Chapter 22

Academic Freedom and University Rankings

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Introduction

The promotion and defense of academic freedom is a Sisyphean labor. New threats, internal and external to academia, regularly arise and need to be countered. One suggestion that has recently been raised is that academic freedom would be advanced if it were to be incorporated as one of the parameters of university rankings. In this chapter, I caution against such a proposal. I argue that, on conceptual as well as pragmatic grounds, the proposed means would defeat the desired end, since rankings are themselves a threat to academic freedom. Moreover, a viable alternative is available.

The "Good-At" and the "Good-For"

By way of background, I distinguish two distinct themes in global higher education over the past few decades. One theme is our response to the question of what we are good at. In this theme, we focus mostly on our academic outputs, and we take as our guiding principle the notion of excellence. To measure excellence, we have developed a formidable array of quantitative indices, metrics, and rankings, which we use to compare academic performance on a linear scale and within a competitive paradigm. The other theme

tries to respond in qualitative terms to the question of what we are good for. It speaks of our contribution to the common good, community engagement, sustainability, social justice, and societal impact. Its academic currency is a multidimensional notion of quality, rather than the one-dimensional notion of excellence.

There is a frequent oversimplification regarding these two themes that should be avoided. I refer namely to the view that a strong answer to the good-at question will suffice also as an answer to the good-for question. This view, prevalent for much of the second half of the twentieth century, considered our job as academics to consist of two and only two components: curiosity-driven knowledge generation, and teaching the value of knowledge "for its own sake." In other words, our job was to increase the supply of knowledge in the world. As long as we do that well (or so we thought), society will automatically benefit in the long run. Elsewhere, I have referred to this view, which sees academic work essentially as a supply-side activity, as the "invisible hand" argument. It is named after the famous metaphor of Adam Smith that in a free-market economy, supply will meet up with demand without the need for external regulation.[1] There is powerful inductive support for this argument, with many examples of how freely generated knowledge, created without any specific purpose in mind, turned out to be beneficial in various and often surprising ways. Still, even though the invisible hand argument may be true, it cannot be the whole truth, and although the free creation and dissemination of knowledge may gladly be acknowledged as necessary, it cannot be assumed to be sufficient. The invisible hand is slow in delivering results, and unpredictable in its effects. It is by definition not responsive to societal needs. In a world beset by societal challenges, it would be an abdication of moral responsibility not to try and generate knowledge with the specific purpose of addressing such challenges. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it would have been irresponsible of the universities just to sit back and assume that the invisible hand would take care of it.

Even a strong response to the "good-at" question will not suffice, by itself, as a response to the "good-for" question. The latter needs to be responded to on its own terms. In fact, each of these two themes has a domain of discourse,

1 Chris Brink, *The Soul of the University: Why Excellence Is Not Enough* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018).

a lexicon and a methodology particularly suited to it. This becomes evident when we consider the terms in which we evaluate each kind of activity.

For the good-at theme, by far the most commonly used evaluative term is excellence. It is worth understanding the preconceptions inherent in this notion. To "excel," according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, is to be superior, preeminent, or outstanding. What that means is that excellence is a relational notion: when we claim that entity A is excellent, we do so in relation to other entities. The concept of excellence therefore rests on a key assumption, namely that of any two entities A and B (of whatever kind we are talking about), it makes sense to say that one of them is better than the other. This assumption then also applies iteratively to all the entities under consideration, at every stage pronouncing one of them to excel above the rest—in other words, to be excellent.

A mathematician would formulate the key assumption behind the notion of excellence by saying that the set of entities under consideration is assumed to be linearly ordered. It is, namely, the distinguishing characteristic of a linearly ordered set that of any two distinct elements A and B, it must be the case that either A > B or B > A. This is in fact a very strong assumption to make about any set of entities. It works well for numbers, but not always well in real life (and not well either for mathematical objects other than numbers, such as sets). Accepting the assumption of linearity means that we would be constrained to believe that if you have an apple and an orange, one of them must taste better than the other; if you have a rose and a lily, one of them must be more beautiful than the other, and if you compare Raphael to Rembrandt you must pronounce one of them the better artist.

