

CONTEXTUALISING A GLOBAL HIERARCHY

ALL-AFRICA RANKINGS INITIATIVE

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University Rankings

University rankings are a tool used to benchmark universities based on different criteria. Currently, the major rankings used to place universities within the global institutional hierarchy are

1. Quacquarelli Symonds World University Ranking (QSWUR)
2. Times Higher Education World University Ranking (THEWUR)
3. Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai ARWU)

Data, known as indicators, is collected, compiled and analysed by data analysts, who then produce a score that is used to rank universities.

Indicators

Indicators are measurements of an institution's performance in a particular aspect. There are different methods in which data is gathered to produce indicators, namely

1. Surveys: International employers and academics
2. Bibliometrics: Scientific papers and book chapters
3. Ratios: Student-to-faculty, international students, international faculty
4. Institution- submitted: Income and employability
5. Composite indicators: Blends of several measures rolled into one score⁵

QS World University Ranking

The QS World University Ranking is a score produced by Quacquarelli Symonds, a firm based in London, consisting of global higher education analysts and experts. The QSWUR is determined based on Lenses – a group of indicators, which are measurements of an institution's performance in a particular aspect.

The QSWUR's indicators include Research and Discovery, Employability and Outcomes, Global Engagement, Learning Experience and Sustainability. The weightings of the specific lenses are shown in Table 1¹.

Table 1: Table showing lenses, indicators, and weightings used to calculate score¹

Lens	Weighting	Indicator	Weighting
Research and Discovery	50%	Academic Reputation	30%
		Citations per Faculty	20%
Employability and Outcomes	20%	Employer Reputation	15%
		Employment Outcomes	5%
Global Engagement	15%	International Research Network	5%

		International Student Ratio	5%
		International Faculty Ratio	5%
Learning Experience	10%	Faculty Student Ratio	10%
Sustainability	5%	Sustainability	5%

THE World University Ranking

The THEWUR, instead, makes use of five pillars: teaching (the learning environment), research environment (volume, income and reputation), research quality (citation impact, research strength and excellence), international outlook (staff, students and research), and industry (income and patents)². The approximate weightings of the indicators are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Table showing pillars, indicators, and weightings used to calculate score²

Pillar	Indicator (s)	Weighting
Teaching	The Learning Environment	30%
Research Environment	Volume, Income, and Reputation	30%
Research Quality	Citations, Impact, Research Strength and Excellence	30%
International Outlook	Staff, Students, and Research	7,5%
Industry	Income and Patents	2,5%

Shanghai ARWU

The Shanghai ARWU is unique in that it only considers bibliometrics to calculate its score. All universities that have produced Nobel Laureates, Field Medalists, and highly cited researchers are ranked. The criteria used for the Shanghai ARWU include Quality of Education, Quality of Faculty, Research Output, and Per Capita Performance. For each indicator, the highest-scoring institution is assigned 100 points. The remaining universities are then given a percentage of the score achieved by the highest-scoring institution (top score)³. The weightings of the different indicators are described in Table 3.

Table 3: Table showing indicators and weightings used to calculate score³

Criteria	Indicator	Weighting
Quality of Education	Alumni of an institution receiving Nobel Prizes and Field Medals	10%
Quality of Faculty	Staff of an institution receiving Nobel Prizes and Field Medals	20%
	Highly Cited Researchers	20%
Research Output	Papers published in Nature and Science	20%

	Papers published in Science-Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index	20%
Per Capita Performance	Per capita academic performance of an institution	10%

Reflections on the All-Africa Rankings Initiative

Why is UCT ranked the number 1 university in Africa? What determines institutional excellence? Why are South African universities ranked so highly in Africa, when we have seen and experienced many issues as students within these institutions?

The All-Africa Rankings Initiative was a process that aimed to ask a plethora of questions, some without answers, some with clear explanations, and some that require continuous investigation.

The entire process was centred on a single principle – before we rank, we listen. As a result, many of the discussions, workshops, and addresses looked at asking key questions:

1. What are rankings, and what are they based upon?
2. Why do rankings matter?
3. How can rankings be tailored to the African experience?
4. Can we objectively and accurately rank universities if every university operates out of a different context?

