

Is Stellenbosch one of the OD 500 universities in the world?

One of the reasons that university rankings are attracting so much attention is the various attempts made to answer questions such as "What is a 'world-class' university?", "Which universities are the best in the world?", "Is the university where I want to study, or to which I want to send my child, or where I studied, or that approached me for a donation, one of the top universities in the world?" The problem is that several institutions are compiling their own university rankings and that their modi operandi differ significantly from one another. There is thus no final list of the foremost 200 - or 500 - universities as an objective given, writes Prof Jan Botha, Senior Director: Institutional Research and Planning at Stellenbosch University (SU).

Rankings by media organisations

Numerous media organisations - such as the Australian Good Universities Guide, the US News and World Report and the Canadian weekly Maclean's - compile rankings.

In the United Kingdom, the daily The Times publishes the Times Higher Education (previously The Times Higher Education Supplement). This supplement published its "World University Rankings" for the first time in 2004. The list is based on five indicators:

- The opinion of more than a thousand academics from almost 90 countries on the reputations of universities (50%).
- 2. The percentage of foreign academic personnel (5%).
- 3. The percentage of foreign students (5%).
- 4. The lecturer:student ratio (20%).
- 5. The number of times that research publications by the personnel of an institution are cited by other researchers (20%).

There are, however, indications that, in the reputation surveys, universities bearing the name of a well-known city – such as the University of Melbourne or the University of Cape Town – are ranked more highly than other universities in the same metropolitan area that are also very good – such as Monash University or SU.

Rankings by academic study groups

University rankings are also compiled by academic study groups, such as the University of Florida's "The Top American Research Universities" and the Swiss Centre for Scientific and Technological Studies' "Champions League of Research Universities".

In Spain, the Cybermetrics Laboratory publishes the "Webometrics Ranking of World Universities", based on the presence of universities on the web. The Centre for Scientific and Technological Studies of the University of Leiden in the Netherlands compiles a ranking based on publication output included in the Web of Science database. In this database, more than

30-million publications (since 1980) and more than 300-million citations have been included. This is the most comprehensive and reliable database of its kind in the world.

The Postgraduate School in Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China has been publishing the annual "Academic Ranking of World Universities" since 2003. This ranking has popularly become known as the list of top 500 universities. Three South African universities are included in this list - none of which is SU. The list is based on six indicators:

- 1. Former students who have won a Nobel Prize or Fields Medal for mathematics (10%).
- 2. Personnel members who have won a Nobel Prize or Fields Medal for mathematics (20%).
- 3. Researchers whose publications (in 21 fields) have been cited by other researchers (20%).
- 4. The number of articles published in the journals Nature and Science (20%).
- The number of articles in the Science Citation Index-expanded and in the Social Science Citation Index (20%).
- 6. Adjustment for the size of the institution (10%).

Rankings in perspective

University rankings are highly criticised on various points. These include the choice of indicators, the random way in which weightings are allocated, the formulas (which are frequently adjusted and therefore invalidate any deductions over time), the importance attached to opinion surveys not based on hard data, problems with statistical reliability and

inconsistencies.

If one therefore focuses on

research output and its impact,

SU ranks among the top 500

universities in the world.

In many cases, data that are used are incomplete or unreliable. Experts in the field of scientometrics are also very critical of the problematic modus operandi frequently used. Many of the rankings are, in fact, based on pseudo-science. A one-size-fits-all approach does not make sense - universities and contexts differ far too much.

The importance attached by the Chinese lists to Nobel Prize and Fields Medal winners is also contentious. This can be compared with a provincial rugby team that, instead of basing its position in the Currie Cup league on the number of matches that it has won against other provinces, bases its

position on the number of players who have played for the Springboks during that season. Furthermore, attaching so much importance to former students winning

Nobel Prizes can also be compared with a provincial rugby team basing its Currie Cup position on former players who have played for the Springboks instead of on the results of the matches played by the team.

However - whether universities like it or not - rankings have become very prominent over the last few years and many people do heed these lists. A university that is not satisfied with its place in a ranking or is not listed in a specific ranking may, of course, be tempted to call the modus operandi or rankings themselves into question. It would be human nature: if you don't like the results of a match, blame the rules or the umpire! Or choose the ranking in which your university is ranked more favourably!

How does SU rank?

