



IREG Observatory
on Academic Rankings and Excellence

IREG Guidelines for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings

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Foreword

The IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellent (IREG Observatory) believes that academic rankings are one of many tools available for improving higher education. It works to enhance the understanding of the use of rankings for assessing the quality and performance of higher education. These *Guidelines for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings* in combination with other initiatives of the IREG Observatory are intended to improve quality, assure reliability of information and give users of rankings a tool that is functional and trustworthy.

These *Guidelines* draw from and supplement the most significant other initiatives of the IREG Observatory, the *Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions* (2006) and *IREG Ranking Audit Initiative* (2009).

A preliminary draft of these *Guidelines* was prepared by a team working at the Center for World-Class Universities, Graduate School of Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, chaired by Liu Nian Cai. Members of the Steering Group overseeing the development of the *Guidelines* are Liu Nian Cai (Chair), Serban Agachi, Gero Federkeil, Marko Marhl, Klaus Hüfner and Jan Sadlak. Further work on the *Guidelines* was carried out in consultation with the members of the IREG Observatory. A draft of the *Guidelines* was presented on the website of the IREG Observatory and comments were solicited. These were taken into consideration in this final text, which has been approved, by the Executive Committee and the General Assembly, which met in Aalborg, Denmark, on 12 June 2015. In this context the document can also be referred to as *Aalborg Guidelines for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings*.

The IREG Observatory is grateful for the valuable contributions of many institutions and individuals in preparing these *Guidelines*.

Jan Sadlak
President, IREG Observatory

I. Introduction and General Advisory Statement

Purpose of the Guidelines

“Academic ranking” is a numerical assessment of the performance of a *program, activity, institution or system* of higher education, based on an agreed upon methodology.

One-dimensional rankings assess performance according to one set of indicators, with a specific weight attached to each given indicator.

Multi-dimensional rankings provide a series of score-tables rather than just one overall table. This allows users to weigh indicators according to their own preferences and to construct personalized rankings.

Common to all rankings is that they measure and compare academic performance on the basis of quantitative indicators. In this way, rankings differ from other instruments of quality assurance within higher education, such as peer review, which is based on evaluation and accreditation. Like other, more traditional, instruments, academic rankings, if used properly, can contribute to the promotion of a quality culture and the pursuit of academic excellence. Despite the relatively brief history of academic rankings, particularly with regard to their international application, educators have accepted them as a valid source of evidence-based information, as a transparency tool, and as a method of quality assessment.

The purpose of the *Guidelines* is to provide recommendations for appropriate interpretations, uses and applications of rankings by potential interested parties including students and parents, institutions of higher education, policymakers, quality assurance and funding organizations, employers and the media. Specific recommendations have been formulated for each group of stakeholders.

Rationale for Presenting the Guidelines

In their modern format, academic rankings (also referred to as “university rankings” or “league tables”) were first presented in the 1980’s by *U.S. News and World Report* as a student guide in order to meet the need for easily readable comparative data about the performance of the increasingly diverse study programs of American institutions of higher education. Since then, similar types of rankings have been produced in many other countries.

Increasing globalization of higher education has spawned “global ranking” (sometimes called “world ranking” or “international ranking”) to supplement national rankings systems. Worldwide attention to such rankings grew with the publication of the *Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)* by the Center for World-Class Universities of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (often referred to as “Shanghai Ranking”) in 2003 and of the *World University Rankings* by the Times Higher Education and QS

(Quacquarelli-Symonds) in 2004. Within one decade, a variety of global rankings have been launched - with different purposes, different methodologies and different indicators.

Despite their recognized limitations, academic rankings are widely used throughout the world, especially by those who are looking for easily accessible comparative information. Students and their parents use information from rankings to decide which college or university to attend. The governing bodies of institutions of higher education use rankings to set benchmarks, to select indicators for improving management, to determine policies to achieve excellence, and for reference in their marketing and public relations. Governments use rankings as a quality assurance tool, especially in countries where quality assurance mechanisms are relative new or weak. Funding agencies use rankings to assess the capacity and financial strength of a given institution. Global university rankings have had an impact on national academic exchange programs as well as immigration policies. Employers use rankings to identify university partners for cooperation and to find potential employees.

The IREG Observatory believes that properly used and interpreted rankings can be an important tool in assessing programs of higher education. Using the fundamental tenets of the *Berlin Principles of Rankings of Higher Education Institutions*, these *Guidelines* should maximize the usefulness of rankings and respond to practical problems which have arisen as the world of higher education implements a new and valuable source of information.

