

University rankings theory, practice, and realities: Some basics
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Each Fall university rankings flood media outlets and inundate universities with requests for commentary on their performance. Most recently media about world university rankings would have us believe that Canada's universities are failing to maintain quality. In particular, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE)—which aim to measure world class status of universities—received much attention across Canada. Here I articulate three basics on how to read rankings that will bust the myth Canadian university failure.

The first thing to know about rankings is that they measure a particular idea of what a university should be doing. Most rankings try to measure research and teaching, but despite their efforts they do not actually measure the quality of the educational process that students go through. Instead, most measures are focused on research inputs such as money and outputs such as publications. There are many criticisms about ranking measures, and you can easily find them with a simple online search, so I will not bore you with the details. The point is that it is important to be wary of what rankings actually measure.

The second thing I want to make clear about rankings is the danger of only ever look at a university's position in the top 100 or 200. The subscales and comparisons of these across institutions are more telling as to what is going on, but are often ignored. All of the scores for Canadian universities actually increased! So if you believe that rankings actually measure what they are supposed to measure and that universities should do what the rankings say they should do, then Canada's universities are doing quite well. There is no cause for alarm.

The third thing I want make clear about rankings is that they are relative. The hierarchical structure means that rankings only allow a university to increase in position if others decrease. This relativity in combination with the fact that universities have adopted practices of continuous improvement (they are always trying to be better at what they do, and always trying to show that they are doing better), means that a university can only climb the ranks if they are able to improve their scores to a greater degree than other ranked universities. So while Canadian universities are improving according to the Times Higher Education measures, they may not be improving as quickly as other universities in the world.

Universities are complex institutions that require considerable political and social cooperation in order to function effectively. A significant effort at the university, local, and national levels would be necessary in order to adopt a strategy to dramatically increase in world rankings. Is there a crisis in Canadian universities? For me the more important question is whether Canada should allow rankings to define how we make decisions about our universities instead of facilitating a conversation about what Canadians want universities to become.