According to the University of Leiden's ranking, SU ranked 454th out of the top 500 universities worldwide in terms of international publication output and 415th in terms of the impact of citations from SU scientific publications in 2007. This is one of the most reliable rankings in respect of research but it does not - and rightly so - attempt to rank universities in a comprehensive sense. It therefore does not consider the teaching at universities or community interaction or research funding or popular reputation or any of all the other possible indicators. It is indeed highly complex to express a factor such as

the quality of teaching in figures. If one therefore focuses on research output and its impact, SU ranks among the top 500 universities in the world.

Issues

It is important to bear the following points in mind:

- It is only during the past two decades that SU has become a strong researchoriented university. It will therefore take some time before the effect of this becomes clearer in rankings based on research performance. That SU is already doing so well, however, is a feather in the cap of SU researchers.
- Is it meaningful for SU to attach great importance to rankings at this stage of its development? The University is, after all, busy with planning and financial processes to reposition itself. Which considerations should carry more weight: externally dictated considerations by media and other institutions or the University's own objectives and priorities, given the history, context and ideals
- Is it furthermore meaningful actively to pursue goals that are frequently set in a random manner or that are measured in a problematic manner and that are. in any event, not realistically obtainable in the foreseeable future? Such goals are also largely outside the University's control.
- The impact of the SU's language practices on the position that the University could obtain in some of the rankings should also be borne in mind. For example, the percentage of international students (both under and postgraduate) and of international lecturers is used as indicators in some of the rankings. Since Afrikaans is the language of instruction in many of the undergraduate programmes, international students can study only in some of the undergraduate programmes at SU. It is also therefore more difficult to appoint top academics from around the world at SU. Due to the position of English as an international language, rankings do, in fact, favour Englishspeaking universities.
- The University is developing a number of flagship projects centred on the millennium goals of the United Nations with the aim of making the University "significantly different and significantly better", in the words of the Rector, Prof. Russel Botman. These flagship projects are not, in the first instance, selected to engineer improved results in rankings but the University does, at the same time, remain aware that its flagship projects should not jeopardise higher positions in rankings.
- It is becoming increasingly clear that a connection does exist between the position of a university in some of the rankings and the financial investment made in that university. An economically prosperous country can, to a great extent, 'buy' its universities a place in some of the rankings by enticing top academics with enormous salaries and access to expensive research facilities, as in, for example, Singapore and Saudi Arabia. It is widely accepted that a number of Chinese universities in the 2008 Chinese ranking fared significantly better due to huge financial input. It is therefore unrealistic to believe that universities in developing and less prosperous countries stand a realistic chance of competing.

So where to from here with rankings?

The University maintains a nuanced approach to rankings, given our current realities (including our language policy), our country and our continent and given the problematic methodology of most of the rankings. We monitor the rankings continuously. Our Research Development Division and our Centre for Research on Science and Technology (CREST) have experts in the field of scientometrics. CREST maintains the only and a highly respected database of scientific output in South Africa. The University also works closely with prominent international institutions such as the University of Leiden in the Netherlands.

Prof Lee Harvey of the United Kingdom, one of the most respected international experts in quality assurance in higher education, made the following statement on rankings during a presentation at the Annual Forum of the European Association for Institutional Research in September 2008: "What's good about them? They are easy to use. What's bad about them? Most everything else."

2009

SUCCEED

Executive Development Programmes

COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMMES

Executive Development Programme Senior Management Development Programme Management Development Programme New Managers' Development Programme

COACHING PROGRAMMES

Certificate in Coaching Practice Coaching for Performance

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

Financial Management for Non-Financial Managers Programme in Wealth Management

GENERAL PROGRAMMES

Commercial Negotiation Consensus-Building & Conflict Management in the Workplace Entrepreneurial Business Management Knowledge Management Management Programme for NPO's MBA Foundation Programme Mediation Skills for Managers Passport to China Health Technology Assessment Managing Labour Relations and Employment Related Risks Supply Chain Management

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

Programme in Performance Management Programme in Strategic Human Resources Leadership

LEADERSHIP PROGRAMMES

Authentic Leadership through the Gift of Horses Development of Leadership & Team Skills (POLS) Foundations of Leadership (International) Leadership Development Programme (International)

MARKETING MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

Digital Marketing Strategy Managing Customer Service Excellence Managing Marketing Assets Strategic Marketing Metrics

PROJECT MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

Various options available

WORKSHOPS

Conscious Career Strategies for Women

Contact us for more information +27 (0)21 918 4488/4344 www.usb-ed.com



University of Stellenbosch Business School

The best business learning in the world is our business.

