



# Global geographies of higher education: The perspective of world university rankings

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to emerging debates about uneven global geographies of higher education through a critical analysis of world university rankings. Drawing on recent work in geography, international higher education and bibliometrics, the paper examines two of the major international ranking schemes that have had significant public impact in the context of the on-going neoliberalization of higher education. We argue that the emergence of these global rankings reflects a scalar shift in the geopolitics and geoeconomics of higher education from the national to the global that prioritizes academic practices and discourses conducted in particular places and fields of research. Our analysis illustrates how the substantial variation in ranking criteria produces not only necessarily partial but also very specific global geographies of higher education. In comparison, these reveal a wider tension in the knowledge-based economy between established knowledge centers in Europe and the United States and emerging knowledge hubs in Asia Pacific. An analysis of individual ranking criteria, however, suggests that other measures and subject-specific perspectives would produce very different landscapes of higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

Geographies of higher education have recently come to the fore of different geographical research agendas as they provide important insights into the formation of a global knowledge economy (Epstein et al., 2007; Hoyler and Jöns, 2008; Olds and Robertson, 2008; Hanson Thiem, 2009; Holloway et al., 2010; Robertson and Olds, 2010). While critical perspectives on the neoliberal corporatization of the university (e.g. Berg and Roche, 1997; Castree and Sparke, 2000; Mitchell, 2008) and studies on transnational academic mobility and business education (e.g. Hall, 2008; Faulconbridge and Hall, 2009; Jöns, 2009; Brooks and Waters, 2011) have begun to unravel the complex geographies of higher education from the perspective of students, researchers and academics, there remains a lack of global analyses that focus on changing institutional geographies in higher education and their representations (Holloway and Jöns, 2012; Waters, 2012).

This paper aims to contribute to this emerging field by providing a critical analysis of world university rankings. Since the first of these rankings appeared in 2003, following a decade of increasing internationalization, neoliberalization and marketization of higher education (Teichler, 2004; Lynch, 2006), the annually updated league

tables have captured the attention of university managers, employers, policy makers, academics and the wider public (Sadlak and Liu, 2007; Hazelkorn, 2011). Geographers have been vocal in commenting on the newly released data, as documented in several entries on university league tables in the *GlobalHigherEd* Blog established by geographer Kris Olds and sociologist of education Susan Robertson in September 2007 (Olds and Robertson, 2007). What is missing from these important debates are analyses that interrogate more systematically the variety and limitations of the geographies produced by world university rankings.

Drawing upon recent work in geography, international higher education and bibliometrics, we aim to provide such a geographical analysis of world university rankings by exploring how these powerful discourses represent contemporary global higher education to the wider public and what a specifically geographical perspective can contribute to on-going interdisciplinary debates about university league tables. By comparing two of the major international ranking schemes, we develop the argument that because of different types of ranking criteria, inevitable limitations of the underlying data and the rankers' diverse interests, world university rankings always provide highly partial and specific perspectives on the global geographies of higher education. By geographies we mean both the material realities of universities, as reflected by the indicators used in the league tables, and the reputational geographies that not only inform their construction but also emerge from the reception of the published rankings. This

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argument, we suggest, can only be substantiated through a geographical, comparative and disaggregating perspective on different ranking schemes that directs the analytical focus to the level of institutions and thus goes beyond the more common national comparisons of global higher education (e.g. OECD, 2012).

Our starting point is the striking tension between a considerable impact of international ranking schemes on individual and institutional decision-making and a variety of critical voices that question their methodology and value. On the one hand, many universities, particularly in Europe and Asia Pacific, have adjusted their strategic plans to become ‘world-class’ universities as defined by the rankings (IHEP, 2009), thus contributing to what Altbach (2004, p. 5) called the current “age of academic hype in which universities of different kinds in diverse countries claim this exalted status.” On the other hand, it has been pointed out that

The influence of league tables is increasing both nationally and internationally, and cannot be ignored despite serious methodological limitations. They are being used for a broader range of purposes than originally intended, and being bestowed with more meaning than the data alone may bear” (HEFCE, 2008, p. 7).

In many ways, this inflated influence of world university rankings mirrors the persuasive discourse about the ‘knowledge economy’, which Kenway et al. (2006, p. 5) ascribe to “an un-reflexive celebration of the triumphs of contemporary capitalism”. Drawing upon this work, we argue that the discourse about world university rankings is similarly “of consequence despite its ambiguity” (Kenway et al., 2006, p. 11) so that university league tables, even if some commentators discount them entirely, need to be scrutinized as important policy drivers of socio-economic change (Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Hazelkorn, 2011).

