

# Statement on Global University Rankings

Independent Expert Group (IEG) convened by the United Nations  
University International Institute for Global Health

# Preface

Universities are crucial organisations of our modern times. They play a key role in the delivery of education and training. They also provide knowledge, information, and evidence, and have a critical role in policy, practice, and public debate. Through independent academic enquiry and enabling informed public discussion, universities help strengthen democracy and protect human rights. Everywhere, they contribute to regional development and serve as hubs for cultural and civic engagement. By enabling equitable access to higher education, universities encourage social mobility and fairness across society. And through international research and scientific collaborations, universities promote cross-border cooperation, trust, and peace.

COVID-19 demonstrated the particular importance of universities in providing public health evidence and analyses for policymakers and the general public. It brought to light how indispensable universities, their staff, and students are in providing assistance to health workers and local communities everywhere. The pandemic also demonstrated the importance of academic communities in public health and medical sciences cooperating and collaborating across national borders. It is thus vital that we protect, promote, and develop these social and public-interest functions, which have always been the pillars of universities' role in society.

For the past two decades, global university rankings have had a large and increasing influence over higher education worldwide. While rankings may have incentivised some improvement in the quality of some universities, there is growing recognition that they also incentivise a number of perverse and harmful behaviours and produce systemic long-term negative effects. These problems were described in a briefing paper published by the United Nations University - International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH) in February 2023.[1]

With the aim of promoting equitable and improved academic public health education, research, and practice as a global public good, UNU-IIGH convened an independent expert group (IEG) of 20 people to address the problematic nature and effects of global university rankings. This statement follows several rounds of discussion involving the IEG between February and September 2023, and is endorsed by 16 members of the original group (see Appendix 1).

Part 1 of the Statement briefly outlines what global university rankings are. Part 2 explains why they are problematic. And Part 3 puts forward a set of recommendations for change, followed by a conclusion. Each expert participated in their individual capacity and the statement does not represent the view or position of the organisations they belong to.

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[1] Nassiri-Ansari T & McCoy D (2023). World-class Universities? Interrogating the Biases and Coloniality of Global University Rankings. <https://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:9082>.

# I. What are global university rankings?

Global university rankings are regularly published hierarchical lists that compare universities from around the world. Typically, they rank universities in a league table according to a quantitative measure of quality.[2] Since they first appeared in 2003, these rankings have garnered significant attention and their growing influence on the global higher education landscape has been extensively documented.[3] University rankings have also vastly expanded in number, scope, and complexity in the last 20 years. Many alternative and different types of rankings have been introduced. They now include not just global rankings, but also regional, topical, and subject rankings, among others.

This Statement is concerned with both global university rankings and their producers, particularly the longest-operating and the most influential ones: Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, and U.S. News & World Report.[4] Respectively, their global rankings are QS World University Rankings, THE World University Rankings, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and U.S. News Best Global Universities Rankings. These rankings are based on composite indicators, whereby several separate measures of performance are combined into a single score. It is important to note that, over the years, the portfolio of rankings that these companies produce has expanded.

Despite their influence and impact on society and university staff and students, and despite the problems associated with university rankings, the major ranking organisations are not accountable to the public, the academic community, or governments. As private for-profit companies that extract considerable resources from higher education, they are subjected to surprisingly little scrutiny from the sector's stakeholders. While they do collaborate with universities and governments, such arrangements are no substitute for independent accountability mechanisms. This Statement is, therefore, a call to higher education stakeholders, national and international, to address both the problems associated with global rankings but also the undue influence that the major ranking companies have over the sector.

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[2] In 2021, for example, ARWU and THE ranked around 1800 and 1500 universities respectively.

[3] Hazelkorn E (2011). *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence*. Springer; Hazelkorn E, & Mihut G (2021). Introduction: Putting rankings in context – looking back, looking forward. In Hazelkorn & Mihut (Eds.), *Research Handbook on University Rankings: Theory, Methodology, Influence and Impact* (pp. 1-17). Edward Elgar Publishing.

