

The Global Ranking of Universities: the industry of rankings and the rise of audit culture in higher education

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Global university rankings have grown much more visible and are now arguably a more influential factor in many decisions made by university leaders, public policy makers and students. While there are many critiques leveled at the rankings, they appear set to stay.

Rankings play an important role in a variety of ways. One of which is how they shape the flow of international students in the growing industry of global higher education. The uncertainties related to studying abroad are linked to the growth of systems of comparison and assurance that help students make choices. While some countries have had national ranking systems for some time, it is only relatively recently that the systematic ranking of schools at an international level have been developed. The two best known global rankings – the Shanghai Jiaotong University Rankings and the Times Higher Education rankings – began to be published in 2003 and 2004.

Rankings appear to be gaining importance in political discussions on the reform of higher university sectors in many countries. Rankings are invoked by some public policy makers as markers of the country's competitiveness in the knowledge economy. Governments concerned about the reputation of their education sectors are anxious that their national 'champions' appear at the top of these rankings.

While some rankings are better known than others, there are a growing number of ranking initiatives. Some broad types of rankings can be identified: rankings generated by commercial or media outlets, those with links to governments, and those that are undertaken by academics or independent agencies. Because of the increasing number of rankers, each appears to present a methodology that its readers will trust. There are various strategies of legitimation that rankers employ.

Through a variety of methods the practices of legitimation used by rankers and their efforts to differentiate their rankings from those of others to acquire a 'market share' for themselves and to consolidate their own legitimacy will be explored.

This research project aims to map the relationships within the field of the ranking industry and examine these relationships more deeply. It also aims to discuss the social dynamics of rankings and their effects in the field of higher education.