There were very brief discussions looking at the more technical and mathematical aspects of rankings, weightings, and calculations. However, the basis of this gathering was to investigate why such a strong emphasis has been placed on rankings produced by European firms and corporations. I was particularly intrigued by the narrowness of the indicators – indicators that do not examine governance, student wellbeing, community engagement, equity, historical justice, and African identity. Hence, when we consider a university as the ‘best in Africa’ it is important to recognise the multiple aspects of an African university’s inner workings that are not used as data.

Examining the ramifications of rankings

Rankings are intended to be a means to an end but not the end itself. They serve to benchmark institutional resilience, excellence, and sustainability. However, the global university community has placed rankings at the centre of their goals, creating a culture of competition and hierarchy, rather than communal learning, curiosity, and collaboration. Evaluation, and by extension, ranking should always be developmental rather than punitive.

With this foundation laid, many questions exist, especially those looking at the contextual relevance of ranking systems. The QSWUR, THEWUR, and Shanghai ARWU are all based, founded, and operated out of the Global North. African universities, however, operate in very unique historical, social, political, and economic contexts – they serve countries ravaged by colonisation and only recently granted independence. Plurality lies at the core of the African experience – we contain multitudes, carry inheritances, and have indigenous ways of knowing. Unfortunately, many ranking systems do not acknowledge this. The ambitions and objectives of African universities, hence, aim to honour the diversities present within the continent. European rankings place emphasis on research, globalisation, and reputability, but these criteria are not always translated well in African contexts where emphasis is placed on community engagement, social accountability, and sustainability.

Additionally, as described by the VC, the unfortunate truth exists that institutional buy-in, from students, alumni, and investors, hinges on university rankings. For many alumni the quality of their degree is founded on the fact that their university was ranked high and remains high-ranking after they have left. This leaves universities shoved between a rock and a hard place – rankings often do not appreciate the deeper ambitions, workings, and efforts of universities, but withdrawing from rankings leaves a university at odds with alumni, governments, and industry⁵.

Excellence in the African continent

Before rankings were widely accepted, institutions had reputations for their unique expertise. As rankings are considered, it is important to investigate the definition of institutional excellence, specifically on the African continent. Collective insights regarding African excellence have prioritised community, collaboration, and co-creation. Curriculum reforms need to be made to create African-centred, multilingual curricula that address African needs and challenges. Ultimately excellence within the African context is founded on standards, dignity, and cultural plurality. However, we have seen that many markers are not measurable in the traditional sense – certain qualities cannot be quantified⁵.

What do rankings capture and what are they overlooking?

Rankings currently are largely based on research output, volume, and citations. While research and innovation are essential factors of a productive university, we still ask ourselves - how is the continent better because you are here? How is your community benefiting from your output? How would you rank a university's community benefit? Would that look at political stability, economic growth, social accountability?⁵

Proposal 1: An Eight-Pillar African University Ranking Framework

The first proposal is a new ranking framework organised around eight pillars: Academic Excellence, Research Excellence, Innovation, Societal Impact, Graduate Success, Africanisation, Internationalisation, and Institutional Sustainability. Its central contribution is not simply the addition of more indicators. It is the recognition that institutional excellence is multidimensional. A university may be exceptional in research, transformative in its community, deeply embedded in African knowledge systems, highly successful in preparing graduates, or internationally connected. A meaningful African framework should be capable of recognising these different forms of strength while maintaining methodological transparency.

1. Academic Excellence

Academic excellence should extend beyond institutional prestige or reputation. It should consider the quality of teaching and learning, curriculum relevance, academic standards, student support, progression and completion, staff capability, and the extent to which students are prepared to think critically, apply knowledge, and contribute to the academic community. In an African context, academic excellence must also ask whether education is responsive to the realities students will encounter after graduation.

2. Research Excellence

Current research scores emphasise citations, volume, and output, however volume and output should never be conflated with impact and intellectual contribution. Research excellence should recognise the ethics of research including quality, originality, integrity, and implementability. African research that addresses local and continental priorities may be transformative even when its immediate citation profile is modest. The framework should therefore balance international scholarly influence with relevance, knowledge mobilisation and contribution to African development.

3. Innovation

The most important quality of innovation is its practicality. Innovation should capture the ability of research to be translated into solutions that are feasible within the resource bases of African communities. This encompasses entrepreneurship, technology transfer, intellectual property, partnerships with industry and government, social innovation, incubators and practical responses to societal challenges. Innovation should not be restricted to commercialisation: a low-cost public-health intervention, a community-designed technology or a new educational model may be as innovative as a patent.