[4] The points made in this statement, however, may be extended also to other rankers and rankings, depending on the extent to which they share the same characteristics and/or effects.

## II. Why global university rankings are problematic

### 1. Global university rankings are conceptually invalid

A competitive league table does not accurately and appropriately reflect the quality and value of universities. [5] The performance of teaching, research, and a wide range of other university functions cannot be meaningfully combined into a single composite indicator, and any method attempting to do so will always be arbitrary and questionable. Furthermore, the suggestion that the performance of a university (or specific department or discipline) can be reduced to a single indicator that is equally applicable in different parts of the world is not only profoundly misleading but ignores the diverse missions, varying strengths, and unique contexts within which universities operate. Finally, constituting rankings as a zero-sum hierarchy suggests that quality higher education is in limited supply and that no two universities should expect to have equal status. This also is plainly false.

### 2. Global university rankings are based on flawed and insufficiently transparent data and methods

The data and methods used in the major global university rankings are flawed. [6] Of particular note is that these rankings heavily rely on subjective judgements of quality made by non-representative grab samples of survey respondents. [7] There are also well-established data quality issues with citation counts and their use as a measure of research quality. Moreover, while the major rankers provide some information about their methods, they do not publish details explaining how they calculate rankings (e.g., their weighting schemes are only partially disclosed). They also do not make their datasets publicly accessible. [8] The lack of transparency regarding the quality of the data used to produce the rankings raises concerns about bias, objectivity, and credibility, and prevents anyone from being able to verify or critically evaluate how these rankings are produced. Lastly, as improving position in rankings becomes increasingly important to many universities, rankings become less a measure of actual performance and more an indicator of a university's ability to 'play the game' of competing in rankings.

### 3. Global university rankings are biased towards research, STEM subjects, and English-speaking scholars and universities

A close examination of the methodologies of global university rankings reveals a heavy emphasis on research metrics and on science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) subjects. They are additionally biased towards anglophone countries, institutions, and journals. [9] These biases implicitly diminish the importance of other university missions, including teaching, but also of the humanities and social sciences, and of research and instruction in languages other than English. In marginalising and devaluing other epistemic cultures and forms of knowledge creation, global rankings both reflect and reinforce a form of coloniality within higher education.

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[5] This conceptual invalidity is especially pronounced for global rankings, but also applies to regional and national rankings.

[6] Among academic publications on the subject of global university rankings, those criticising their methodologies and pointing out to their fundamental flaws are likely among the most numerous. For further information on the global rankings' methodologies, see Nassiri-Ansari & McCoy (2023). More recently (July 2023) Universities of the Netherlands published a recommendation paper titled 'Ranking the University: On the effects of rankings on the academic community and how to overcome them' which also contains a useful overview of ranking methodologies by QS, THE and Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. [https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/en\\_GB/f\\_c\\_rankings.html](https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/en_GB/f_c_rankings.html)

[7] 50% of the total score in the QS World University Rankings is based on a survey of subjective opinions provided by anonymous individuals. In the case of Times Higher Education's World University Rankings and the U.S. News Best Global Universities, subjective opinions make up 33% and 25% of the total score, respectively.

[8] Gadd E (2020). University rankings need a rethink. *Nature*, 587, 523. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-03312-2>.

[9] See for example: (a) Mustajoki A (2013). Measuring Excellence in Social Sciences and Humanities: Limitations and Opportunities. In Erkkilä (Ed.), *Global University Rankings: Challenges for European Higher Education* (pp. 147–165). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

[https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137296870\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137296870_9); (b) Safón V (2013). What do global university rankings really measure? The search for the X factor and the X entity. *Scientometrics*, 97(2), 223–244. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-013-0986-8>.

Furthermore, the bias toward ‘cutting-edge research’ pulls universities away from conducting research that is more practical, action-oriented, and relevant to real-world needs, policies, and programmes.[10]

#### **4. Global university rankings are colonial and accentuate global, regional, and national inequalities**

The criteria and methods used in global university rankings reflect perspectives, standards, and traditions that favour wealthier, older, larger, and more research-intensive universities from the Global North and reinforce various inequalities and prejudices rooted in colonial histories.[11] None of the major rankings apply methods that control for the resources available to a university or that adjust for challenging and unstable political and policy contexts, thereby helping to reproduce existing inequalities and structures of privilege within and across countries and regions. By creating a self-reinforcing system of winners and losers and working against efforts to raise standards across the board, global rankings further risk widening historic and geographic inequalities.

