

# Global university rankings and the metrics maze

Discussions and debates continue over a truly contentious issue in higher education, the institutional passion for micro-performance measurement in the form of key performance indicators (KPIs) or metrics; otherwise be known as a “metrics maze”. Are you lost in the metrics maze?

On writing, *Campus Morning Mail* had just published in the same week two commentaries on global university rankings (GURs), by Angel Calderon, on 26 and 28 June respectively and another by Merlin Crossley on 21 July. This industry was established in 2003 with the advent of the Shanghai Academic Rankings of World Universities (ARWU) as the inaugural ranking of global universities. Subsequently, the numbers of sector rankings of the genre have multiplied. According to an RMIT University web site, “there are at least 15 global ranking schemas” [1]. Therefore, how many global rankings exist for our public universities to select and use?

The metrics maze has become much larger across the past 20 years since the initial release of numbers dominated GURs and continues to do so. Of course, the larger the maze, the harder it becomes to find one’s way out. Getting into the rankings caper seems to be straightforward and, indeed, considered trendy in this “calculative era”.

Currently, we are into the global rankings season. Calderon, on 26 June, comments that “Aus unis shine bright under Leiden lights”. Readers are advised that the Leiden Ranking “includes 1,318 universities, up by 93 from 1,225 in 2021”. For better or worse, the oldest universities (formed when there were essentially few universities established), which are often the largest, need not be greatly concerned. These institutions appear to be eternally privileged and often guard their positioning with strong commitment and enthusiasm.

Next, on 28 June, “Angel Calderon (critically) reviews big-name rankings”, with the sub-heading, “Nature Index can be better and U-Multirank not much use in Australia”. U-Mr, as it is known, originated in 2014, and “covered 804 institutions from more than 70 countries. The 2022 edition covers 2202 institutions”. In essence, it seems that this growth is well expressed as, “the more participants there are, the better it shall be”.

Merlin Crossley, on 21 July, referred to what he calls the “university league tables” and expressed a view that these “would fade into the background”, adding “it’s happening” already. Why is this the case? According to the author, “because once things settle . . . rankings are self-reinforcing and stable”. In other words, GURs are predicted to become firmly fixed in time and across space. What is the point of this nice, even potentially cosy set-up for the so-called top-ranked universities? Does this mean that direct competition among our public universities, as indeed stimulated by GURs, results in effectively no change in the future perceived standing of institutions, say in the next 10, 20 or 30 years, as purportedly identified by ranking positions?

Notwithstanding Crossley’s comments, the constant uploading of institutions into ranking competitions creates a much bigger gap between those players ranked in the Top 100 and those in the Bottom 100. The first category has great cache for marketing purposes to move further up the rankings towards even higher ground. For institutions herded within the bottom tier, their positioning is at least potentially embarrassing and even viability threatening.

Unlike in 2003, how many universities evidently aspire to be ranked very well in several different ranking schemas? It does not seem necessary to provide examples of these



institutions; there are evidently many in our midst, based on a cursory examination of university web sites, but even this view is likely to be hazy if you are trapped in the metrics maze. However, one might lighten up, given there are many others either lost or feeling lost in the metrics maze.

So, what does this mean? Academics, at least, will know that they are effectively running around and aiming to jump higher to no avail, to get a slight glimpse of the outside world to help them find their way out of the maze. What are the impacts, though, of this micro-measurement approach to university management on the stakeholders of these public institutions?

While not seeking to answer all aspects of impact, we know the transformative power of GURs is already well understood. Global rankings instigate heightened and even intense competition among our universities that stimulate “a self-interested corporate culture and dysfunctional behaviours . . . The warnings are clear” (Carnegie and Parker, 2021). A culture of university competition emerges to replace cross-university collaboration.

What is an alternative? A focus on universities working sharply on attaining their organisational missions/purposes and visions/ambitions is manifest under the macro-contributions approach to university management (Carnegie, 2021a, b). Societal expectations of public universities, as represented in mission and vision statements, portray a broad-scope orientation focussed firmly on the public good and community advancement, that is, a macro-contributions approach to serving and supporting local, national, regional and global societies.

Not curiously, this represents the public’s overarching expectation of the vital, broad-scope social value of our public universities, such as contributing to society and nature by answering “big questions” and solving “wicked problems”. In 2022, there is certainly no shortage of questions or problems of that genre. These include issues such as the climate crisis, energy crisis, health and aged-care provision, housing shortage, education availability and affordability, domestic violence and many more.

Recently, a new definition of accounting has been proposed for widespread adoption. It states: “Accounting is a technical, social and moral practice concerned with the sustainable utilisation of resources and proper accountability to stakeholders to enable the flourishing of organisations, people and nature” (Carnegie *et al.*, 2021a, b) [2].

Accounting is not a mere neutral, benign, technical practice. This is a narrow conception of accounting. Rather, accounting is multidimensional; it is also vital social practice and moral practice. Adopting this more inclusive and important conception of accounting will help in shaping a better world and serve society and nature, essentially by contributing to answering big questions and solving wicked problems, particularly on a strong, government backed, multidisciplinary basis.

This proposed definition combines accounting for universities’ financial stewardship with assessing and evaluating their wider accountability, including accounting’s impacts on human behaviour, the tone and openness of organisational culture, and upon organisational and social functioning and development. In short, it is based on considering this broad question:

*Q1.* What are the effects of accounting, including performance measurement, in the world?

The transformative power of GURs is indeed premised on the transformative power of accounting (Carnegie, 2021c). In studying accounting, it is essential to understand the nature, roles, uses and *impacts* of accounting, including performance measurement, especially when driven by KPIs under global ranking regimes. This intricate landscape was not painted in 2003 on the pioneering adoption of ARWU nor, as far as can be ascertained, has this ever-extending landscape been captured on canvas since that time.

Accordingly, capturing this landscape is now well overdue, and is a firmly recommended means of at least reducing the haze in the maze. This purposeful imagining will also contribute positively to stimulating the university sector, whether operating locally, nationally, regionally or internationally, to focus on making explicit macro-contributions by collaborating and co-operating for society and nature by answering big questions and solving wicked problems. This is the way out of the metrics maze. That will be for the benefit of all of us, humans and non-humans alike as well as our planet. There is no “Planet B”!

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### Notes

1. RMIT University web site, available at: <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/facts-figures/reputation-and-rankings>
2. This definition was applied by Carnegie *et al.* (2022) in evaluating the proposal of the International Public Sector Accounting Standards Board (IPSASB) under Exposure Draft (ED) 78 “Property, Plant, and Equipment (IPSASB, 2021), to place monetary values on the public cultural, heritage and scientific collections of not-for-profit cultural heritage or arts institutions for financial reporting purposes.

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**Further reading**

General review

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Crossley, M. (2022), “Rankings: not much to see now”, *Campus Morning Mail*, 21 July, available at: <https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/rankings-not-much-to-see-now/> (accessed 23 July 2022).