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University rankings: Assessing the newest kid on the block

Ellen Hazelkorn and Philip G Altbach 11 February 2023

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After 20 years of global university rankings, one fact seems self-evident: ranking fever remains high. Policy-makers around the world, higher education institutions of all missions as well as students, parents, investors and others are obsessed in myriad ways with rankings and what they allegedly say about quality and competitiveness.

Over the years, there have been pretenders-to-the-throne who have simply sought to reproduce their own version of a world-class university ranking, such as University Ranking by Academic Performance (URAP), Round University Ranking (RUR), *US News* rankings and others referenced by the **IREG (International Ranking Expert Group) Inventory on International Rankings**.

But the world around us is changing and the issues impacting on and expected of higher education are changing also. Thus, what marks out the current phase in the development of rankings is the number of different initiatives which aim to promote an alternative conceptual framework which responds to the challenges we face today and the changes we see around us.

The 'new generation' of rankings focuses on more specific themes that the rankers see as central to global realities.

As discussed previously in *University World News*, new entrants are focusing on, among other things, sustainability, the environment and climate change, equity and social mobility, ethics and transparency and societal value and impact.

Many operate on a non-commercial basis. But they arguably reflect the views and concerns of Generation Z and Generation Alpha; in other words, students and potential students.

They also offer an opportunity for higher education institutions in East Asia and the Pacific and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) regions and the Global South and other less resource-intensive institutions – all of which are effectively locked out of the dominant rankings which mainly emphasise research productivity and global reputation – to put themselves and their topics 'on the map'.

Globethics.net

One of the newest rankings is the **Globethics.net University Ranking (GUR)** which emphasises "ethical values that contribute to building sustainable, just and peaceful societies". The ranking was developed by **Globethics.net** – an international non-governmental organisation registered in Geneva, Switzerland, as an independent, not-for-profit foundation.

Established in 2004, Globethics.net focuses on ethics in higher education, both in the governance and administration of higher education institutions as well as in teaching to foster responsible leadership. It holds special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

The Globethics.net University Ranking was **launched in November 2022**. Its aim is to disrupt the current global landscape. It is the first global ranking instrument that places values, ethics and sustainability as central principles of higher education institutions worldwide.

The aim is to capture student and academic views on three key issues: the student learning experience; inspiring leadership in higher education; and commitment to sustainability and integrity.

The methodology, which was piloted over two years, consists of two proprietary survey instruments. For students, questions are grouped under seven themes: 1. Teaching and learning; 2. Assessment; 3. Skills development; 4. Social interaction; 5. Aspirations; 6. Academic integrity; and 7. Sustainability (awareness and commitment).

For academic staff, questions are grouped under four themes, namely: 1. Leadership assessment; 2. Institute values; 3. Institute resilience; and 4. Institute sustainability commitment. Noticeably, research is not an indicator of excellence.

Higher education institutions opt in to Globethics.net by directly contacting them. The institution then distributes the surveys, which are available in nine languages, to students and academic staff. It aims for a 10% response rate per institution.

Only the top 25 higher education institutions are published, with the aim of focusing on and promoting good practice rather than who is number one. Higher education institutions are encouraged to provide examples of measures that have resulted in positive outcomes. Detailed feedback is provided to universities with recommendations.

Strengths and weaknesses

One hundred institutions from 30 countries appeared in the first edition of GUR. They are listed under three different themes in groups of 25. Approximately 65% of the higher education institutions are from countries across the Global South, with only one each from the United States and Australia. Not surprisingly, the ranking has attracted significant interest.

Amongst students, skills for future careers were considered the most important attribute, followed by a commitment to social engagement and integrity. Amongst academic staff, trust in management ranked highest although being valued at work ranked low.

It is interesting that the most popular responses from both students and academics did not rank ethics as the top area of concern.

Furthermore, **according to Aftab Dean**, who was commissioned to develop and analyse the surveys, while there is a commitment to integrity and sustainability, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), "one-third of students indicated that they were not particularly committed to or engaged with sustainability and integrity after they graduated and a quarter of staff do not believe their institution is particularly committed to or is demonstrating a commitment to meet the SDGs".

Essentially, GUR is a survey of opinion and perception. It says what students and staff think about issues which can be helpful to inform higher education leadership about what they are doing and what they could be doing better. There is an algorithm to auto-detect fake answers.

However, GUR faces various methodological and resource problems. For one thing, it does not really measure ethical values – indeed it does not actually measure anything. Rather it asks students and academics what they think about a broad range of topics, but the ranking does not objectively measure anything at all.

Because no data is required to be submitted by the participating universities, we have no idea about what the institutions are actually doing in relation to ethical values.

The responses provide an interesting array of attitudes and perspectives by the respondents, but, as **Manja Klemencic and Igor Chirikov argue**, "the widespread use of student survey data raises questions of reliability and validity".

Furthermore, the participation of 100 universities worldwide (out of a total of more than 20,000 universities) and a very limited participation from the Global North do not tell us too much. Finally, as GUR is discovering, rankings are incredibly resource intensive.

Thus, while the intention to highlight ethics in higher education is without question laudable, this ranking is not a ranking; it is a survey of student and academic opinions about what higher education institutions are doing rather than what they actually do.

Where next?

As **Alex Usher**, president of Higher Education Strategy Associates, argues, these new initiatives are exposing "increasingly deep fractures across global academia about the larger purposes of higher education and how – if at all – institutional progress on these purposes should be measured".

That is certainly true – and that is important. Their growing presence raises fundamental questions as to whether the dominant university rankings are (still) fit for purpose.

On the other hand, the Globethics.net University Ranking shows us that conceptualising, organising and implementing a ranking is difficult. A much better idea is to further develop their existing benchmarking tool, the **Higher Education Ethics Model of Excellence Tool**. Joining with others – perhaps via UNESCO – to promote these important themes, such as ethics and sustainability, and making it available for academic institutions to measure their own work, would be transformative.

The new Globethics.net University Ranking (GUR), was launched on 11 February 2023. The authors of this article were commissioned to give their independent expert view of the ranking.

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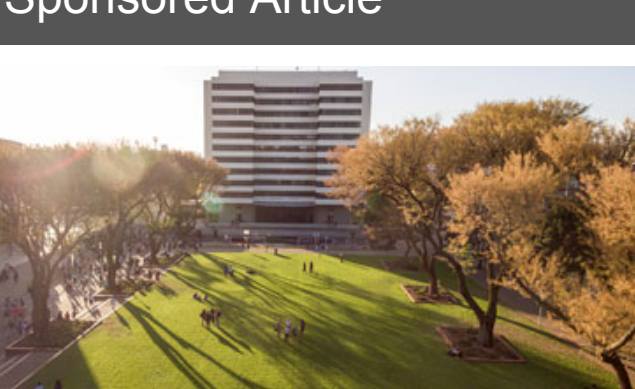
A new global university ranking with an ethical mission

Aftab Dean

A new university ranking system aims to serve as a catalyst for positive transformation in higher education, ensuring that universities create an environment grounded in integrity and sustainability that inspires and supports students and staff in the development of novel solutions to global challenges.

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University of Pretoria staff

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