#### **5. Global university rankings undermine the development of higher education as a sector**

The focus on the performance of individual universities diverts attention away from that of the higher education sector as a whole. Rather than foster shared responsibility and cooperation, rankings incentivise universities and academic staff to compete and prioritise activities that enhance their own positions. As a result, they can undermine systemic improvements and limit higher education’s ability to address societal challenges collectively.[12] By judging all universities according to the same universal set of performance measures, global university rankings homogenise the sector, reduce institutional autonomy,[13] and diminish the benefit of a more diverse mix of institutions with the capacity to determine priorities that are needs- and context-based.

#### **6. Global university rankings pressure universities to adapt to frequent and short-term ranking cycles**

All major rankers publish their global university league tables frequently and regularly, typically annually. This creates an environment in which universities are pressured to constantly strive to improve their standing relative to other universities, even if improvements from one year to the next are statistically or in real terms insignificant.[14] This is costly and can consume vast amounts of scarce time and resources.

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[10] See for example: (a) Muller SM (2017). Academics as rent seekers: Distorted incentives in higher education, with reference to the South African case. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 52, 58–67. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0738059316304436> (b) Soudien C (2014). The Influence of Rankings and Incentive Systems on Academic Publishing in South African Universities. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22, 33–33. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v22n33.2014>

[11] See for example: (a) Lloyd M & Ordorika I (2021). International University Rankings as Cultural Imperialism: Implications for the Global South. In Stack (Ed.), *Global University Rankings and the Politics of Knowledge* (pp. 25–49). University of Toronto Press; (b) Shahjahan RA, Blanco Ramirez G & Andreotti V de O (2017). Attempting to Imagine the Unimaginable: A Decolonial Reading of Global University Rankings. *Comparative Education Review*, 61(S1), S51–S73. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690457>; (c) Lo WYW (2011). Soft power, university rankings and knowledge production: Distinctions between hegemony and self-determination in higher education. *Comparative Education*, 47(2), 209–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.554092>

[12] For several years, THE and QS have been publishing rankings that aim to measure and compare how universities perform on various ‘third mission’ indicators (THE Impact Rankings and QS Sustainability Rankings, respectively). While different in focus, these rankings are no less resource-extracting, methodologically deficient, or substantively problematic than other rankings produced by these organisations. See: (a) Bautista-Puig N, Orduña-Malea E & Perez-Esparrells C. (2022). Enhancing sustainable development goals or promoting universities? An analysis of the times higher education impact rankings. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 23(8), 211–231. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-07-2021-0309>; (b) Calderon A (2023). Sustainability Rankings: What they are About and How to make them Meaningful. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153231172022>.

[13] See for example: (a) Anafinova S (2020). The role of rankings in higher education policy: Coercive and normative isomorphism in Kazakhstani higher education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 78, 102246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102246>; (b) Erkkilä T (2014). Global University Rankings, Transnational Policy Discourse and Higher Education in Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 49(1), 91–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12063>.

[14] See for example: Brankovic J, Ringel L & Werron T (2018). How Rankings Produce Competition: The case of global university rankings. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 47(4), 270–288. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2018-0118>.