II. Guidelines for Stakeholders

General Guidelines

While academic rankings provide information about quality and performance and serve to promote transparency of information about higher education, they do not provide causal analysis of differences in performance among systems, higher education institutions and their activity. One should expect rankings to identify strengths and weaknesses but not prescribe remedies or explain successes. Users of rankings can expect and should demand that rankings, as the *Berlin Principles* indicate, be clear about purposes and target groups, recognize the diversity of institutional missions and goals, be clear about sources of information used and specify cultural and historical contexts taking care to understand that there are different values and beliefs about what constitutes “quality” in higher education. Readers should be aware that different rankings have different purposes, target different groups, select different indicators and use different methodologies.

Given these characteristics of rankings all stakeholders should

- (a) *Be clear about what academic rankings measure:* understand the purposes, targeted audiences and variables of academic rankings.
- (b) *Use academic rankings as one source of information:* look at information provided by rankings in combination with other relevant sources whenever

- possible. Depending on individual needs, rankings should be considered as additional information.
- (c) *Pay less attention to precise positions and annual changes:* take a long-term view of rankings and pay less attention to numerical positions and single-year changes, since such short-term fluctuations are not usually good indicators of changes in performance.
 - (d) *Carefully read and understand all methodologies:* since each ranking typically has a different methodology it is vitally important to understand how each ranking is calculated and the data that is used. This knowledge is necessary to determine how relevant any given ranking is to any given stakeholder.

Guidelines for Students and Parents

Providing comparable information for students and parents to decide which college or university to attend has been and still is the primary purpose of the foremost national academic rankings. This is why some rankings present themselves as “study guides,” “best programs,” “best colleges,” etc. At the same time, rapidly increasing student mobility draws attention to international rankings.

Prospective students and their parents should realize that although they do help to support evidence-based decision-making, rankings are only one source of information, and, clearly, choosing a university depends on a number of factors, social, financial and personal, which cannot be measured by academic rankings. Students should choose the institution/program that best matches their professional ambitions, personal development and labor market opportunities.

Students and parents can use rankings in the following areas:

- (a) *The choice of undergraduate programs:* look at the institutional rankings of relevant schools/colleges; pay attention to the performance of relevant indicators such as class size and faculty resources. Those students who already know their programs of study may also look into the rankings of relevant programs. Prospective undergraduate students should get additional information that fits their preference, interests and individual job prospects.
- (b) *The choice of professional programs:* look at international and national rankings of specific professional programs and relevant professional schools, particularly business schools and various management education programs, instead of general institutional rankings. Pay attention to relevant indicators reflecting employment conditions and labor market and career prospects.
- (c) *The choice of doctoral programs:* look at academic rankings of specific departments/subjects/programs instead of overall institutional rankings, pay attention to relevant rankings indicators reflecting the quality of research and doctoral programs. Prospective doctoral students should get additional information about the conditions that can determine and facilitate their academic development.

- (d) *Overall choice strategies*: if possible try to collect information from more than one academic ranking system.

Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions that provide education, research and community service are objects of academic rankings as well as users of academic rankings. Rankings can influence core university activities, such as teaching, research and community engagement, as well as strategic planning, quality improvement, international collaboration, reputation, fund raising, marketing and publicity. Best practices in each area include the following:

- (a) *Teaching, research, community service*: use rankings to improve activities that have been developed according to each institution's mission. This may mean ignoring rankings that assess activities that are not mission-driven. For example, a liberal arts and vocational or professional undergraduate program may not be worried that it ranks low in research.
- (b) *Strategic planning*: use rankings to identify strengths and weaknesses relevant to individual missions, visions, traditions and national roles. Be careful to balance long-term strategies and short-term needs. The strength and comprehensiveness of disciplines and the importance of interdisciplinary studies and research should be developed on their merits in the context of the institution's culture, not simply to optimize rankings.
- (c) *Quality improvement*: use rankings to identify successful institutions, attractive study programs, excellent research achievements and beneficial socially engaged projects. Share best practices in curricula, teaching and learning, research, innovation, technology transfer, but be careful not simply to copy the successes of other institutions if they do not fit the culture.
- (d) *International collaboration*: use rankings to develop international collaborations in research, engage in students and faculty exchanges and build networks of excellence, but do not use rankings as the only criteria to identify partners with whom to collaborate.
- (e) *Fundraising*: take care not to overstate the importance of ranking indicators such as the percentage or amount of alumni donations.
- (f) *Reputation, publicity and marketing*: cite well-recognized academic rankings, such as those that have successfully passed the *IREG Audit*, and offer website links to ranking methodologies.
- (g) *Interaction with ranking organizations and other providers*: ensure understanding of ranking methodologies. Avoid inconsistent or incomplete data submitted to ranking organizations. Offer feedback and recommendations to ranking organizations, taking into consideration the institutional, national and international context. Understand that providing and signing off on institutional data for use in rankings gives an institution the right to access the methodology and calculations used in those rankings.

