



SAAIR News

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Chairperson's Corner: *Jan Botha*

Institutional Research and Quality Assurance professionals in our institutions are often required to respond to questions on university rankings.

Why are international rankings of universities attracting so much attention in recent times?

People attempt to respond to questions such as

- What, in fact, is a "world class university"?
- Which universities are the best universities in the world?
- Is the university where I intend to enrol, or where I want my child to study, or the university which has approach my foundation for a grant indeed a good university, and comparable with the good universities of the world?

It is important to keep in mind that there are a whole range of institutions who are drawing up ranking lists of universities. There are major methodological differences between the different ranking systems. Therefore, we cannot speak of *the* top 200 or *the* top 500 universities as if such an objective given exists.

A number of media organisations draw up ranking lists and publish it, for example the *Australian Good Universities Guide* (GUG), the *US News*

and World Report and the weekly *Maclean's* in Canada. In Germany *Der Spiegel* publishes a ranking of European universities. However, the lists of *Der Spiegel* was severely criticised by the Society of Co-operative Universities in the Netherlands, *Vereniging van Samewerkende Nederlandse Universiteite* (VSNU). In order to compile their ranking list, the *Asiaweek* sent questionnaires to universities to ask for information. They also used information available in the public domain. However, the University of Tokyo and 19 Chinese universities decided in 1999 to no longer complete *Asiaweek's* questionnaire, and shortly after that, *Asiaweek* stopped to publish ranking lists.

In the UK the daily newspaper *The Times* publishes a supplement formerly known as *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES), later renamed as *Times Higher Education*. In 2004 they published their "World University Rankings" for the first time, based on the following indicators: a survey of academics' opinion on the reputation of universities (contributing 50% to the weight of the ranking as a whole), the percentage international academic staff (5%), the percentage international students (5%), the staff: student ratio (20%) and the number of citations (20%). While peer review is indeed a valid manner to gauge excellence, the Time's peer selection process is unclear and in 2006 the

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response rate was less than 1% (1600 respondents of 190 000 contacted). Furthermore, to enhance the validity of peer evaluations, it is necessary that input data be provided. However, *The Times Higher* only request the peers to list the 30 universities they regard as the top institutions in their area, without providing any data on any institutions. There is some speculation that it is easier for universities carrying the name of a well-known city (e.g. the University of Melbourne) to get a higher peer rating than other universities in the same area (e.g. Monash University) which are also very good.

In addition to media rankings, there are also academic/research groups who are compiling ranking lists, for example the University of Florida's *The Top American Research Universities* and the Swiss Centre for Science and Technology Studies' *Champions League of Research Universities*. In Spain the Cybermetrics Laboratory publishes a *Webometrics Ranking of World's Universities* based on universities' web presence. The Centre for Science and Technology Studies (*Centrum voor Wetenschap en Technology Studies* CWTS) of the University of Leiden in the Netherlands compile a ranking on the basis of the *Web of Science* database. More than 30 million publications (since 1980) and more than 300 million citations are included in the *Web of Science* database. It is one of the most comprehensive and most reliable databases of this type in the world.

The Graduate School of Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) in China publishes since 2003 annually their "Academic Ranking of World Universities" (ARWU). This ranking list has since became popularly known as the "Top 500" list. Three South African universities were listed in this ranking in 2008. The ARWU uses six indicators:

1. Alumni who have won a Nobel prize or Fields Medal (10%)
2. Academic staff who have won a Nobel prize or Fields Medal (20%)

4. Number of publications in *Nature* en *Science* (20%)
5. Number of articles in the *Science Citation Index-expanded* and in the *Social Science Citation Index* (20%)
6. An adjustment making provision for the size of institutions (10%).

The rankings of media and academic organisations have been severely criticised, for example, for the choice of indicators, the arbitrary weightings, the formulas which are being changed continuously, the huge weight allocated to opinion polls (in the case of *The Times Higher*), which are not based on hard data, problems with statistical reliability and consistency, et cetera. Consider, for example, the following changes in the rankings of institutions on the ARWU so called list of the "Top 500" where A, B, and C represent the University of Osaka, the Ecole Polytechnique France, and the University of Geneva. Can the performance and quality of a university change so drastically within one year?

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
A	69	105	70	46	44
B	27	10	37	28	34
C	-	88	39	105	68

The data that is being used is in many instances incomplete and unreliable. Experts in Scientometrics are very critical about the methodology used in rankings, sometimes going so far as to call it pseudo-science. A "one size fits all" approach does not make sense – universities and contexts differs too much. Furthermore, the weighting that the ARWU gives to Noble prize and Fields medal winners is controversial. One can compare it to a provincial sports team that does not base their position on how many matches they have won against other provinces, but on how many players played for the national team during that season. And to give that much weight to alumni who have received

sport team that base its position in the league on the number of their former players who are playing for the national team instead of the results of the matches that the team itself plays. A recent study indicated that most of the Nobel Prize winners have not done the work for which they were awarded at the institution to which they were affiliated at the time of the award.