The focus on short-term strategies to improve their rank also comes at the cost of universities neglecting deeper and longer-term goals, as well as objectives that are not as easily quantifiable, in particular in the short run.[15]

## 7. Global university rankings produce reputational anxiety that negatively affects university behaviour

The often acute, constant, and exaggerated preoccupation with rankings can lead to a state of constant anxiety and stress within universities.[16] Commercial rankers are in particular invested in fostering and mobilising such collective emotional states.[17] This can lead to a range of perverse behaviours such as universities paying their scientists to publish in high-impact journals or prioritising citation scores when hiring academic staff. It can also lead to unhealthy levels of attention to comparisons with other universities (instead of to one's institutional mission), excessive corporate branding, and engaging in data manipulation and fabrication (and other forms of 'cheating' or 'gaming').[18] All this comes at the detriment for the quality of teaching, staff wellbeing, and student learning.[19]

## 8. Global university rankings are extractive and exploitative

The major global rankers are primarily private businesses, whose interest in higher education is driven or at least strongly influenced by the need to maximise profit.[20] This effectively aligns rankers with major publishing companies, such as Elsevier, Clarivate, Wiley, and Springer, that have in recent decades transitioned into data analytics firms with growing profit margins.[21] Extracting data, time and other resources from universities and the public sector, while generating demand for analytics and consultancy products and services, are at the heart of their business model. The diversion of resources away from core academic functions that is created by this business model also places universities and governments with limited budgets at even more disadvantage.

## 9. Global university rankers have a conflict of interest

Due to the business model in place, the major global rankers are clearly in a position of conflict of interest.[22] Although they claim to provide impartial judgement about performances of universities, they are primarily driven to sell advertising and performance-related products and services to the very same universities they are ranking. This conflict of interest is aggravated by the absence of adequate transparency that would allow some basic level of accountability and public scrutiny of their operations. By selling consultancy services to governments and other stakeholders, the major global rankers are also able to further reinforce their salience and role in the sector.

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[15] See for example: Gadd E, Holmes R & Shearer J (2021). Developing a Method for Evaluating Global University Rankings (No. 1). 3(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.29024/sar.31>.

[16] See for example: (a) Espeland WN & Sauder M (2016). Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputation, and Accountability. Russell Sage Foundation; (b) Shahjahan RA, Sonneveldt EL, Estera AL & Bae S (2022). Emoscapes and commercial university rankers: The role of affect in global higher education policy. *Critical Studies in Education*, 63(3), 275–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1748078>; (c) Shahjahan RA, Bylsma PE & Singai C (2022). Global university rankings as 'sticky' objects and 'refrains': Affect and mediatization in India. *Comparative Education*, 58(2), 224–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2021.1935880>.

[17] Shahjahan RA, Grimm A & Allen RM (2021). The "LOOMING DISASTER" for higher education: How commercial rankers use social media to amplify and foster affect. *Higher Education*, 86(4), 827–843. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00762-z>.

[18] See (a) Calderon A (2020, June 12). New rankings results show how some are gaming the system. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200612104427336>; (b) Biagioli & Lippman (Eds.). (2020). *Gaming the Metrics: Misconduct and Manipulation in Academic Research*. MIT Press; (c) Hartocollis A (2022, March 17). U.S. News Ranked Columbia No. 2, but a Math Professor Has His Doubts. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/17/us/columbia-university-rank.html>.

[19] Gadd E (2021). Mis-Measuring Our Universities: Why Global University Rankings Don't Add Up. *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, 6. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frma.2021.680023>.

[20] QS and THE are both owned by private equity firms.

[21] See (a) Chen G & Chan L (2021). University Rankings and Governance by Metrics and Algorithms. In Hazelkorn & Mihut (Eds.), *Research Handbook on University Rankings: Theory, Methodology, Influence and Impact* (pp. 425–443). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://zenodo.org/records/4730593>; (b) Lamdan S (2022) *Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information*. Stanford University Press.

[22] See for example: (a) Chirikov I (2022). Does conflict of interest distort global university rankings? *Higher Education*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-022-00942-5>, 86(4), 791–808; (b) Jacqmin J (2021). Do ads influence rankings? Evidence from the higher education sector. *Education Economics*, 29(5), 509–526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2021.1918642>.

### III. Recommendations

Many in higher education, including academic experts themselves, agree that the elimination of university league tables is not immediately achievable. There is a growing consensus, however, that more must be done to unmask, prevent, and avoid their negative effects and that the disproportionate and unhealthy influence that the major rankers wield over higher education should be curtailed.