It is exactly the assumption of linearity that lies at the bottom of university rankings. The defining purpose and main characteristic of such a ranking is that given any two universities—any two universities at all, anywhere in the world—it is assumed to make sense to rank one of them above the other. This is done no matter how these two universities might differ from each other. For example, University A might have an Engineering School and a School of Medicine, but neither a School of Agriculture nor a School of Law, whereas University B might have both Agriculture and Law but neither Engineering nor Medicine. One university might do an outstanding job of helping to uplift a local disadvantaged community, whereas the other might go about its business entirely divorced from its immediate surroundings.

One might be focused on responding to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, whereas the other is focused on pure mathematics, physics, and cosmology. No matter. On a ranking, one of A or B will be pronounced to be better than the other.

Constructing a Ranking

It is in fact not difficult to construct a university ranking. What is needed is not so much any technical skill as the blind self-confidence to make arbitrary choices between equally plausible alternatives. First, there is the choice of which categories of activities to evaluate. This choice is often driven by expediency because some activities (like research outputs) are easier to measure than others (like societal engagement). Naturally, the choice you make of what to evaluate will advantage some universities and disadvantage others. Second, you have to choose performance indicators in your chosen categories and how to measure them. Research performance, for example, has many plausible indicators, and whatever selection you make could easily have been different, with different outcomes. Also, when choosing performance indicators, you have to choose the manner and extent to which you use indicators of opinion vis-à-vis indicators of fact. "Reputational ranking," for example, is a matter of opinion, as is "student satisfaction." Third, for every performance indicator you have to come up with a number that represents your measurement of that indicator. The term "measurement" is a dubious suggestion of objectivity. In practice, the so-called measurement again requires a number of choices. You need to choose, for example, which data set(s) to use and what level of reliability of those data sets you will be content with. You also need to choose whether you will deal with gross numbers (which will favor larger institutions) or normalize the numbers according to the size of the institution (which tends to favor smaller institutions). Even normalizing your numbers "relative to size" involves a level of choice, because there is no generally agreed definition of what the size of a university is. (Is University A, with ten thousand students and two thousand academics, bigger or smaller than University B, with twenty thousand students and one thousand academics?) Fourth, having made many choices already to arrive at a number for each performance indicator, you still need to decide on a formula for combining those numbers into one number (which would then

be your ranking). You could, for example, take the average—either mean or median. Or you could assign weights to each performance indicator—which can of course be done in infinitely many ways. There are many different ways of combining a set of numbers to yield one number, and, crucially, there is no strong reason, either mathematical or empirical, for choosing one method above any other.

To repeat: the construction of a ranking involves many choices, and there are no objective criteria for making one choice rather than another. Any ranking of universities therefore reflects the choices made by the ranker at least as much as it might be claimed to reflect an objective reality about those universities. It is hard to escape the suspicion that rankers make their choices according to their preconceived notion of which "the best" universities are. If a ranking did not fit their preconceptions, they would change their parameters rather than adjust their preconceptions. What this means is that rankings are normative, not just descriptive. They create a reality at least as much as they reflect a reality.

In short, university rankings are conceived in sin. Of course, criticism of rankings is nothing new—there are many discussions of their methodological shortcomings.[2] My summary here is however constructed to emphasize a particular point: any ranking suffers from the original sin of purporting to capture something which there is no reason to believe exists: a linear ordering of the set of all universities in the world.

