

Zen and the Art of University Rankings in Art and Design

Abstract Rankings in higher education are now common, but do they mean anything? Can they accurately reflect the quality of an institution? University rankings, while imperfect, serve as a proxy for comparative measures of quality. This paper begins by providing a philosophical and historical profile of the notion of “quality,” considers what might constitute quality in higher education, and examines how rankings specifically convey this impression for the disciplines of art and design. The paper illustrates the wider role played by rankings in the highly competitive international higher education sector by exploring the various types of rankings, their methodologies, and the criteria they use to measure institutions. It highlights how different rankings measure different research and teaching activities, and the various tensions that can arise across disciplinary boundaries; among institutional and departmental priorities; in research, teaching and learning; and across national and international dimensions within the fields of art and design when rankings compare unique offerings quantitatively.

Keywords

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1 The ARWU was founded by the Chinese government to determine how its universities compared to international ones. It was originally known as the Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking. “About Academic Ranking of World Universities,” accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.shanghairanking.com/about-arwu.html>.

2 “Rankings and Advice,” U.S. News, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.usnews.com/rankings>.

3 Robert Morse, “Best Value Schools Methodology,” U.S. News, September 12, 2016, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/best-value-schools-methodology>.

Introduction

National and global rankings of higher education institutions have become a mundane part of academic life. As the international mass higher education system exists within a wider context of increasing global competition and international benchmarking, there is a growing demand for rankings that gauge and track the quality of higher learning institutions and the departments within them. Universities and other higher learning institutions use rankings to stimulate investment in research and development, attract new students and researchers, and eventually bolster their claims of prestige. Rankings help undergrad and graduate students weigh their options and contribute to decisions about where they might best invest their time, money, and effort to obtain a useful degree.

But what does it all mean? Can the quality of an institution be conveyed via linear measurement? If so, what criteria are being used for such measurements, and are these criteria fair across a global, diverse system of higher education providers? What are rankings actually trying to measure, and what impact does this measurement have on art and design disciplines?

There are many higher education rankings, and depending on where institutions sit within them, some are likely to be taken more seriously than others. Ultimately, rankings are used to compare the quality of one school against another. However, each ranking uses a different set of criteria – research output, teaching and learning indicators, measures of reputation, or a combination of all three – and weights criteria differently when measuring quality. Some use quantitative metrics and others use qualitative judgments. The universities source some of this data themselves, and other information they sourced from bibliographic databases like Scopus. None of these rankings are perfect in an absolute sense, because “quality” itself is an elusive, fluid, and often implicit concept that (usually) uniquely applies to a specific context.

Like it or not, university and discipline-based rankings have become international proxy measures for quality. Some global rankings, like the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)¹ – founded in 2003 – focus solely on institutions’ research performance. Research performance rankings do not gauge the teaching and learning quality of the institutions, and tend to favor old, comprehensive universities who excel in citation-based disciplines like science, medicine, engineering, and technology. The ARWU does not feature any highly specialized institutes or schools of art and design. Other prominent rankings systems like the Times Higher Education World University Ranking and the QS World University Ranking – both founded in 2004 – combine research performance indicators with measures of teaching and learning and self-reports from the academic community and employers that quantify reputation. Once again, no specialized art and design institutions feature in the overall university rankings. They do appear in discipline-specific rankings for art and design. In the United States, the U.S. News and World Report Education Rankings – which began as early as 1983² – also offer a number of rankings and sub-rankings. One of these ranks the “Best Value Schools” by calculating economic value in terms of annual “quality” ratings as these correlate with the institution’s net cost of attendance.³ The U.S. News overall university rankings contain no schools specializing in art and design.

Of course, providing transparency about the quality of our universities is an admirable goal. Increasingly, students in our more commercial and international higher education environment are demanding qualitative and quantitative information that can help them make more informed choices, and most would agree that students should be able to access this kind of information. Governments, particularly those who fund higher education, also want to ensure they are getting “value for money,” and want clearer evidence of output quality from the

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