The influence of commercial rankers is symptomatic of the broader marketisation and corporatisation of higher education – a trend that has diminished the public-interest functions and social responsibilities that universities have in society, both nationally and globally. Yet, more than ever, there is a need to harness the qualities of higher education to better respond to the urgent and complex challenges facing the world and serve equitable and sustainable development. Instead, global university rankings drive higher education towards becoming a homogenised but unequal market of winners and losers based on arbitrary, dubious, and simplistic criteria.

A more valid, de-colonial, context-specific, and sophisticated approach to the evaluation of university performance is required. Such an approach would promote quality and improvement in all universities, encourage sector-wide planning relevant to national and regional contexts, accommodate a more diverse ecosystem of differentiated universities, and preserve and strengthen the mandates of universities to serve the global common good.

We thus call on government ministries, national evaluation and funding agencies, university administrators, media, academics, students, and relevant international organisations to act in three ways.

#### 1. Raise awareness about the problems and harms of global university rankings

We ask policymakers, evaluation agencies, university leaders, and others to recognise the systemic negative effects of university rankings and the undue and inappropriate influence and power of commercial rankers. In particular, we ask university administrators and national and international higher education policymakers to prevent the negative long-term effects of global university rankings on national higher education systems, students, graduates, staff, and society as a whole.[23]

We also call on international and national media to cease sensationalist reporting when new rankings are released, and instead open up space for critical and reflexive commentary on rankings and promote a better-informed public discourse on higher education and its role in society.[24]

We specifically call on national and international evaluation and funding bodies to not use standings in global rankings as a criterion in their assessments and decisions on competitive funding, and to discourage universities from using rankings to signal prestige and quality in their evaluations and funding applications.

Finally, we call on universities to adopt a more critical stance when displaying their rankings in promotional material, to enable prospective students and the wider public to understand the biases, limitations, and arbitrary nature of global university rankings.

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[23] Over the past two decades, national and international actors have questioned rankings. For example: a) Remarks on College Rankings and Data by U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona at the Conference on Best Practices for Law School Data (March 2, 2023), <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/remarks-college-rankings-and-data-us-secretary-education-miguel-cardona-conference-best-practices-law-school-data>, retrieved on 9 October 2023; (b) UNESCO: Marope, Wells & Hazelkorn (Eds.). (2013). Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses; (c) European University Association (EUA): Rauhvargers A (2011, 2013). Global University Rankings and Their Impact. Reports I and II. Most criticism coming from the authorities, however, tends to focus on methodological weaknesses of rankings, while glossing over the more systemic implications of the practice.

[24] It's important to note that media organisations also profit from reporting on rankings. Many report on rankings while simultaneously selling advertising space to universities, often in ways that blur the distinction between information and marketing. See also: Shahjahan RA, Bylsma PE & Singai C (2022). Global university rankings as 'sticky' objects and 'refrains': Affect and mediatisation in India. *Comparative Education*, 58(2), 224–241.

## 2. Encourage and adopt positive alternatives

There are better ways to evaluate universities and to help prospective students and research funders assess the standards and relative strengths and weaknesses of different universities and departments. There is no need to be trapped by the reputational anxiety that is strategically manufactured by rankers, especially given their use of invalid, costly, and top-down performance metrics.

We call on university administrators and ministries to support and engage with initiatives promoting better ways of assessing university performance. We urge them to ensure that universities are incentivised and adequately supported to deliver their social and public interest mandates. Higher education should also be regulated to ensure that those universities that provide important public service functions (be they public or private) are not disadvantaged. Several initiatives that deserve greater attention include:

- More Than Our Rank is an initiative that acknowledges a broader and more diverse definition of university success or quality and provides an opportunity for universities to highlight the multiple and various ways they serve society that are not reflected in their ranking position.[25]
- U-Multirank is a non-commercial initiative primarily funded by the European Commission that does not produce a league table based on a single composite indicator, but rates universities across five areas of performance in order to provide a fairer picture of performances and show specific strengths and profiles of universities.[26] The experience of this regional and public initiative may be used to inform similar approaches to university evaluation in other regions.
- African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) is another regional and public initiative, spearheaded by the Commission of the African Union and developed by the Association of African Universities. It provides a self-assessment tool to help higher education institutions rate themselves against set standards, such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.[27]
- A Universities of the Netherlands Expert Group on university rankings has called for universities in the Netherlands to be more responsible in their use of rankings, provide better communication about the limitations of league tables, and make greater use of existing alternatives. They highlight the need for coordinated action at the national and regional level to minimise the negative impacts of global university rankings.[28] A similar approach could be taken by other countries in other parts of the world.