The Rising Prominence of University Rankings

Despite these fundamental flaws, the phenomenon of university rankings has grown within two decades to become one of the defining features of global higher education. It is rare now to attend any meeting or seminar on any topic in higher education without the reality of rankings becoming part of the discussion. In the process, rankings have become big business. What the Times Higher Education started as a curiosity in London in the early 2000s, for example, has become an international commercial enterprise, endlessly but profitably recycling data, much of which comes from the univer-

2 See, e.g., Terence Karran and Lucy Mallinson, "Academic Freedom and World-Class Universities: A Virtuous Circle?" *Higher Education Policy* (2018).

sities themselves. Somehow the rankers have maneuvered themselves into the advantageous position of being both auditor and consultant, at the same time, for the same institutions. More to the point, however, rankings have grown in influence so much that they have global geopolitical consequences. This assessment has been convincingly demonstrated by the foremost expert in the field, Professor Ellen Hazelkorn. Tellingly, her groundbreaking work is titled *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence*.[3] It gives copious references and has been updated by other publications. The final chapter summarizes how the reshaping of higher education has happened at three levels. First, rankings have changed higher education institutions. Many universities have turned themselves into ranking-chasing machines, narrowly defining their institutional mission in terms of the ambition to rise in one or more of the university rankings. Second, in many countries, rankings have been instrumental in the reshaping of national higher education systems. Politicians have come to regard university rankings as a measure of international competitiveness and have therefore restructured their national higher education systems, in various versions of an *Exzellenzinitiative*, with the declared intention of enabling a few "elite" universities to rise to the top of the rankings. Third, rankings have reshaped our understanding of knowledge itself. Hazelkorn speaks of rankings "reasserting the hierarchy of traditional knowledge production," with a focus on a narrow definition of knowledge, traditional outputs, and "impact" defined as something that occurs only between academic peers. There may well be people who honestly, though naively, believe that academic excellence is objectively represented by university rankings. The fact is, however, that the opposite is the case: the subjective and haphazard choices of the rankers have come to define what academic excellence is considered to be.

So the situation is this. There is a force, external to academia, run as a global money-making business, based on a false premise and implemented by ad hoc choices, which is influencing the career choices of countless young people, affecting the modus operandi of many academics, demonstrably shaping the way universities operate, influencing national higher

3 Ellen Hazelkorn, *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See also Ellen Hazelkorn, ed., *Global Rankings and the Geopolitics of Higher Education: Understanding the Influence and Impact of Rankings on Higher Education, Policy and Society* (London: Routledge, 2017).

education policies, and fundamentally affecting our understanding of the nature and purpose of knowledge production. I would argue that any external force constraining higher education in such a manner must be considered as a threat to institutional autonomy and, therefore, also to academic freedom.

The situation is not improved by the fact that many universities and individual academics are complicit in this threat. Vanity is such a powerful motivating factor that those who do well on the rankings—even just momentarily—cannot resist the temptation to boast about it in public, even when simultaneously expressing private misgivings. Those who have done less well, on the other hand, feel that they cannot speak out against rankings lest they be accused of sour grapes. In this manner compliance follows in the wake of vanity, and the entire rankings-chasing exercise becomes self-perpetuating.

Academic Freedom and University Rankings: Proceed with Caution

It is time for us to take account of the fact that the global role of university rankings should be counted among the growing list of threats to academic freedom.

I would raise a caution, therefore, about any proposal, well-intentioned though it may be, that academic freedom should be included as a category of evaluation in university rankings. Recently, for example, a letter went out to all ranking organizations from the Global Public Policy Institute and the Scholars at Risk network, saying:

> Academic freedom is an integral part of quality academic research, teaching, and learning—yet so far none of the dominant university excellence rankings include measures of academic freedom in their assessments. University rankings are in a unique position to shape incentive structures for governments, universities, scholars, and students. The omission of academic freedom in existing rankings, on the other hand, negatively affects universities' and governments' impetus to improve academic freedom levels. With the creation of the Academic Freedom Index (AFi),

> university rankings finally have a real opportunity to close this gap in their methodology.[4]

An article titled "Why University Rankings Must Include Academic Freedom" also appeared in *University World News* (one of the coauthors being the contact cited in the letter to ranking organizations),[5] while in the same time frame, the claim was made that "universities without academic freedom have no place in rankings."[6] The letter to ranking organizations is also featured on the website of the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG) Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, an organization consisting of "ranking organizations, universities and other bodies interested in university rankings and academic excellence."[7]

To anyone committed to academic freedom, any proposal for its advancement deserves attention—but not uncritical acceptance. In this case, in particular, two areas of concern are apparent: conceptual and pragmatic.

