

Measuring Up:

The Intended and Unintended Consequences of the

World-class University Ranking

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The global drive for “world class” universities includes a movement to create research quality assessment indicators. These linked developments foretell different futures for higher education. On the one hand, globalization increases the contact and sharing of information, values, and common issues. It also promotes competition, and this may increase productivity on shared research agendas. However, the downside may also derive from the over-emphasis on the pursuit of “world class” universities, by promoting a common language of scholarship (usually English), and by prioritizing certain research journals in research assessment exercises which cluster in nearly all “ranked” journals published in North America and Europe at the expense of global diversity and pluralism.

In countries with centralized research funding sources, journals are classified as either “domestic” or “international.” By awarding local journals lower assessment scores, this classification may have the unintended consequence of discouraging research that is inherently difficult to communicate to English-language readers but may be of great local impacts.

This paper intends to explore both possibilities while documenting the recent histories of higher education governance and the finance of research. Six countries and areas have been included to touch upon these issues with empirical data collected and analysed based on faculty journal publication in Education and Anthropology between 1993, 2003, and 2013. In Taiwan’s case study, the author argues that the new higher education policies in Taiwan have impacted academic culture and research

practices in social sciences and humanities. Faculty international visibility via publication has improved at the expense of local impact and social relevance. On the other hand, in a case study of Japan, the author indicated that the paradox of autonomy—a continued commitment to locally relevant research at the expense of global recognition—while the government’s declaration to make some of the nation’s top universities “super global” can lead to the erosion of long-sustained vernacular scholarship.

While comparing research assessment exercises in China, Hong Kong and Japan, the author argued that the global ranking regime has created a Double Bind for East Asian universities, and has brutally dominated their institutional reconfigurations as well as how the new stage of East Asian universities, e.g., the Chinese University 3.0 should be revitalized.

In another post-apartheid era of South Africa, the author contested the changing academic profile in University of Cape Town. The author concluded that the increasing pressure to satisfy performance management criteria required for promotion and monetary reward has driven researchers in south Africa to be more individualistic in their approach to research output.

On the other hand, the world trend of journal publication in the pursuit of the world-class university also affected other English-speaking country like Australia. It is argued that the overwhelming majority of publications were found to remain in English in Australia, albeit dealing with research themes and data from many parts of the world, and despite growing numbers of colleagues whose first language was Asian or European.

In spite of the increasing pressure for journal publication in most parts of the world over the last two decades, Faculty from US provided a very different account in American public universities. The author concluded that the pressure to publish in certain journals, and to research topics of interest to English language readers, has been felt slightly if at all in the case of one typical U.S. higher education institution.

The case studies in this paper suggest that the world-class university rankings, and the use of SSCI-related indicators affect higher education in a highly

contextualized and nationally specific way. From these case studies, several conclusions can be made:

1. There is a trend towards an increasing reliance on quantitative bibliometric indicators in faculty evaluations, including tenure, promotions, and salary.
2. The trend is not limited to Education and Anthropology. Faculty members of all different fields have encountered a similar shift in how they are evaluated. However, the impact of the systemic changes may differ by discipline.
3. Those in the social sciences and humanities may be more negatively affected by over-reliance on quantitative indicators of journal article publication.
4. The non-English speaking world has been neglected and affected by language barriers due to the hegemony of the English language and mainstream ideology subscribed to by indexed international journals.
5. The trend is not limited to a specific geographic area. The evidence indicates that universities and governments in both advanced economies and developing countries have implemented such systems for evaluation in the name of objectivity, competition, and excellence.
6. For the most part, the implementing institutions have good intentions when devising evaluation systems based on quantitative publication indicators. The actual impacts, however, are often not as positive as anticipated.
7. Governance under the influence of the SSCI syndrome has altered academic culture in higher education. The impacts are mixed, but they are long-lasting, especially for those in the humanities and social sciences, whose research outcomes are more culture-bound and require greater social relevancy than in the physical and natural sciences.

These conclusions suggest that a critical review of current world-wide policies implemented by many administrations promoting a reliance on SCI and SSCI indexed journals should be taken.

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