



**SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES:** Both within and between countries, institutional ranking systems tend to reinforce existing hierarchies and can lead to lack of development of university systems at a national level.

*The Going Global higher education conference was held in South Africa earlier this year for the first time. Hosted by the British Council, the conference offered a platform for keen debate on many issues pertinent to the South African context.*

**Blade Nzimande**

**R**ankings are a reality. It is not possible to ignore them: they are widely reported on and watched by parents and employers.

They can provide valuable information to all of us about the quality of education and research offered by higher education institutions.

The developing world has serious resource constraints, which we in Africa are acutely aware of.

This places increasing pressure on institutions to raise third stream income.

This means any proposals that involve non-participation in international league table systems are very unlikely to succeed, as the rankings are seen as a means to attract new resources.

This is particularly so for those universities who currently feature in the top few hundred, or those with a fighting chance of doing so.

But there are many dangers with ranking systems. What is

## CHALLENGING mainstream rankings systems

a particular concern to us is the potential to reproduce or even widen inequalities.

Both within and between countries, institutional ranking systems tend to reinforce existing hierarchies and can lead to lack of development of university systems at a national level, as resources are siphoned off to support a few institutions to become more highly ranked in the globally competitive arena.

Rankings can also encourage negative behaviours on behalf of institutions.

Any indicator-based system is problematic. Indicators are always proxies for what are seen as desirable goals.

As proxies they are always more crude than is desirable, and inevitably are extracted from context.

For example, in some ranking systems having intakes of high-achieving students contributes to obtaining a high ranking.

This discourages the excellent work of institutions that take poor-performing students and put in the extra work needed to get them through university – and as we all know poor students are more likely to have poor academic records.

Focus on targets individually often leads to “gaming” – focusing attention on narrow meeting of specific

targets, without looking at the bigger picture of what universities should be doing.

An institution might choose to employ a few high-ranking researchers and boost its publication rate, while leaving untouched the teaching and learning environment, which is notoriously slow and difficult to change.

Another perverse type of activity promoted is the appointment of researchers who are not employed by the institution and play no part in improving the quality of research and teaching, but who lend their “names” to the institution (as visiting/adjunct/associate/linked professors) in order for the institution to boost its research publication rate.

Further, the selection of indicators is dependent on the purpose of the assessment, and all of them have ideological biases.

What they generally take insufficient cognisance of is the complex relations between socio-economic status and educational performance.

All of us working in higher education want students to be employed after graduating.

But ranking those institutions whose graduates get good jobs may simply be rewarding institutions who take in wealthy students with good networks – as opposed to rewarding curricula which are really preparing students well

for employment.

What all of this means is that we as a global higher education community need to take positive and constructive steps to engage with what is captured in performance indicators, and how they are used to rank institutions.

We need to engage far more critically with the content of indicators, as well as how they get reported on.

We need to be far more clear about what we want to measure, and how we develop targets and indicators – knowing how easily they can lead to perverse behaviour.

We as Africans and other developing countries should use and harness our regional and continental academic networks and associations with the aim of purposively participating in the rankings enterprise on the basis of fields or centres of excellence rather than pitting institutions against one another.

Examples of continental excellence are the research and learning opportunities associated with the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site and the Square Kilometre Array in South Africa, ancient archaeological structures such as Great Zimbabwe, widespread rock-art, the manuscripts of Timbuktu, and the hugely challenging health epidemics of malaria, HIV/Aids

and TB in sub-Saharan Africa, to name but a few.

Within South Africa, my department is working on sets of indicators linked to: teaching, learning, research, and engagement; governance, and financial health.

Our hope is that these that can be used differentially at institutional level (linked to mission, mandate and niche areas) for self-assessment and reporting in terms of pre-determined objectives linked to the reporting regulations, and at national level to evaluate the development of a differentiated university education sector in SA.

International rankings drive behaviour, and they are unlikely to go away.

Universities in the developing world should identify areas of excellence where institutions can be supported through national and continental collaboration and support to compete within the global knowledge economy, strengthening a differentiated the system as well as individual institutions.

We should energetically promote and develop a field-specific ranking system to stand alongside the more traditional approaches that make unfair comparisons between very different kinds of institutions, and at the same time we must continue to challenge the mainstream ranking systems, in terms of what they are measuring, how they are measuring, and what the effects of this measurement are on systems.

*Dr BE Nzimande is the Minister of Higher Education and Training*

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