Conceptual Concerns

My conceptual concern about adding academic freedom to ranking parameters is that, in principle, the proposal is self-defeating. In the letter quoted earlier, the writers themselves begin by acknowledging that "rankings are in a unique position to shape incentive structures for governments, universities, scholars and students." That is to acknowledge exactly what Ellen Hazelkorn argued, that in many countries rankings have been an external force instrumental in the reshaping of higher education systems, which is to say that rankings constrain free choice. Such a starting point can only offer the same advantages as surrendering before the battle begins. The very premise of the proposal is that by including academic freedom the rankings can be

4 Global Public Policy Institute and Scholars at Risk, *Accounting for Academic Freedom in University Excellence Rankings: An Invitation to Collaboration* (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute and Scholars at Risk, 2021).

5 Robert Quinn, Janika Spannagel, and Ilyas Saliba, "Why University Rankings Must Include Academic Freedom," *University World News*, March 11, 2021, www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210311071016522.

6 Carsten A. Holz, "Universities without Academic Freedom Have No Place in Rankings," *International Higher Education* 106 (2021): 3–5.

7 IREG Observatory, "About Us," https://ireg-observatory.org/en/about-us/.

improved, and thus become even more influential—which means that they would become even more effective at restricting academic freedom. That is why I say the proposal is self-defeating: the proposed means would defeat the desired end.

The idea that rankings can and should be "improved" is very common, and proposals to this effect are often made. But improvement is in the eye of the proposer. Seldom does a specific proposal for "improvement" amount to anything other than offering a different set of choices from those already used, according to how the preferences of the proposer differ from those of the rankers. Thus, the current proposal offers academic freedom as an additional category of evaluation, and similar proposals have also been made for the inclusion, for example, of societal impact, sustainability, or ethics. Such proposals then also need to go further in suggesting some tweaks in the arithmetical formulae leading to the eventual ranking number. All of this is technically feasible and would not be hard to implement.

It has been claimed that "measuring and ranking universities is difficult."[8] I disagree. Technically, ranking universities is easy. Conceptually, however, if by ranking we mean objective ranking, it is not just difficult—it is impossible.

Let me motivate this bold claim of impossibility by returning to the distinction between what we are good at and what we are good for. I have already coupled the good-at theme with the notion of excellence, and hence with rankings. I would now argue that the good-for theme is coupled, not with excellence, but with the much richer notion of academic quality.

There are two fundamental differences between excellence and quality. The first is that whereas excellence, as mentioned, is a relational concept, quality is not. When we compare the apple and the orange, or the rose and the lily, we are interested in their various qualities, but we do not thereby relate one to the other as being better or worse. Quality inheres in an individual—it is part of what philosophers have long described as the essence of the individual. The second difference between excellence and quality begins with the tautological observation that quality is described in qualitative terms. To be a little less gnomic about it: quality has many aspects, and so it is a multidimensional concept, whereas excellence is a one-dimensional concept. As regards universities, then, under "academic quality" we would

8 Quinn et al., "Why University Rankings Must Include Academic Freedom."

include a richness of attributes, most of which are not relational. Under the quality of a university, we might incorporate its value system, for example, how it responds to societal challenges, or its contributions to issues of social justice, such as equality. In particular, and to the present point, it seems perfectly reasonable to consider academic freedom as one aspect of academic quality. Concepts such as values, social justice, or freedom, however, do not naturally lend themselves to ranking (although they can of course be forced into normative linearity by some process of quantification). Who is to say, for example, that the ethical basis of University A is better or worse than that of University B? When universities A and B each set out their value system via their vision and/or mission statement, we may be interested in asking each whether they practice what they preach, but we do not normally rank their value statements. We are back to the rose and the lily: while we can appreciate each on its merit, it makes no sense to rank one above the other.