In addition, there are several initiatives that specifically promote better research metrics:

- The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) works to eliminate the use of journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, in funding, appointment, and promotion considerations; to assess research on its own merits rather than on the journal where it is published; and to explore new indicators of significance and impact.[29]
- The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) works towards assessments of research, researchers and research organisations that recognise diverse outputs, practices, and activities and that are based primarily on qualitative judgement, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators.[30]
- The Humane Metrics Initiative works to develop impact indicators that demonstrate how core values are enacted in academic practices and products.[31]

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[25] For more information see: <https://inorms.net/more-than-our-rank/>.

[26] For more information see: <https://www.umultirank.org/>.

[27] For more information see: <https://www.aqrm.aau.org/>.

[28] For more information see: <https://go.unu.edu/bLCI2>.

[29] For more information see: <https://sfdora.org/read/>.

[30] For more information see: <https://coara.eu/>.

[31] For more information see: <https://humetricshss.org/about/>.



### 3. Disengage from practices that are extractive, exploitative, and non-transparent

There is a need to re-balance the dynamic between universities and commercial rankers and to address the conflicts of interest currently built into the rankings industry. Systems to compare and evaluate universities should exist to serve the missions and needs of higher education institutions, not the other way round. Presently, rankings organisations collect vast amounts of data from universities and publicly accessible sources, which they then privatise in order to market them back to universities, governments, and other interested parties in the form of performance analytics.[32] This practice is both ethically and economically questionable.

We thus call on evaluation agencies and funding bodies to not rely on the data from ranking organisations and other analytics companies (e.g., Elsevier and Clarivate). Instead, evaluation agencies and funding bodies should use the data provided to them directly by universities, which is ideally also open access, and not controlled by commercial businesses.

We also call on university administrators, relevant ministries, media, academics, students, and international organisations to question and properly evaluate the social benefits and economic value of commercial rankers, and curtail the extractive, exploitative, and manipulative practices of the industry. We specifically call on universities and academics to consider:

- Not submitting data and information for commercial ranking purposes or making the submitted data also publicly available on their websites.
- Not participating in reputation surveys distributed by rankers.
- Not purchasing products and services from the commercial rankers.
- Not hosting or participating in events organised by the commercial rankers.

Finally, we call on academics, universities, experts, and scholars researching rankings to be more mindful of the ways their choices and activities contribute to the further grip of rankings and related extractive practices on higher education.[33] Rather than perceiving themselves as powerless victims and bystanders of the developments described in this statement, they can act more proactively as ‘upstanders’ and inspire change in the sector – and society as a whole.

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[32]Chen G, Posada A & Chan L (2019). Vertical Integration in Academic Publishing: Implications for Knowledge Inequality. In Mounier (Ed.), *Connecting the Knowledge Commons—From Projects to Sustainable Infrastructure: The 22nd International Conference on Electronic Publishing – Revised Selected Papers*. OpenEdition Press. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.oep.9068>.

[33] See for example: (a) Brankovic J (2021). Academia’s Stockholm Syndrome: The Ambivalent Status of Rankings in Higher Education (Research). *International Higher Education*, 107, 11–12. <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ihe/article/view/14557>; (b) Brankovic J, Ringel L & Werron T (2022). Spreading the gospel: Legitimizing university rankings as boundary work. *Research Evaluation*, 31(4), 463–474. <https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvac035>; (c) Hamann J & Ringel L (2023). The discursive resilience of university rankings. *Higher Education*, 86(4), 845–863. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00990-x>

## Conclusion

An adequate response to the growing influence and harms of global university rankings requires simultaneous and ideally coordinated actions by multiple stakeholders at all levels. Actions may be undertaken by individual academics and administrators, universities working independently and collectively, and national and international institutions responsible for higher education policy and management.

