculty, academics, policymakers, academic administrators, and university students. Its key findings are relevant for anyone looking to participate in higher education; in a growing global university market, university rankings determine students' interest, research credibility, faculty hiring, philanthropic and financial support, as well as tuition fees. We thus recommend this book for its accessible discussions on how knowledge is produced, consumed, marketed, and ranked.

Throughout the book there is an emphasis on the important role rankings play in garnering prestige and funding while legitimizing the work of top universities. However, it would have been helpful if authors had delved deeper, especially using quantitative data, into how these rankings actually influence public opinions and decisions (e.g. as done by Milian & Rizk, 2018). Considering the heavy promotion of rankings when universities are recruiting students, we were left with questions about rankings within the context used by many non-academics: deciding where to study.

Overall, as we are undergraduate students ourselves, this book provided a much-needed perspective on the impacts university ranking systems have on our lives well beyond our individual studies. Rankings have been romanticized to students like us, promising accurate insights into the quality of universities. In reality, their value is not only questionable but arguably harmful. This book's insights bring the field one step closer to addressing that harm.

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