4. Societal Impact

Societal impact asks the question that conventional rankings often leave unanswered: how is the continent better because this university exists? How does the community benefit from the output of an institution. Evidence might include sustained community partnerships, contributions to public policy, improvements in health and education, economic participation, environmental stewardship, and the preservation of political stability. These initiatives must be sustainable and systemic, rather than fragmented special interests.

5. Graduate Success

Graduate success should consider more than immediate employment. A university's responsibility does not end at graduation; graduate trajectories provide one indication of whether education has translated into capability and opportunity.

6. Africanisation

The central pillar of this ranking is Africanisation – African histories, languages, indigenous knowledge systems, and pedagogical approaches should be a defining feature of the score. Indicators could include curriculum transformation, curriculum transformation, multilingualism, support for African scholarship, longitudinal partnerships across the continent, preservation and advancement of indigenous knowledge systems, and meaningful engagement with questions of decolonisation, equity and historical justice.

7. Internationalisation

Internationalisation remains important, but should be reimagined as reciprocal engagement rather than a simple measure of foreign staff or students. A strong African university should be globally connected while retaining local and continental relevance.

8. Institutional Sustainability

Institutional sustainability should encompass the university's capacity to endure and contribute responsibly over time. This includes environmental sustainability, financial resilience, governance, infrastructure, digital capacity, staff and student wellbeing, and institutional preparedness for future challenges. The question is not simply whether a university performs well today, but whether it can sustain its mission for the generations that follow⁵.

Proposal 2: Replacing Rankings with an African Excellence Index

Rather than ranking universities from first to last, an African Excellence Index would recognise achievement through a system of stars across distinct domains. The purpose would shift from declaring one institution universally 'better' than another to identifying where each institution demonstrates excellence. This approach would make institutional diversity visible rather than treating diversity as methodological noise.

The seven domains include

1. Overall Excellence

A broad recognition of sustained institutional strength across multiple dimensions, without requiring that every university excel in exactly the same way.

2. Research Excellence

Recognition of high-quality, influential and relevant knowledge creation, including both scholarly impact and contribution to African priorities.

3. Innovation Excellence

Recognition of an institution's ability to generate, adapt and translate ideas into technological, economic, social and public solutions.

4. Community Impact

Recognition of sustained and demonstrable benefit to communities, public systems and society, with particular attention to reciprocity and long-term partnership.

5. Digital Readiness

Recognition of digital infrastructure, technological capability, digital teaching and learning, data capacity, innovation and preparedness for the rapidly changing technological environment.

6. Sustainability

Recognition of environmental responsibility and the institution's contribution to sustainable development, climate resilience and intergenerational wellbeing.

7. Employability and Graduate Success

Recognition of how effectively an institution prepares graduates for meaningful work, further development, leadership, entrepreneurship and contribution to society.⁵

Why Stars May Be More Honest Than a League Table

A star-based index has an important advantage: it acknowledges that excellence is plural. A university might earn the highest recognition for Community Impact and Sustainability while still developing its research infrastructure. Another may demonstrate exceptional Research Excellence and Innovation while having more work to do in employability or digital readiness⁵.

Transparency

Transparency is still lacking: the average student or alumnus does not understand how rankings are calculated and will never be able to see how the data supplied by universities is used to produce scores. Some institution-supplied data is not used for reasons known only by the data analysts. This lack of transparency not only perpetuates the inequality that ranking systems create, but they cast doubt on the rigour of data collection, analysis, and synthesis processes. To truly investigate ranking and its ramifications, data must be made globally available, such that the general public is able to dissect, criticise, and question the manner in which data is used to produce scores.

Dilemma

Although a star-based index could remove the calculation, data-dependent, and complex scoring systems, stars themselves can be counted and used to formulate an informal ranking system. Once the African Excellence Index has been created, there is no way to prevent the public from creating competition and hierarchies based on the number of stars different universities have. Ultimately, this workshop showed that quantitative analyses of a university's performance cannot be escaped – whether that quantification is stars or scores. What needs to be rectified is the way in which these scores are perceived and how their societal and academic functions are constructed.

Parting question

Universities are a microcosm of society and competition is a natural driving force within it. But if we live in a competitive, capitalist, survival-of-the-fittest society, it is truly possible to remove competition from the global university community?

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