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Rankings: Does What Gets Counted Get Done?

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Much of the debate around rankings has focused on methodological problems—which indicators and weightings, the credibility of the statistical process, and why (or why not) inconsistencies arise. There are also complaints about the overreliance on research rather than teaching. Yet, there has been little commentary about the increasing use of quantitative methodologies to drive decision making at the national or institutional level—what I call policymaking by numbers. The same issues arise about performance indicators, in general.

Have rankings accelerated this trend? And, because indicators incentivize behavior, are we measuring what counts or are we doing what gets measured—a classic case of “goal displacement”?

SELECTIVITY

Student-entry levels are generally considered a good indicator for student achievement, on the assumption that a student's performance is roughly similar throughout their higher education career. For example, US Scholastic Achievement Test scores correlate strongly with graduation and retention rates, future incomes, and graduate school admissions. Other higher education systems and institutions use college-entry scores, preparatory examinations, or secondary school scores for the same reason.

This practice is reinforced by university rankings, such as *US News & World Report* and the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, which use student entry scores as a proxy for educational quality—worth 15 percent and 9.5 percent, respectively. The greater the number of smart students are admitted, the higher a university can score. High-ability and second-generation students—the latter from Asian backgrounds (or non-US citizens)—wanting a doctoral, medical, or law degree are especially sensitive to rankings. A virtuous circle is created due to the link between rankings, reputation, and selectivity.

Selectivity is becoming a perverse driver of higher education and student behavior. Universities seek to improve their rank by a range of enrollment management practices—including influencing the number of applications received, while retaining the same number of available places. In this way, the selectivity index rises. Higher education institutions may limit class or cohort size. They may also use higher tuition fees to signal selectivity; that the majority of UK universities have chosen the maximum £9,000 (US\$14,700) tuition fee is symptomatic of this mind-set. Others use financial aid to attract high-calibre students rather than students with the greatest need. Like many

US universities, the UK government has encouraged universities to offer “special deals” to high achievers.

COMPLETION RATES

Today, policy is concerned not just with the number of students who enter an institution but the number who actually complete and graduate within a determined time frame. In this way, responsibility shifts to the institution to ensure that students progress successfully through the system. *US News & World Report* and the European Union’s new *U-Multirank* measure an institution’s predictive graduation rate; the latter also measures graduate (un)employability. This aspect is often captured by surveys of employer groups, such as those conducted by *QS World University Rankings*.

However, performance is influenced by many factors, including student socioeconomic profile. Measuring graduation rates may be disadvantageous to lower socioeconomic and ethnically disadvantaged groups or mature students, whose life or family circumstances disturb normal study; while measuring graduation rates can encourage institutions to abandon educational standards.

This may undermine institutions that are working hard to provide widening participation opportunities to new student groups or to students who might use this opportunity to transfer to higher-ranked or other universities. There is already evidence that institutions are abandoning programs aimed at widening access or establishing arms-length colleges, so that the poorer-performance scores do not affect the university’s overall ranking. Others, as mentioned above, are changing the conditions of their scholarships.

A major handicap for first destination employment data is the time frame; surveys usually concentrate on the first six to nine months postgraduation, which is inadequate for many types of careers and is unable to distinguish between employment on graduate-level jobs or underemployed. While the time frame may provide useful information during a period of active economic growth, is the information an accurate reflection of educational quality during a recession such as the current one?

MEASURING RESEARCH

Measuring research productivity and impact through bibliometric and citation data is a widespread methodology for assessing academic and research quality and is a key indicator for various rankings. A related practice is ranking journals, whereby the quality of a journal is determined by its local, national, or worldwide scientific reach. The Shanghai *Academic Ranking of World Universities* awards 20 percent of its score to just two publications, *Science* and *Nature*; and *SCImago* uses the journals' scientific prestige, the SJR indicator, to rank journals based on citations.

Quantity is correlated with quality—despite normalization for discipline, institution size, and age. This tends to reward larger and older universities and the physical, life, and medical sciences—due to their publishing habits. This means other important sources or publication formats—such as, books and conference proceedings, contribution to international standards or policy reports, electronic formats or open source publications, etc.—are all ignored. Nationally relevant, interdisciplinary, but non-English-language research is under-reported and undervalued.

Many governments, research agencies, and institutions link this exercise to resource allocation. Not surprisingly, these trends are already producing distortions in research focus and research management: encouraging academics to write journal articles rather than reflective books or policy papers, discouraging intellectual risk taking—favoring the “hard sciences” over the arts, humanities or social sciences, and informing hiring and firing.

LESSONS

These brief examples raise questions about the way in which indicators can shape policy decisions and incentivize behavior. Indeed, there is mounting evidence that governments and higher education institutions around the world are using rankings deliberately in this way, rolling them into key performance indicators, to inform targets and award results. In other instances, governments are making profound structural changes to their national systems in order to push a few elite universities into the top 20, 50, or 100 of global rankings.

The history of rankings shows measuring the wrong things can produce distortions. The US National Governors Association Center for Best Practice similarly cautioned in 2009 against relying on methodologies that can inadvertently create perverse incentives. This should be a critical lesson for all governments and institutions.