

cation of 2014–15. Among these former proposals, there were to be cuts of around 20 percent to the sector overall, as well as the introduction of a real rate of interest on student debts (currently tied only to the inflation rate). Universities would also have been free to charge any fee they chose for high-demand courses. Some vice-chancellors (largely from the wealthiest institutions) who supported the proposed flexibility to charge higher fees for some courses, may have been privately disappointed. But the large majority of the sector breathed a sigh of relief that these earlier measures, which would have seriously weakened higher education and the national research effort, were abandoned. Even if dropping such measures was only an admission that they were doomed to failure—since the national parliament had consistently refused to accede to their implementation, a potential major funding crisis was averted.

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**It remains to be seen if the proposed shift of the cost burden toward students deters some from enrolling, particularly those from the more vulnerable groups in society.**

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#### THE PROBLEMS OF SUCCESS

But while the worst effects of earlier proposals were averted, the new budget measures have again failed to address the problem of inadequate funding. The problem is that Australian universities have been too successful, and are being punished for it. By transforming themselves into major engines of export earnings, now earning a collective AU\$20 billion annually from international student fees, universities have come to be seen by government as cash cows to be milked at will. Further “efficiency dividends” and a continued failure to fund the full cost of research will only drive universities further in the direction of earning more from international students, to make up for declining government funds. At least one vice-chancellor responded by raising the prospect that enrolling more international students could displace domestic students. This argument has not been raised as part of the national debate over higher education in the past. But the fact that one in four higher education enrollments (one in three at some of the leading universities) is international—the highest rate of any major system worldwide—could, for the first time, be met with popular resistance. While averting the worst elements of earlier proposals, the current set of proposed “efficiency dividends” transfers of more of the financial burden for loans from the state to students themselves. Further, chang-

es to grant funding mechanisms do nothing to address this prospect and only add to the longstanding failure to fund the sector adequately.

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## Tempest in the Rankings Teapot: An African Perspective

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It is that season when ranking entities announce their “findings” on the comparative stature of the world’s universities. As usual, the “premier” universities remain at the top and the rest are relegated to the bottom—African universities in particular. The “rankers” go about their business, some with audacity, but too often without sufficient concern for veracity, authenticity or integrity in their methodologies and, especially in the case of Africa, without sufficient data.

#### FACTS VS. PERCEPTIONS

For the last three years, the University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa has been the first in the country in academic productivity, as measured by the Department of Higher Education and Training. The Department undertakes the task of ranking using parameters that meticulously measure research and academic outputs. Yet, according to the newly released QS ranking—which allocates 60 percent of the criteria to academic reputation—the University of Kwazulu-Natal now stands below six other South African universities. This points to a glaring tension between data and dubious assessment based on reputation.

#### BUILDING REPUTATION: UNPACKING THE NUMBERS

The QS ranking is a mix of survey responses and data across six indicators, compiled and weighted to formulate a final score. It claims that over 70,000 academics and 30,000 employers contribute to the rankings through the QS global surveys. QS states that it analyzes 99 million citations from 10.3 million papers before 950 institutions are ranked.

The *Times Higher Education (THE)* states that their

methodology is a unique piece of research that involves “questionnaires [that] ask over 10,500 scholars from 137 countries about the universities they perceive to be best for teaching and research.” It claims that the Academic Reputation Survey “uses United Nations data as a guide to ensure that the response coverage is as representative of world scholarship as possible.” *THE* goes on to state that where countries were over- or underrepresented, the responses were weighted to “more closely reflect the actual geographical distribution of scholars,” throwing more uncertainty on the changing parameters of the rankings.

There appears to be a conflation between “world of scholarship” and “geographical distribution of scholars,” without any clear definition of “scholar” or “scholarship.” China, India, and Brazil may have the largest number of “scholars” and by that account more scholarship, yet they barely make it to the top in the rankings.

According to *THE*, only 2 percent of the survey participants are Africans, presumably located on the continent. As about 50 percent of research in Africa is undertaken in South Africa, one may presume that the number of survey participants in the rest of Africa tapers off to 1 percent. Around 100 academics in Africa, then, outside of South Africa, participated in the reputation index “evenly spread across academic disciplines.” Thus, for the 11 disciplines considered in the *THE* rankings, that would mean about 10 responses per discipline from Africa. A similar problem is presented in the Latin American and Middle Eastern contexts, which see survey representation of 5 percent and 3 percent, respectively.

#### RANKINGS INDICES

Indeed, rankings are largely about reputation. According to QS, reputation is a calculation with 40 percent derived from the responses of academics and 20 percent from employers. An institution improves its position in the rankings if it scores big in these two indices based on perception. The *THE* reputation index is entirely based on a perception survey which requests subjects “to name no more than 15 universities that they believe are the best.”

The reasons why the world, especially Africa, would be well served to ignore these rankings are numerous. Let us consider the QS ranking, which puts considerable weight on student–faculty ratio. Without exception, the African higher education sector is expanding massively, as is the case in many other areas of the world. This has resulted in high student–staff ratios, which may force institutions to face difficult choices if improving their standing in the rankings is important to them—either freezing expansion or raising the number of academics. Increasing the number of academics would require massive investments, creative policies, and long-term commitments that few institutions

are positioned to contemplate.