Whether universities like it or not, ranking positions have become prominent in recent years. A university that is not satisfied with its position on a ranking list or that did not make it onto a specific ranking list may be tempted to attack the methodology used to compile the rankings: If one does not like the outcome of a match, then blame the rules or the referee! Or, alternatively, choose another ranking wherein your own university performs better.

The CWTS's ranking list is reliable in terms of research, but they justifiably do not claim that it is a comprehensive ranking covering all aspects of universities' activities (teaching and learning, and community engagement or popular reputation or any of the other possible indicators). It is very difficult (impossible?) to express the quality of teaching and learning in a single digit.

So what do we do about the rankings that have become part of university life? A few pointers:

- What is better, for universities in Southern Africa to focus on the race for better positions on rankings lists or to focus on the development and transformation issues required by our context? Should externally determined criteria (by the media and other organisations) carry more weight than our universities' own goals and priorities, given the history, context and ideals of the universities in our part of the world? Our priorities are in many cases not chosen purely with the aim to improve our performance in, say, the THES or ARWU rankings.

- It is not wise to focus on goals which were set arbitrarily, which are measured in terms of highly

questionable methodologies and which are not achievable in the near future. To achieve some of these goals is not in the power of an individual institution. The problem with such a focus is that a university may then become preoccupied with what it does not achieve, rather than being inspired by the many positive things that it does achieve.

- It becomes increasingly clear that there is a casual link between the position of a university in some of the ranking and the financial investments that is made by the university. A prosperous country can to a certain extent "buy" a favourable position on certain ranking lists by offering very attractive packages and facilities to top academics from all over the world. There are universities who have done this successfully in, for example, Singapore and Saudi Arabia. It is widely accepted that a number of Chinese universities achieved better places in the 2008 AWRU ranking after substantial financial injections. It is unrealistic to think that universities in developing and less prosperous countries can compete at that level.

Lee Harvey said in September 2008 during a lecture at the Annual forum of the European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR) in Denmark, "... there is evidence that ranking systems have impacted on higher education institutions and their stakeholders. For example, one of the top universities in Malaysia, the University of Malaya, dropped 80 places in the THES rankings without any decline in its real performance due to definitional changes. This resulted in a replacement of the Vice-Chancellor and embarrassed the university, which claimed in an advertisement two months shy of the 2005 THES results, that it strived to be among the 50 best universities by 2020." Harvey is one of the most respected international experts in quality assurance in higher education and his opinion carries a lot of weight. During the same paper he also said the following about rankings:

"What's good about them? They are easy to use.

What's bad about them? Most everything else."

HEMIS Institute: 18-20 May 2009

The purpose of this Institute is to discuss and workshop any HEMIS related issues, and to develop skills in the area of statutory reporting. In this Institute we will cover many aspects of statutory reporting (Student, Staff & Space) and hope to clarify issues of uncertainty in the production of the required reports. We also hope to share the valuable experience of certain individuals gained over time and to address common issues between institutions in a formal manner.

The target audience is primarily HEMIS office staff, managers of HEMIS staff, planners, management information specialists and even faculty, where the understanding of the process of HEMIS information will benefit the ability of individuals to perform their duties.

The ongoing changing HEMIS reporting framework makes this institute both necessary and helpful, since we all grapple with similar issues and changes to our reporting structures. With the onset of additional reporting requirements (e.g. Space) common problems and solutions are identified and addressed.

The programme will be subject to change but will concentrate on aspects of enrolment planning, funding of students, additional funding by the Department of Education (e.g. foundation funding), space norms and classification, staff FTE calculations and definitions, the upgrade and maintenance of VALPAC software, reporting problems and issues, the audit process and related issues, etc.

During the institute there will be opportunities for open discussion and debate, but it must be stressed that this is not a lecture session, but an interactive one. The programme will be put together by Herman Visser (UNISA) and Glen Barnes (UKZN) and will not strictly follow the format of prior years, but will contain sessions to address specific issues in 2009. The draft programme is available on the SAAIR website.

The venue will be the University of KwaZulu-Natal Innovation Centre off Francois Road (Rick Turner Road), Howard College. Maps and accommodation details are available from the SAAIR website (www.sair.org.za)

Registration is online on the SAAIR website. Registration fees are R 1200.00 for SAAIR members, and R 1400.00 for non-members.

Should you need further information, please consult the SAAIR website for more details, or contact Glen Barnes (031 260 1366, barnesg@ukzn.ac.za) for specific information regarding the local arrangements.



EAIR : August 2008



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“The annual EAIR (European Association for Institutional Research) Forum was held in August 2008 in Copenhagen, Denmark. The theme was *Polishing the silver: are we really improving higher education?* There were at least seven tracks at one time, and everything was organised with Danish precision.

Excellent keynote speakers opened every day, followed by a plethora of presentations on topics including quality, governance, marketing, student satisfaction, services and development, finance and transnational education.