Given the globalised nature of higher education, international organisations such as UNESCO and the International Association of Universities are ideally positioned to foster greater transparency and accountability of ranking organisations, as well as to encourage the development of better and more holistic ways to measure higher education quality and impact. They can also play a key role in providing guidance to national governments and other relevant higher education institutions when it comes to orienting their policies in view of international trends and developments.

We also stress that the data collected on universities – and in particular data submitted by universities themselves – should be considered a public good, and not a good to be privatised, commoditised, and commercialised. These data should be collected and managed nationally and internationally by appropriate organisations with adequate expertise and a public-interest mandate. An example of such an initiative is the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER),<sup>[34]</sup> as well as the recently announced European Higher Education Sector Observatory, under the auspices of the European Commission.<sup>[35]</sup>

Governments and other national bodies should embrace a more holistic and context-sensitive view of higher education quality – in contrast to the reductionist, one-size-fits-all model promoted by global rankings – and should stimulate universities to develop their own strategies in this direction. Ministries of education and national university associations are critical in directing sector-wide change to empower universities and incentivise them to strive not only for their own improvement but for the betterment of society as a whole. To this end, governments should stop using rankings to guide policy and instead develop and implement a more coherent, needs-based, and context-specific strategy and plan for higher education improvement.

Finally, universities themselves should ensure that the quest to improve their standings does not compromise the quality and diversity of their offerings or put certain individuals and groups at (even greater) disadvantage. At the individual level, administrators, academics, students, and their parents should strive to avoid the allure of prestige, by becoming better acquainted with the conceptual, methodological, ethical, and other limitations of global university rankings.

We hope you will join us in taking action.

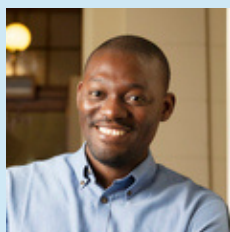
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[34] <https://www.eter-project.com/>. See also: Lepori B, Borden VMH & Coates H (2022). Opportunities and challenges for international institutional data comparisons. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 12(sup1), 373–390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2022.2094817>.

[35] [https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/first-steppingstone-towards-creation-european-higher-education-sector-observatory-call-tenders-2023-07-03\\_en](https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/first-steppingstone-towards-creation-european-higher-education-sector-observatory-call-tenders-2023-07-03_en), retrieved on 22 August 2023.

## Appendix 1: The International Expert Group (IEG) members

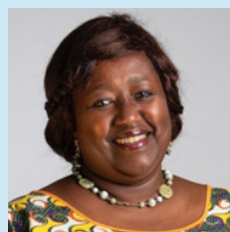
The members of the Independent Expert Group endorsing this statement are listed below. IEG members endorse this statement in their capacity as individuals. Their participation does not imply institutional endorsement.



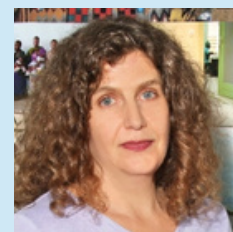
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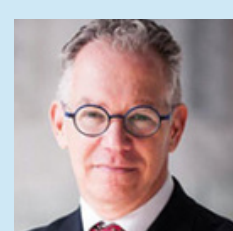
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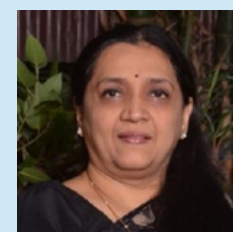
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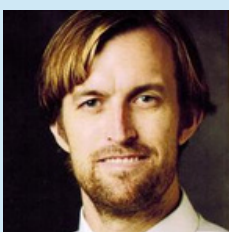
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UNU International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is the designated UN think tank on global health, serving as a policy translation hub for UN member states, agencies and programmes. It was established by a statute adopted by the Council of the United Nations University in December 2005.

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