Another parameter used in the rankings is international faculty ratio and international student ratio. In sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa and Botswana, and to some extent Namibia, are the only countries that attract international faculty, mostly from elsewhere on the continent. This remains a dream for the rest of Africa. The same could be said about most developing countries.

Likewise, improving the percentage of international students is another ranking criterion used by QS and others. The number of African countries that attract international students is very small and includes South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda. Virtually all of these international students come from other African countries, with the exception of South Africa. Even when students enroll from overseas, it is only for a semester or two.

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**Some enterprising entities, calling themselves data analysts, are already emerging to “help” African institutions do better in the rankings.**

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The nature of these rankings is such that the institutions at the top are mostly from the United States, year in and year out. In reviewing the ranking published by *THE*, the same could be said about those in the middle and at the lower end on the global list, where some may have moved up a notch and others moved down a notch. Emphasizing reputation-based criteria does not affect the standing of those established at the top. These institutions tend to be immune from strikes, financial strain, internal strife, or other critical challenges faced by institutions in the developing world.

#### MANIPULATING THE RANKINGS

Some enterprising entities, calling themselves data analysts, are already emerging to “help” African institutions do better in the rankings. One flagship university in East Africa is suspected of pursuing that approach, for which it is reported to have paid a hefty service fee. The rankers themselves have now started selling their expertise to institutions, claiming to provide a “branding” service for a fee. This emerging development adds another twist to this already flawed exercise—conflict of interest.

The aggressive positioning of these entities masquerading as service providers—often at major events, where senior institutional administrators meet—is nothing more than a swindle. Institutions should use their limited re-

sources effectively, rather than pursue shortcuts to improve their rankings.

### THE QUEST FOR QUALITY REGIMES

The global market place for higher education is exploding with a plethora of new and old, bona fide and dubious players and providers. Accordingly, the scope, mode, platform, and practices of educational delivery have diversified tremendously, increasingly necessitating the need for a reliable—and trustworthy—quality regimes.

As a consequence, numerous quality agencies are being established at the national and regional levels. For instance, more than half of the African countries now have national authorities regulating higher education quality—with various levels of effectiveness. As the higher education sector continues to diversify, there is a great need for such entities at the global level. The ranking agencies are supposed to be these gate keepers of quality at the global level; but they have so far not lived up to that expectation.

Over a year ago, I received a phone call from a vice-chancellor at a university in South Africa who suggested coordinating a withdrawal from the rankings by the country's institutions. The proposal was to encourage all universities in the country to refuse to participate and instead to dedicate all their resources, energy, and time to more relevant concerns. Rhoades, one of the premier universities in South Africa, already refuses to participate in the rankings, so a precedent exists.

An international roundtable on rankings, supported by the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of British Columbia, took place in May 2017 in Vancouver. The roundtable deliberated on the scope and significance of university rankings and proposed concrete actions and interventions on the issue in the future.

### CONCLUSION

According to *THE*, “the reputation league table is based on nothing more than subjective judgment.” QS also states that 60 percent of its scores are dependent on reputation, and are thus subjective. What is depressingly astonishing, however, is how seriously the world of higher education (and beyond) takes these self-serving businesses, which use defective and flawed instruments year in and year out.

Rankings will not be disappearing anytime soon. In fact, as additional rankings join the fray, they are more likely to generate more buzz to insure their survival and influence. But it is not inconceivable that the proliferation of these rankers may be the beginning of the end of their huge influence—as institutions pick and choose particular rankers which presents them in a favorable manner. In the end, institutions at the very top and the massive bottom of the

rankings will continue to watch the ritual from the sidelines, while the tempest continues undeterred in the rankings teapot.

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## Research: The “Lost Mission” of African Universities

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The first universities in Africa were established with the triple mission of teaching, research, and community engagement. However, between the early 1970s and 2000, teaching became the only de facto mission of many of these African universities. Yet, many university leaders hold the mistaken notion that their universities have always been research universities. It is only over the last decade that the research mission has emerged again as a key vision of African universities.

In colonial times, the British government set up several commissions to explore the need for higher education in British colonial Africa. Among eight well known commissions and advisory bodies established during the colonial era (from the Madden Commission in 1841 to the Asquith Commission in 1945), it is worth noting that the Channon Commission (1943) was the first to mention the need for future universities in the British colonies to include research as a core function. Thus, research became part of the mission of universities that were later established by the colonial and national governments.

Since the establishment of universities in British colonial Africa in the late 1940s, several conferences have been held to discuss the notion of the African university and its mission. These meetings brought together key stakeholders in higher education across Africa and assessed the role and relevance of universities at each period of their history. Of the four main conferences held before 2000 (Addis Ababa Conference, 1961; Tananarive Conference, 1962; Accra Workshop, 1972, and Tananarive Conference, 1980), it was only the 1962 conference that strongly emphasized research as a key mission of African universities.

Years after these national universities were founded, most governments in their respective countries were overthrown. Military governments interfered with the administration of universities by appointing their political affili-