Methodologically, we chose to analyze the Academic Ranking of World Universities, compiled by Shanghai Jiao Tong University since 2003 (Shanghai ranking), and The Times Higher World University Ranking as produced by QS Quacquarelli Symonds Limited from 2004 to 2009 (THE-QS ranking) to examine two highly influential perspectives on global higher education.<sup>1</sup> Focussing on the years 2006 and 2009, this enables us to examine two established rankings and their changes over time in a rare period without major alterations of the selected indicators and their weightings. As we are interested in comparing geographical clusters of universities and structural variations between two league tables that use very different types of ranking criteria, the same data analysis was conducted for both years. Due to large similarities between the 2006 and 2009 data, we have illustrated our findings mainly but not exclusively with the more recent 2009 data.

The paper is divided into four sections. First, we outline the research contexts that inform current work on geographies of higher education and sketch our conceptual framework. Second, we briefly contextualize the history of world university rankings within recent neoliberal reforms of higher education and critically examine the construction of the Shanghai and THE-QS rankings. Third, we compare the global geographies created in these two world university league tables and discuss how individual ranking criteria represent the university-based knowledge economy. The fourth section concludes by discussing wider implications of our findings for conceptual and policy-relevant understandings of the knowledge-based economy.

<sup>1</sup> Since 2010, the Times Higher World University Rankings have been generated by Thomson Reuters, known for its research platform ISI Web of Knowledge, which concentrates another aspect of academic performance evaluation in the hands of this New York-based multinational information company. This has entailed a complete overhaul of the methodology employed. QS Quacquarelli continues to publish its own global ranking under the name of QS World University Rankings, so that there are now three major annual rankings in circulation.

## 2. Geographies of higher education: an emerging field of research

This paper draws on two main bodies of academic work that usefully inform geographies of higher education. The first comprises *geographical* studies of universities that have largely neglected world university rankings (for exceptions, see Batty, 2003; Théry, 2009; Robertson and Olds, 2010) but have examined the socio-economic impact, the internationalization/globalization and the neoliberalization of higher education. The second widens this perspective to include interdisciplinary work on international higher education and bibliometrics as the key arenas for academic debates about university rankings. We suggest that analysing world university rankings from a geographical perspective creates important links between these fairly disconnected fields and contributes to both lines of research by introducing debates about world university rankings into geography and a new perspective highlighting the partiality and place-specificity of university league tables into relevant interdisciplinary debates.

### 2.1. Geographical perspectives

Studies investigating geographies of higher education have multiplied since the late 1990s and constitute a heterogeneous but emerging research field within human geography. Recent key themes concerning the production, consumption and governance of higher education include four main lines of inquiry.

#### 2.1.1. Impact of universities

The economic geography of higher education and ‘learning regions’ focuses on the role of universities for regional economic development in comparison to other geographical scales (e.g. Rutten et al., 2003; Lawton Smith, 2006; Goddard and Vallance, 2011). Fewer studies have looked at the university in its wider social and cultural contexts such as the politics and geographies of honorary degree conferment (Heffernan and Jöns, 2007) and the impact of students on university towns and cities (e.g. Smith and Holt, 2007). These studies highlight the role of universities as key actors in the knowledge economy as they have important economic, social and cultural impacts on their wider region, provide graduates and innovations for the national economy and sustain diverse international linkages (see also Cochrane and Williams, 2012; Meusburger and Schuch, 2012). Recent work on the formation of global educational/knowledge hubs in the world economy has stressed that universities can be regarded as both outcomes and drivers of globalization (Olds, 2007a; Olds and Robertson, 2008; Matthiessen et al., 2010; Lai and Maclean, 2011) so that the geographies of world university rankings need to be positioned within wider socio-economic processes (Robertson and Olds, 2010).

#### 2.1.2. Transnational mobility

Transnational perspectives are also central to studies that examine the historical geographies of academic mobility and its role for the rise of knowledge centers such as universities (e.g. Charle, 2004a; Jöns, 2008; Taylor et al., 2008; Pietsch, 2010). Similarly, research on the global circulation of academic staff in more recent decades has discussed the extent to which this contributes to the formation of transnational knowledge networks (e.g. Ackers, 2008; Jöns, 2009; Leung, 2011). Most studies on global flows in higher education, however, have examined the nature and impact of international student mobility by addressing students’ migration decisions, experiences and outcomes; inclusion and exclusion in spaces of education; and transnational educational strategies (e.g. O’Connor, 2005; Findlay et al., 2006, 2012; Hazen and Alberts, 2006; Brooks and Waters, 2011). All of this work helps to

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