How Might University Rankings Contribute to Quality Assurance Endeavors?

Deane Neubauer
Senior Consultant East-West Center
Professor Emeritus, University of Hawai'i Manoa
APHERP NCCU Chiayi, Taiwan October 7-17, 2013

Two Problematics

○ A: What are university rankings when viewed from a social science perspective—and what might the significance of this be?

○ B: Two: the extent to which which ranking phenomena either are or could be useful components of accreditation and quality assurance.

A Few Arguments

○ Liu:

　　○ Strengths of ARWU: hard data that allow for comparison; meet a need as demonstrated by rankings' use and popularity; make use of reliable data sources such as citation indexes; given the complexities of universities such comparisons fill a need—indeed, whatever the criticisms, they are here to stay—and as his paper to the conference suggests, the designers are working on constant improvements to tap other aspects of the university experience.

　　○ Weaknesses: strong hard science bias; over-emphasize Nobel prize winners in scoring; bias toward English language publication; major weakness—does not take much into account the teaching/learning/service roles of universities.

Marginson

○ Overwhelming bias to English language universities

○ ARWU is superior among competitive rankings because of its non-reactive/non-reputational data base

○ The value of such rankings needs to be viewed from the perspective of their functional use

○ Performs a very valuable role (supplying a kind of "currency") within the "status economy," which in turn is an essential part of the emergent knowledge economy (k-economy).

'In the k-economy knowledge flows are regulated by a system of status production that assigns unequal values to parcels of knowledge and arranges them in ordered patterns.' The new means of assigning status values to parcels of knowledge are league tables and other institutional and research rankings; publication and citation metrics; and journal hierarchies. These processes together create and sustain the standard of value. This standard of value is a key mediating factor enabling the k-economy to interface with the financial and industrial economies, and with the systems of policy and regulation. It also enables the global k-economy to be mapped on a world-wide basis, identifying the concentrations of knowledge power, guiding the investments in innovation by governments and businesses, and providing measures for the k-economy comparisons that all nations seem compelled to make...."
(Marginson, 2010 p. 31)

So….

○ From the functional perspective, such rankings give a value necessary to the requirements of status and material exchanges taking place within the global k-economy.

○ If these did not exist, some other mechanism (s) would emerge to perform this function, since the exchanges are structured to other fundamental elements of the global economy

○ One can conclude that (a) the exercises are good social science, and (b) perform valuable and necessary functions within broader social structures.

However…

○ From the perspective of other kinds of social science, namely those of the social constructivist school---the rankings do other things as well

○ They operate to create meaning within defined property spaces and then through the mechanisms of the rankings to colonize the ranges of other meanings associated them

○ The result is a version of Gresham's Law (bad money drives out good), whereby in efforts to understand and array universities in a variety of comparative contexts, simplicity (that achieved by the rankings) drives out complexity (all the other ways in which universities can be "known")

So what?

○ The overall result is to create a "default meaning" (or set of meanings) for the socially complex entity "university" (or "global university") that comparatively de-values other (competitive) meanings...

○ This is most consequential within policy discourses where the presence of multiple "complexities" renders "powerful simplifications" most valuable in resource competitions

○ The result is ranked universities colonize unranked universities-- necessarily devaluing all the other activities that are not included in the ranking measurements

And...

- Is there a way out of this conundrum?

- Two are at hand...and probably others

- (a) The notion of a "delimited" measurement...label the "thing" that is being measured "away from" the root concept. The polyarchy example

- (b) Seek to create effective measurements for those important elements of universities not contained within the rankings

This is the 2ⁿᵈ problematic…

○ Ranking, or other versions of empirical measurement could be useful within the frame of "multiple de-limited" measurements.

○ This would mean, in effect, seeking to develop relevant empirical referents for all of that "university stuff" that most observers find too "complex" to measure

○ These more than any other "things" involve the teaching dimension (s) of HEIs, including what are increasingly coming to be understood as "learning" outcomes

However...

- The difficulties with this concept are the vast differences that exist among higher education institutions, from the most elite, well-resourced, research-focused institutions that also teach and perform services...to those at some other end of a scale that are not so elite, and no so well-resourced, but which also teach

- The essential basis of any form of comparison requires a concept of something that is common to all such institutions...

And that might be...?

- One effort that might bear some examination and perhaps replication has been the decade-long effort of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) of the U.S., whose region contains the whole of this range of differentiated institutions

- In 1999-2001 an effort was made to re-conceptualize how accreditation might operate with respect to these very different institutions

Enter…

- After an extensive process involving over 200 participants from all over the world, WASC invented a new model that it believed represented a useful approach to this conundrum

- It generated the notion of Educational Effectiveness as a vehicle for dealing with institutional diversity

- Educational Effectiveness was based on the presumption that <u>all</u> higher education institutions, irrespective of their mission or purposes, have a root obligation to demonstrate to themselves and others that they are <u>effective</u> in achieving such mission or purposes

And the lesson is...

○ Educational Effectiveness in the WASC manifestation is worthy of evaluation and critique and has received both

○ The process suggests two conceptual and methodological lessons worth emulating:

○ (1) Revealing and reliable empirical data can be gathered on a wide range of higher education institutions that may yield useful comparisons within relevant value frames that in turn can be of distinct value to the policy process...for example: policy makers at multiple levels can make resource decisions based on relative effectiveness

○ (2) By framing comparative/evaluative data within distinct and bounded measurement parameters, one can accomplish measurement without submitting to the colonizing effects of reductive value assignments

○ Following a course framed in some version by these conceptual parameters could yield valuable comparative data for accreditation and quality assurance