All of this is to say—no more and no less than what philosophers have accepted ever since Aristotle—that Quantity and Quality are different categories. Neither can substitute for the other. That is why I argue that, in principle, rankings cannot capture quality.

Pragmatic Concerns

That still leaves what might be called the pragmatic argument. It goes like this: rankings are a reality that cannot be wished away, and therefore, whatever their conceptual shortcomings, it is better to join them than to try and beat them. That is, we should on pragmatic grounds accept excellence as a proxy for quality, and rankings as a popular assessment of excellence. In consequence, it would then be advantageous to incorporate academic freedom as a parameter of rankings so that it can ride on the coattails of their popularity.

In response, I would say: Consider the consequences. Imagine that the proposal is indeed implemented—that is, that some index of academic freedom is incorporated in the so-called university world rankings. Suddenly, then, the league table of the "top-200" universities in the world would look very different, according to whether or not the country within which a university is situated is judged to be free or unfree. Now consider the fallout. Inevitably, ques-

tions would be raised about the credibility of this move.[9] Two consequences appear to be likely. The first is that those universities that lost out will cry foul on the grounds that, whatever the level of unfreedom is in their country, it is not their fault. Along the same lines, those governments whose universities lost out would simply hold the entire exercise up to ridicule, arguing by the logic of excellence that the inclusion of academic freedom is a weak attempt to game the system and gain advantage by bringing extraneous factors into play. Academic freedom, they would say, has nothing to do with academic excellence—and for those committed only to the logic of "excellence," they would have a point. The second likely consequence is that whatever arithmetical wizardry was applied to factor in a freedom index could and would easily be reverse-engineered, leading back to whatever the original ranking would have been—and handing a propaganda coup to the "unfree" countries. Thus the pragmatic proposal fails, on pragmatic grounds, when we consider the consequences of its implementation. The game is not worth the candle.

In summary: we are dealing with two distinct domains of discourse. The discourse of rankings and excellence leads us to a one-dimensional league table. It is part of our response to the question "What are we good at?" The discourse of quality, on the other hand, is multidimensional and deals with concepts that are not by nature positioned on a linear scale. It is part of our response to the question "What are we good for?" As I argued earlier, the second question is not reducible to the first. Excellence by itself is not sufficient. The good-for question needs to be addressed on its own terms. The proposal to incorporate a qualitative concept like academic freedom into the quantitative game of rankings fails both on conceptual and pragmatic grounds, essentially because you cannot advance the case for quality by the logic of excellence, for the same reason as you cannot foster multidimensionality on a linear scale.

A Way Forward? Ratings and Rankings Distinguished

One question remains: for the concept of academic quality, is there an alternative to ranking? Is there a way of offering a comparison between variations of quality without forcing qualitative concepts onto a quantified linear scale?

9 I am of the view that any question raised about the credibility of rankings is welcome, but for the moment I am following the reasoning of the pragmatic argument.

Such an alternative is indeed available. It begins with distinguishing a rating from a ranking.

Rating qualitative concepts is very common. It consists of breaking down a qualitative concept into a number of categories, and then assigning a rating—which could be a word or a number—to each of these categories. Suppose for example a food critic decides to rate the quality of restaurants in a city. She might then break down "quality" into (say) five dimensions: the quality of the ingredients, the quality of the preparation, the quality of the presentation, the quality of the service, and the taste of the food. On each of these five dimensions she might further assign an evaluation, say "awful" or "mediocre" or "fair" or "good" or "wonderful." It makes no difference if she decides to use numbers as shorthand, say 0 for "awful" up to 4 for "wonderful." The point is that each restaurant gets an evaluation that consists of five ratings. So, following the order in which the five dimensions are listed, Restaurant A might get an evaluation that says "ingredients fair, preparation good, presentation good, service awful, taste good," or "2-3-3-0-3" for short. Restaurant B, on the other hand, might by the same method get an evaluation that says "1-4-0-2-4," which indicates a different kind of dining experience.