SAAIR was represented by Dt Gert Steyn, Director Institutional Research at Stellenbosch University, who presented a paper on “Space and cost norms for buildings as management tool in HE”, as well as by his two Bloemfontein counterparts. Dr Cay van der Merwe, head of the Information Management Unit at the CUT, and Prof. Driekie Hay, previously dean of Academic Development at the CUT and now DVC: Academic at the University of the Free State, who presented a research paper entitled “Student Academic Language Proficiency: An

investigation into a non-first language developmental intervention”.

Van der Merwe and Hay argued that since more and more school-leavers are entering higher education with a serious backlog in academic language proficiency, and hence are hampered in their studies from the onset, it has become essential that universities test and develop (where necessary) the language skills via special, mostly English, courses. They found a significant difference, for the better, in the end-of-year results of those new students who had been exposed to this additional intervention. This ultimately leads to better throughput and a more efficient higher education system and it appears that universities are obliged – from an educational, moral and economical point of view – to invest, in the medium term, in this crucial form of support to incoming undergraduates.

A boat ride amongst the beautiful olde-worlde buildings and harbour channels preceded the formal dinner, and the ladies even had the privilege of touching the 95-year old Little Mermaid. The Bloemfontein pair are shown in the photo, taken on 27 August 2008.

Introducing: *Margaret Baiketsi*



I am pleased to introduce myself to the Institutional Research family. Margaret Baiketsi is my name. I was born about 40 years ago in Botswana, Gaborone, married and have two girls.

Education as a discipline has always been a profession I esteemed. Over the years I have attained Diploma, Degree and Masters in Education. For this to have happened, it stems from the strong drive and ambition I have as a citizen of Botswana to realise my potential. This aspiration continues to live with me to this day in order for me to achieve a fulfilling and productive life which is beneficial to me as an individual, my family, the community in which I live, the society which I form part of and the global milieu with which I interact. My personal goal as an individual is to achieve my full potential by assuming a personal responsibility for my own self development through determination, courage, self sacrifice, and by recognising that I am ultimately answerable for ensuring the maximisation of my own abilities.

At undergraduate Diploma level, I trained as a secondary school teacher and the Degree programme refocused my career out of the classroom into a Change Agent in the area of extension service.

Nevertheless, both programmes were in the Education discipline of Home Economics and are complementary. My career in the world of teaching lasted for four years. Teaching was quite a test while on the other hand motivating. As years passed by, I developed interest to extend my knowledge and skills outside the teaching fraternity (classroom) to another sector of service – Police Service.

I diligently served the police service as a Change Agent. When I joined this sector, it was going through the transformation process from a Force into a Service. One of its transformational strategies to achieve its vision and mission was to recruit trained personnel in various disciplines and Home Economics was amongst them. It was at the Police Service where I developed so much interest in the field of Research and Evaluation. The challenges faced by the sector required personnel with analytical skills to assess problems and find solutions/answers. The Police Service then saw it fit to create an opportunity for me to train as an Educational Researcher and Evaluator.

My experience with the Police lasted for ten years. With pride and confidence through selfless dedication, I made significant contributions to the sector among them conducting applied research to address issues affecting the welfare of prisoners while in police custody, planning and development of early childhood and foodservice facilities, issues on HIV/AIDS in the workplace, how the sector could re-engineer its services for effective and efficient service delivery to its valued customers etc.

In life as indicated at the beginning, I have a progressive mind and always endeavour to continue learning as well as think beyond the box. My motto is to take on challenges, be proactive and seek to know more. While working for the Police Service, an opportunity opened for me when the new Tertiary Education Council came into being. I happened to be one of its pioneers and was offered a Policy Analyst position. Again, I was

faced with challenges as the Council was new and tasked with an enormous mandate of planning and coordinating the tertiary education sector. Mammoth challenges observed are a fragmented sector and further compounded by lack of a Tertiary Education Policy. Today I pride myself to have significantly contributed to the development of the Tertiary Education Policy for Botswana with an overarching goal to transform Botswana into a knowledge based society.

During the period I have been with the Tertiary Education Council, I was able to develop an impressive academic profile. I have participated in a number of short term training programmes, workshops / seminars and conferences related to data information management systems, quality assurance in higher education, educational planning and research and educational management information systems. The above represents my key strengths and major accomplishment to date.

LAUGHS

I arrived at my desk full of cheer,
When a data request did appear:
“Just need one stat...or two...
Oh--for all our peers, too...
And perhaps going back 15 years”

John Nugent

We're asked to collect data galore.
Countless reports coming out, then more.
It really is easy
To feel a bit queasy
When they're put up on shelves and ignored.

Gwendolyn Kuhns Black

My stomach is churnin' and wrenchin'.
I just heard a casual mention-
Not meant to be mean,
Yet vaguely obscene-
“It's now time to start on retention.”

Debbie Zizzo