

# Community engagement outperforms university rankings

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Andrew Petter 24 March 2017 Issue No:452

No one has ever criticised a hammer for being a hammer; it is an invaluable tool when that is what you need. But it is useless or destructive if used for the wrong purpose, and university rankings can be the same.

There are three main problems that make international rankings a poor mechanism for assessing, improving or differentiating any but the top few dozen universities in the world.

First, the rankings are based on a basket of indicators that privilege the biggest and wealthiest universities and those of the longest standing. For example, the lists commonly assess research productivity based on the number of peer-reviewed publications, which is entirely legitimate, but extremely difficult to change substantively from year to year, especially when the major players already boast an all but insurmountable advantage.

Likewise, the presence of Nobel laureates or other major prize winners. There is little argument that these thought leaders can act as engines for creativity and innovation and magnets for talent, but it is not practical for institutions out of the top 50 to try to attract and retain a bevy of such intellectual superstars. The dominant universities have resources and momentum, on the basis of which they are almost impossible to dislodge.

The second problem is one of relativity. In any particular year, a university's standing on the list depends not just on what it achieves, but also on the performance of every other university in its class. That means that many of the variables are beyond the control of any one institution in the race.

The act of competition can sometimes be inspiring, and success can be enormously gratifying, but there is much to lose – and little to gain – by competing blindly, especially when it is impossible to know whether 'success' is attributable to high performance in one institution or failure and misfortune in others.

The third ranking weakness becomes more extreme as you go down the list. It is, unquestionably, the sweetest pleasure to be celebrated as number one (and excruciating to be dislodged from that position, even temporarily). It is fabulous and relevant to be in the top 10, maybe even in the top 50. But what are students, faculty, alumni and prospective donors to conclude when an institution falls, say, from number 223 to 232? How many more highly talented candidates will rush to a university that has recently moved from number 299 to 291?

As an objective measure of relative strength or of relevance in a local market, these rankings are simply not helpful.



## **Be the best in the world**

Consider, now, a completely different approach, and one that is available to any institution, wherever it sits in the international post-secondary panoply. The goal is not to be judged good or to be found, in any particular year, to be better. The goal is to be great – to identify and promote that at which the institution can be the best in the world.

That means finding the single differentiator on which an organisation can rise above its competitors. And, in the advanced education world, that differentiator is less likely to lie in the rankings than in the communities, or communities of interest, in which the university has formed extraordinary connections, made exceptional contributions, or demonstrated unique expertise.

## **Engage, engage, engage**

This, then, is the best argument for engagement – for an institution to reach out and embrace the resources and challenges of a community that only it can know best. It is not a new notion. Writers and critics have long since dismissed the ivory-tower model, in which academics attempt to hold themselves above the cares and concerns of the outside world.

Universities fare best when they understand current issues, when they dedicate their resources to answering societal needs. This spirit of engagement arises, in part, from a positive desire to serve.

An example may be found in the Talloires Network, an international association of institutions that are committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education.

The Talloires vision reads as follows: “We believe that higher education institutions do not exist in isolation from society, nor from the communities in which they are located. The Talloires Network envisions universities around the world as a vibrant and dynamic force in their societies, incorporating civic engagement and community service into their research and teaching mission.”

True engagement is not a one-way relationship, in which universities deign to bestow favours on their communities. Engagement is defined by the process of sharing, through which a university gains as much as it contributes. It increases its own relevance and it becomes more successful at reflecting the character of its community. It also becomes more effective at drawing inspiration from civic sources and responding to direct and pressing challenges.

The opportunities are wide open for universities to gain recognition for some aspect of community engagement at which they are the best in the world or best in their country. Or, if that is too large a canvas on which to compete, there are reputational benefits for universities to accrue simply by demonstrating their singular strengths in some aspect of engaging the communities they serve.

For example, if you cannot establish yourself as the best university in the world at supporting community-based indigenous research, you may still establish yourself as the best university at doing so within your geographic area. That kind of expertise – that best-in-class quality, cast globally or locally – is always distinctive and often transferable. That way greatness lies.

There is also a gathering amount of scholarship to attest to the effectiveness of this open, cross-pollinating orientation.

## **The SFU experience**

For its part, Simon Fraser University, or SFU, in Canada has taken the goal of engagement as its principal opportunity to differentiate, and has done so comprehensively. The university's strategic vision calls on the institution "to be the leading engaged university defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting-edge research and far-reaching community engagement".

The vision sets goals for engaging students through some of the most ambitious experiential education programmes in Canada.

It calls on faculty and researchers to engage – to connect directly and for mutual benefit with all the communities SFU serves, both for inspiration and for the resulting advantages in mobilising research discoveries and innovations. And perhaps most distinctively, the vision articulates SFU's ambition to engage physically and programmatically.

Physically, the university has built two new campuses in the past 25 years, establishing both in neighbourhoods that were at risk and, in both locations, catalysing community development. The university has also built a model sustainable community adjacent to SFU's original campus – once an isolated, mountain-top retreat very much in the ivory-tower tradition. The new community is now earning international acclaim for its environmental practices and standards.

Programmatically, the strategic vision challenges SFU to "be British Columbia's public square for enlightenment and dialogue on key public issues, and [to] be known as the institution to which the community looks for education, discussion and solutions".

To this end, SFU has developed programmes to encourage and support those across the university to make their expertise – and our unique and valuable spaces – available for public dialogue. And once a year, SFU convenes a week-long summit on an issue of importance to the community.

While pursuing this vision of engagement, SFU has maintained its first place standing in the Maclean's ranking of Canadian comprehensive universities. Yet, as gratifying as this rating success may be, I believe that the university has gained far more reputational benefit domestically, and more notice worldwide, for our mission to be Canada's 'engaged university' and for the initiatives we have pursued in support of its realisation.

### **Embracing your community**

There is no question that domestic and international university rankings are interesting and useful. The lists identify exemplars that deserve admiration and, to the extent possible, emulation, and they sometimes reveal weaknesses or opportunities in need of attention. But the rankings hold no special magic.

Students can find best-in-the-world educational experiences in many institutions that shine far from the bright lights of the top 10 or 20. And researchers who are inspired, well-networked among their international academic colleagues and well-connected in their immediate community have myriad opportunities to achieve best-in-the-world results, often in the most out-of-the-way places.

Thus, if the goal is to be great, the path to success for most universities does not lie in a struggle for incremental improvements in esoteric and opaque rating systems. Rather, it lies in the enthusiastic embracing of one's own community in the search for educational relevance, research innovation and community engagement that can allow each university to find its *métier* – that unique quality that distinguishes it as legitimately pre-eminent and worthy of attention in its own community and in the wider world.

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