

■ OPINION ■

How university rankings fail to paint

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Rankings are useful tools for quickly assessing an institution's reputability. They influence whether the university gets funding for its research, how many students apply to the institution, and how the government assesses its research calibre. That said, what rankings show us is far from the full picture.

First, we need to have an understanding of what influences an institution's ranking. QS World University Rankings, for example, evaluates universities based on academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty-student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty ratio, international student ratio, international research network, employment outcomes, and sustainability.

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings uses 18 performance indicators grouped into five areas – teaching, research environment, research quality, international outlook, and industry.

The formulaic nature of rankings means that universities can easily game the system to climb up certain data points. One prominent example is Boston's Northeastern University's meteoric rise in US News & World Report ranking. The university employed some tactics to get ahead of the competition, such as getting higher ratings on peer assessment scores from other universities, decreasing class size by recruiting more faculty, and building new dorms.

Not all universities share

Northeastern's enthusiasm for rankings, however.

Columbia University decided to drop out of the aforementioned US News rankings in 2023, citing its excessive influence as a point of concern. In the same year, more than 40 law schools and a dozen or so medical schools (including Harvard Medical School) also put an end to their participation in the US News ranking.

Critics of university rankings argue that assigning a single number to represent a university is too simplistic. There are also concerns regarding malpractice, especially since some ranking organisations allow self-reported data and proprietary surveys. There have been numerous scandals in the past where institutions were found to have misrepresented their datasets. Some claim that the overreliance on numbers penalises schools that would have otherwise admitted promising students with less-than-stellar scores.

To obtain authentic data as the basis for university rankings, ranking organisations would have to collect it themselves by being physically present at the universities in question and conducting

assessments and surveys. However, such a system has not yet been feasible to implement on a large scale, considering the manpower and resources it would cross the hundreds of universities worldwide being ranked per year.

Given all the ways rankings can be manipulated, they should not be the only factor influencing a student's decision to attend a university. A good way to conduct the decision-making process is to identify some of your own personal preferences and priorities as a student. This could be class sizes, industry placement,

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the reputation of a certain academic department of choice, the social scene, etc. The next step is to read up on how your options measure up against each other based on these factors on the university's website, student reviews on external sites,

discussion websites, etc. This gives you more freedom to choose a university that matches up to your own personalised needs, instead of the arbitrary number of its ranking granted to the university based on its performance on certain things you may not care about.

For example, a certain university may be highly ranked because its faculty has a lot of research citations, but an undergraduate student who has no interest in going into research and academia may benefit more from going to a less highly ranked university where the faculty dedicates more of their time attending to a student's individual needs.

Rankings won't be going away anytime soon. They do a great deal to quantify a range of factors and simplify our decision-making process. However, making our decisions entirely based on rankings harms our chances of having a well-rounded academic experience. In our decision to attend a university, there should be a few considerations beyond its ranking to back us up in our choice.



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