Following up on this little thought experiment, let me repeat by way of emphasis a number of points I have made before, and add some new ones. First, it would be perfectly possible (indeed, easy) for the food critic to turn each of these two sets of ratings into a single number, and thus get a ranking. Second, for this purpose, she could employ any one of a number of methods, all equally plausible but yielding different results. (Take the mean, then A=B; take the median, then A > B; take the mode, then A < B.) Third, no matter how she does it the ranking process would involve loss of information. Fourth (and this is a new point) whatever ranking method the critic uses the customer could use as well. The customer is perfectly capable of deciding for themself where to go and have dinner on the basis of the given ratings combined with their own individual preferences. Therefore, in conclusion, what is the point of doing the ranking at all? The ratings would suffice perfectly well—indeed, better than the ranking—for individual decision-making.

Now compare the thought experiment with the Academic Freedom Index—the flagship ranking of those who propose that academic freedom

should be incorporated into university rankings.[10] At the outset, academic freedom is treated, very sensibly, as being multidimensional. There are five dimensions: freedom to research and teach, freedom to share research findings, institutional autonomy, freedom from surveillance and harassment, and freedom to express opinions. In each country, each of these dimensions of freedom is then rated on a five-point scale: 0 = completely restricted; 1 = severely restricted; 2 = moderately restricted; 3 = mostly free, and 4 = fully free. So far so good. What this means is that the method would assign to each country what might be called an academic freedom profile: a set of five ratings. However, like the restaurant critic, the Academic Freedom Index does not stop there. It employs a "state-of-the-art statistical model" to turn the five ratings into a single number and thereby produce a ranking. The same conclusions as earlier therefore apply. Above all: the ranking produced suffers from a grievous loss of information—so what is the point of doing it at all? Why not simply retain the multidimensionality, and present the rating results as they are, rather than arbitrarily compressing them into a single number? Why try to gild the lily?[11]

Such restraint is not impossible. The Research Excellence Framework in the UK, for example, is a major national exercise that evaluates research at each university and presents the results in terms of "quality profiles." Essentially, a quality profile is a picture that shows ratings under various headings.[12] What it is not is a single number. As ever, these quality profiles can indeed be turned into rankings (and again in various ways), and indeed the rankers lose no time in doing so. But the primary results—available in full on the internet—are quite deliberately given as sets of ratings, not as a ranking. As another example, even within the rankings world, there are examples of nonlinear presentations. There is, for example, a methodology called U-Multirank (an unfortunate misnomer for what could rather have been called U-Multirating) that presents its evaluation results in multidi-

10 V-Dem, "Academic Freedom," www.v-dem.net/our-work/research-programs/academic-freedom/.

11 The Academic Freedom Index is by no means the only example of an exercise that starts out as a multidimensional rating profile, but then at the last step gets compressed into a one-dimensional ranking. The Social Progress Index would be another such example, see Social Progress Imperative, "2024 Social Progress Index," www.socialprogress.org/2024-social-progress-index/.

12 See, e.g., REF 2021, "Understanding the REF 2021 Results," www.ref.ac.uk/guidance-on-results/guidance-on-ref-2021-results/.

mensional form, such as through a "sunburst chart."[13] It does not rank universities on a linear scale, but it does provide a facility for users to create their own rankings, according to their own preferences.

Almost all rankings begin with a system of ratings, which are in the final steps squashed together into linear form by some arbitrary arithmetic. It is a sad consequence of scientism that we seem unable to stop our quantifications until we have reduced multidimensional qualitative concepts to a single number. Yet such restraint is exactly what is required. A profile, or a picture, or a set of ratings, is far more informative than a single number and presents a viable alternative for purposes both of comparison and decision-making.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I repeat my caution against the idea that academic freedom would be advanced by incorporating it as a parameter in university rankings. The case for academic freedom must be made within the multidimensional paradigm of academic quality; it cannot be made within the one-dimensional discourse of excellence. For the defense of academic freedom, rankings are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Hence my recommendation: think again!

13 U-Multirank, www.umultirank.org/.