



Measuring the Quality of University Education: Beyond the Nonsense of University Rankings

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How do we measure the quality of a university education in meaningful ways? Across the world there are increasingly discussions of how students choose the degree courses that they will study and how employers select graduates based on the degree courses studied. This means that gaining a rich sense of the quality of different degree programs is very important. In my recent book, *Transforming University Education: A Manifesto* (Ashwin, 2020), I explore a series of dominant myths around the measurement of quality and explore what is needed to develop more valid measures of educational quality.

A focus on the measurement of educational quality in the midst of a global pandemic might seem self-indulgent. Surely we have all the information we need provided by the proliferation of university rankings that are available? Universities around the world cover their websites and their buildings in loud proclamations about their performance in these rankings. Surely they wouldn't do this if they thought the rankings were nonsense? Unfortunately, universities engage in 'doublethink' (Orwell, 1949) in respect of university rankings: they know they are nonsense, but they still 'celebrate' their success in them as if they say something meaningful.

In explaining the problems with commercial rankings, it is important to be clear that their purpose is not primarily to measure the quality of education. It is to sell things. Commercial rankings, for example, allow their producers to sell advertising to the universities they are claiming to measure. Producers of rankings also offer other services: expensive conferences to launch and discuss the meanings of their rankings; consultancy services to universities who wish to improve their standings in the rankings. Once produced, the same data can be used to produce many different rankings. More rankings mean more revenue.

So this is why rankings are so popular with rankers but why are they meaningless? First, university rankings tend to involve unrelated and incomparable measures that are then aggregated into a single score. This incomparability makes this single score essentially meaningless. The rankings that are then produced can make very small differences in the scores look very large by separating institutions with similar scores by many places (see Hazelkorn, 2015, 2016; Espeland & Sauder, 2016). When considering university rankings as measures of educational quality, it is also worth considering the factors that are used to generate these judgements of quality. University rankings tend to have little or no metrics which directly relate to the quality of teaching in universities. The measures they use as proxies, such as staff-student ratios, entry requirements, number of PhD students and reputation surveys, do not tell us anything about the quality of the education offered, but do tell us about the level of prestige and resources of an institution (Altbach & Hazelkorn 2018).

Viewpoint

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What would a valid measure of educational quality look like? In *Transforming University Education*, I argue for seven criteria that a measure of educational quality would need to meet. These can apply to the measurement of quality within an institution to measures of quality between institutions. The principles are that a valid measure of educational quality needs to:

1. Reflect the purposes of higher education;
2. Examine quality at the level of the particular programs rather than the institutions;
3. Measure the quality of teaching offered rather than reputation or prestige;
4. Draw on a variety of measures that tell us about quality from different perspectives;
5. As a whole, are based on a coherent, research-informed vision of teaching;
6. Require improvements in teaching practices in order to improve performance on the measures; and
7. Provide a relatively simple comparison of quality.

The first principle is that any measure of educational quality needs to reflect the purposes of higher education. The idea here is that any notion of educational quality derives its meaning from the purpose that informs the judgement of quality. A screwdriver has a high quality for removing screws but less quality when used to hammer nails into a wall. There are a number of consequences of this principle. First, it means that we would have different measures of quality for different purposes of higher education. Part of the appeal of university rankings is that they seem to stand for a general notion of quality, but this appeal is entirely misleading because any institution will have strengths in some areas and not in others. Second, if we are to measure the quality of an educational process then there needs to be discussion about the purpose of that educational process. For something as important as undergraduate degrees, we should expect disagreements over this because defining purposes is not a technical exercise but something that speaks to our educational commitments.

The second principle is that any measure of education needs to be focused on the particular degree programs that students study rather than the overall institution. There is plenty of evidence that the quality of degree programs varies within a single institution (for example, see Ramsden & Callender, 2014). This is important because if prospective students and employers want to use a measure of quality to inform whether they should study a particular degree or employ a particular graduate then they need to know about the particular degree program concerned rather than simply about the institution.

The third principle is that a valid measure of educational quality needs to focus on the quality of teaching rather than institutional prestige. This is related to the first principle because it is often when we consider quality at the level of the institution that reputation or prestige become mistaken for quality. Prestige does not tell prospective students or employers anything about the educational quality of the program.

The fourth principle is that to gain a sense of the educational quality of a degree program we need to know about it from different perspectives. We need to have a sense of what students studying the programs think of it, we need to know what students go on to do after they have graduated (all students rather than just famous individuals). Crucially, if we are to avoid the gaming of the outcomes of the quality assessment process, then we need to have measures of both the educational process and the outcomes of the educational process.

Transforming University Education: A Manifesto explores a series of dominant myths around the measurement of quality, and explores what is needed to develop more valid measures of educational quality.

The fifth principle is that these measures need to be based on a coherent, research informed vision of the educational process. This is one of the key problems with university rankings. They rely on the data that are available rather than first defining the nature of a high-quality education. The crucial thing here is to realise that the process of measurement plays a key role in defining quality. What we choose to measure defines quality because institutions, in just the same ways as students, will respond to the ways in which they are assessed. We need to have convincing reasons for selecting the measures we use. The argument here is that these measures need to be built around a coherent vision of educational processes based on what we know about educational processes. There is in fact over 50 years of research into teaching and learning that has identified a consistent set of principles and processes that underpin high quality teaching and learning (for examples see Chickering& Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2008; Ambrose et al., 2010; Gibbs, 2010; Laurillard, 2012; Entwistle, 2018; Ashwin et al., 2020).

The sixth principle is that we should only use measures of quality that require institutions to improve their educational practices in order to improve their performance. This is not the case with university rankings because they can improve their performance, even if their score drops, as long as it drops by less than their rivals. This requirement also means that the costs of measurement are worth paying because they will lead to improvements in educational practices. There is no point in measuring unless it leads to these kinds of improvements.

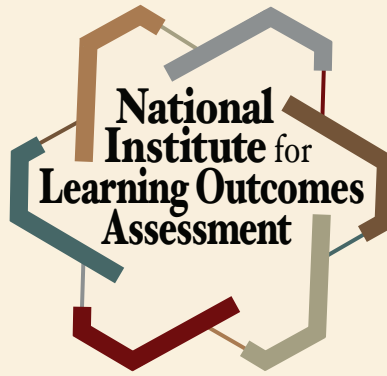
This last principle emphasizes the need for relatively simple measures of educational quality. The idea of 'relative simplicity' rather than simply 'simplicity' gives a sense of uncertainty about the value of simplicity. The source of this uncertainty is best illustrated by the popularity of university rankings, which stems from the way in which they make sense to a wide variety of users without the need for lengthy explanations of what they mean. However, it is precisely this simplicity that makes them so misleading. Whilst we cannot wish the attraction of simplicity away, we also cannot undermine the importance of establishing valid measures of educational quality. The principle is that we need to have the simplest possible measures of educational quality that also provide valid assessments of educational quality.

Overall, these criteria offer a more valid way of measuring the quality of university education that are also more likely to lead to the enhancement of that quality. Given the costs involved in measuring the quality of higher education and the current financial challenges facing global higher education as a result of Covid-19, it is important that we show how measuring quality supports the enhancement of the quality of university education.

Prestige does not tell prospective students or employers anything about the educational quality of the program. These 7 criteria offer a more valid way of measuring the quality of university education that are also more likely to lead to the enhancement of that quality.

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