- (h) Participate or at least follow the developments, which contribute, to improvement of rankings and their proper place in overall efforts of improving quality assurance of higher education.

<i>Guidelines for Policymakers, Governments and Funding Agencies</i>

The growing impact of global rankings on national policies has recently been observed in initiatives promoting national excellence, in funding schemes, in academic exchange and scholarship programs, and even in immigration policies. In some countries, academic rankings have stimulated mergers of institutions, and in others, funding decisions are explicitly linked to national and/or global rankings.

Best practices in these areas include;

- (a) *Initiatives promoting excellence:* pay attention to the balance between international competition and national development, between autonomy and accountability, and between prioritization and diversification. Do not set goals that simply expect high ranking levels. When aiming to build world-class universities, respect national capacity limitations.
- (b) *Funding agencies:* make allocations based on the merits of the proposals as well as the strengths and weaknesses of various institutions. Do not simply fund projects proposed by high-ranked institutions.
- (c) *Institutional evaluation:* ensure that rankings are used only as part of overall assessment efforts. Allow higher education institutions sufficient autonomy to be able to introduce new curricula and major reforms, and to establish and use their independent institutional evaluation and/or accreditation mechanisms.
- (d) *Institution and scholarship selection in the context of internationalization:* take into account the results of relevant field and subject rankings in addition to institutional rankings. Balance national needs and the quality of study programs. When using rankings to allocate funding for study abroad do not use them as the sole criteria for scholarship selection as over-reliance on rankings may destroy long-established cooperation between national universities and their foreign partners.
- (e) *Interaction with ranking organizations:* provide platforms for discussions about academic rankings and actively contribute to improve the quality of ranking systems. Accept and promote ranking activities as information and transparency tools in the service of quality enhancement. Establish data bases of information about higher education institutions and make them publicly accessible. Participate or at least follow the developments which contribute to improvement of rankings and their proper place in overall efforts of improving quality assurance of higher education.

Guidelines for Employers

Employers, particularly large international corporations, sometimes use rankings as one of their sources of information in determining whom to hire. Often they prefer to hire graduates of high-ranking colleges and universities. Employers can also be an important source of ranking-relevant information.

In this context, it is recommended that employers, in respect to:

- (a) *Cooperation with higher education institutions*: look at rankings to identify potential partners for cooperation in R&D activities as well as in teaching and training.
- (b) *Recruitment*: do not use rankings as the sole criterion for screening, recruitment and employment decisions. In addition to academic and professional qualifications, important sets of work-related competencies are found in personal, communication, intercultural and social skills which are not reflected in academic rankings.
- (c) *Interaction with ranking organizations*: support data collection surveys by ranking organizations in order to contribute to the reliability of rankings.

Guidelines for Quality Assurance, Accreditation, and Recognition Organizations

Quality assurance, accreditation and recognition organizations, like ranking organizations, have as their goals to assess, monitor and improve the quality of higher education institutions and/or systems. Some of these organizations use the results and/or indicators of ranking systems for institutional evaluation.

In this context, it is recommended that quality assurance, accreditation and recognition organizations, in respect to:

- (a) *Institutional evaluation*: refrain from using rankings as the only basis for assessing academic quality at the institutional, faculty, departmental and program level.
- (b) *Information and collaboration*: support mutual exchange of information relevant to the quality of higher education institutions with ranking organizations in order to improve methodologies and practices of quality assurance.

Guidelines for Publishers and Other Displayers of Rankings

Rankings are accessible through the media. Publishers and other displayers of rankings often collaborate with ranking organizations. They play an important role in making information about higher education more transparent and readily available to the public through their communications with stakeholders.

In this context it is recommended that publishers and other displayers of rankings, in respect to:

- (a) *Informing the public:* make an effort to inform the general public about the complexity as well as the constraints of academic rankings and not publicize rankings as if they are the only proxy for university quality.
- (b) *Stimulating public discussion:* encourage discussions around critical issues that affect academic rankings as a way to improve the performance and quality of higher education.

III. Final Observation

These *Guidelines* should be seen in the context of a dialogue about how best for stakeholders to understand and use academic rankings. It is one of the fundamental missions of the IREG Observatory to act as a repository of information about rankings and to keep track of the constantly evolving and diverse world of rankings. The ever-expanding group of rankings experts whom we serve cannot effectively do their job of refining and improving rankings if they do not have ongoing conversations with the constituencies they serve. Consequently, it is our expectation that this document will also encourage dialogue about improving ways that the vast audience for academic rankings can be served.