

Grading Universities Is Better Than Ranking Them

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Abstract: Despite their present popularity I want to argue that the major university ranking systems are both misguided and may generate negative consequences. If we must evaluate on a comparative basis, as sometimes I think we must, then a grading system is a much better system than ranking.

My paper presents the main systems of ranking currently in use, points out what I believe to be the weaknesses of ranking and the often negative consequences it has, and suggests an alternative system based on my preferred system of grading.

Problems of ranking systems include the biases introduced by the initial ranking criteria chosen, the unlikely changes that occur in a particular university's rank from year to year, the unreliability of some of the data used and the very concept of a single ranking score. The negative consequences of ranking include an obsession with short-term and narrowly focused 'production targets' rather than wider and more general concerns with quality and excellence; the need for a vast and time-consuming bureaucratic apparatus of data collection; the practice of 'gaming' the system; false comparisons; and facile competitions for prestige ('ranking envy').

Although criticisms of ranking systems are now widespread, ranking remains enormously popular and is unlikely to end any time soon. Merely pointing out the weaknesses and deleterious consequences of ranking systems is unlikely to persuade participating organizations to end their involvement in the competition for prestige. What is needed is a practical alternative — which I think a simple grading system provides.