

Taking a stand:

Rhodes University reaffirms its rejection of scientifically dubious university rankings.



Rhodes University has come out strongly to re-affirm its decision not to participate in scientifically dubious and anti-transformation international university ranking systems.

There has been a proliferation of ranking systems in the recent past, which now also comprise a billion-dollar industry. Most of the systems vary only slightly in methodology.

Despite widespread concern about the scientifically poor and commercialised methods used by these systems, some South African universities actively participate in them and increasingly direct their employment processes and focus their activities towards positioning themselves in the rankings.

Rhodes University is the only university in South Africa to have taken a principled stand against engaging with ranking systems.

Other universities, such as the Law Schools of both Yale and Harvard, have recently taken similar stances, joining Rhodes University's long-held position.

As high-profile universities around the world start to express concern about the neocolonial nature of ranking systems, it becomes even more important for Rhodes University to publicly take up its position on the rankings and to articulate how this position aligns with the University's transformation agenda, academic project, and notions of what constitutes good scientific practice.

Rhodes University's assessments of the ranking systems highlight the following:

1. The rankings suggest that universities work in an entirely market-based ideology without recognising their responsibility as a public good. Being a public good can, at times, entail taking decisions which militate against an institution's positioning in the rankings.
2. The rankings ignore social concerns. Responding to community needs and attending to a redress agenda are rendered largely irrelevant by such systems.
3. Some ranking systems place a heavy weight on institutional "reputation", reinforcing the colonial legacies of higher education.
4. Rankings reward elite and exclusive admissions processes.
5. Rankings are methodologically flawed in that they consist of combining unrelated measures to produce a composite score.
6. The measures are often proxies that often bear a slim, if any, relationship to the quality indicator they are meant to represent.
7. The weighting of each measure is arbitrary, and any changes in weighting results in a reordering of the rankings making the validity of the rankings questionable.
8. The ranking systems use one set of criteria for all institutions, with a failure to engage in the context, history, or aims of the specific university.
9. The rankings systems privilege research outputs over teaching and learning and community engagement, often without any measure of the quality or impact of such research outputs on society.
10. Universities increasingly use ranking metrics to steer institutional decision-making, which drives funding away from activities such as community engagement that might otherwise have been deemed central to the institution's purpose.

Given significant scholarly and social concerns regarding the [flawed methodologies](#) employed by the rankings, the motives and potential impact on the purpose and role of higher education, and their lack of contextualization of an institution's particular academic project, Rhodes University's position not to actively participate is vindicated.

Rhodes University urges other public universities in South Africa to reflect on the extent to which ranking systems sideline the purposes for higher education set out in the [White Paper of 1997](#).

Some universities use their international rankings as a marketing tool, conflating the quality of their offerings with their ranking. Many parents, potential students, and other stakeholders may not have

adequate understanding of how the ranking systems function and what the motives are. With the growing body of academics and institutions who have called out the troubling flaws and problematic assumptions inherent in these systems, we are optimistic that this attempt at commercialisation of higher education can be exposed for what it is, and halted.



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