



A Ranker's Perspective on Methodology and Quality Standards of Rankings

Robert J. Morse

Director of Data Research, U.S. News & World
Report

2nd Meeting of the International Ranking Expert
Group: "Methodology and Quality Standards of
Rankings"

18-21 May 2006, Berlin, Germany

One Ranker's Perspective

- We are in the media, academia, government, higher education associations, higher education institutes and research centers, think tanks, or work for NGOs. We have one thing in common—rankings and their implications for companies, schools, countries, or the world.
- 20 years ago, U.S. News was just a “voice in the wilderness” in regards to the rankings and no one was listening—now the world has changed and is surely paying attention.
- Some call the rankings a case of extreme and unintended consequences.
- Not so, rankings' time has come and now they are in the forefront of worldwide higher education discussions.

One Ranker's Perspective— continued

- Can complex institutions be ranked?
- Resource constraints
- Analytical constraints and compromises—
proxy variables
- High research and quality control standards
versus “social science”

One Ranker's Perspective— continued

- Criticism from academia versus acceptance from the public.
- Is the public being misled by false precision?
- Are non-meaningful statistical differences being exaggerated?
- Has the general public put rankings into a proper perspective?
- Has academia put rankings into the proper perspective?

One Ranker's Perspective— continued

- Growing availability of more higher education data to the public versus keeping it all private or not collecting it at all. Openness around the world is increasing—in some cases very slowly.
- Public as a result of rankings is becoming more sophisticated about school choice versus being left in the dark about the “real” relative merits of institutions.

One Ranker's Perspective— continued

- Rankings (at least student oriented ones) have helped turn higher education into a consumer good. As the cost of attendance and level of education attainment rises worldwide, wasn't this inevitable? There is no more ivory tower.
- Rankings have made higher education competitive: Is this good or bad?
- Accountability versus non-accountability. Are universities achieving their higher education goals? Are students being educated up to standards? Are public funds being spent wisely and effectively?
- Do rankings “make” school administrators do the wrong thing? Do they make policy choices in order to do better in the rankings versus making them for the good of the students and learning?

Future of Rankings

- Rankings are here to stay.
- Rankings are now a worldwide phenomenon.
- Rankings will continue to evolve on a country-by-country basis.

Future of Rankings

- Rankings are now being done or studied for various reasons.
 - Consumer guides
 - Public policy—benchmarking and education policy
 - Academics study them as a discipline or for education/public policy reasons
- Rankings, more and more, are becoming a positive force around the world.
- Rankings have found their place in the 21st century as a tool that can be used for consumers, assessment, accountability, peer analysis, and as a public benchmark to compare education performance and to set goals.