

Going Global 2011: Can University Rankings Play a Useful Role?

Description

by Danny Byrne, Editor of Topuniversities.com

“We should not, as academic institutions, abandon academic rigour, seduced by the spotlight of international rankings.” So argued Malcolm Grant, Vice Chancellor of University College London, at the Going Global Conference in Hong Kong earlier this month. Most intelligent commentators recognise that university rankings only capture certain aspects of institutional performance. But is that sufficient cause to write them off altogether?

Grant was taking part in a session entitled International Rankings: Where Do You Stand?, the aim of which was to establish whether or not university rankings actually provide any useful information. Or, in the terms chosen by the organisers, “Are rankings capable of playing a helpful role in enhancing communications and understanding to stakeholders in today’s global market for higher education?”

The objections to rankings voiced by Grant were part conceptual, part practical. He listed eight major “fracture points” that undermine the validity of established rankings methodologies. Grant drew attention to the proxies rankings are forced to employ in the absence of direct data on some areas of university life, and the problematic nature of applying weightings to indicators.

“How do we weight data in a manner which is not only transparent, but which is intellectually compelling?” Grant asked. “I believe that this remains the biggest single drawback of the rankings that we have at the moment.” However, Grant, whose own university UCL recently announced plans to charge annual tuition fees of £9,000 from 2012, did not identify an alternative means by which students might compare it with other institutions around the world.

Different approaches were proposed by John Molony of QS, and Kevin Downing of City University of Hong Kong. Molony stressed that while we should not deny that rankings have a tendency to simplify, we should also not underestimate the ability of the Web 2.0 Generation to use them as just one part of their decision-making process. “Rankings are helpful because students and institutions are getting better at interpreting and utilising them”, Molony stated. “It’s not only about the quality of the production of the rankings – it’s about understanding the information and applying that wisely.”

Molony pointed out that “rankings provide a rich source of public information that QS makes freely available to all”, and that the QS World University Rankings® are hosted online at www.topuniversities.com in such a way that users may view the results of all indicators in isolation, offsetting Grant’s objection about weightings. Rankings are also “an important tool helping inform strategic planning at institutional level”, Molony argued, providing positive incentives and encouraging many universities to “get their house in order” in terms of data collection.

Kevin Downing agreed. “Rankings can be used to bring about positive strategic change, which allows you to attract better quality faculty and students”, he stated. They also “provide exposure from ambitious younger institutions from emerging areas of the world”, he added. “Many Asian

universities have become much better known in the last few years because they have risen into the top 200.â?•

So are university rankings doomed to misrepresent and distort, or can they be a positive force if presented transparently and put to appropriate use by a well-educated user? Downing offered a fresh perspective: â??Rankings provide information to the consumer. To my two esteemed colleagues who are vice chancellors â?? Iâ??m sorry guys, but for once itâ??s not about you. This is actually about students and their families trying to make informed choices.â?•

Downing acknowledged many of Grantâ??s arguments concerning the difficulty of accurately conveying the complexity of every university in a ranking exercise, but came to a very different conclusion: â??All rankings inevitably invite criticism. It is often easier to concentrate on what is wrong with them than try to identify how they might be used to bring about practical positive strategic change, which will ultimately benefit our stakeholders. That means students, staff and the wider public.

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