

ANALYSIS

Take varsity rankings with a pinch of salt – Prof. Kasozi

Local institutions of higher learning should not spend too much of their time and resources to appear in global university rankings. I am saying this for a number of reasons.

Credible rankings are determined by the economic power of the nations in which the institutions that lead in the subject rankings are located. Few of the website types are worth paying attention to. Many are no different from briefcase businesses.

Secondly, the good ones are rated by the amount of resources universities receive and the projects to which these universities put the money.

Thirdly, ranking positions are influenced by the legal relationships of universities with their host countries. The richer the nations, the more the resources the universities have, the more positive ranking levels are likely to be.

Most African universities are located in poor countries. They are linked to Governments through ministries of education, finance and development, which encumber them with state-like bureaucratic regulations that throttle free action that are necessary for institutional and academic freedom of universities. Their chances of making it to the top in credible world leagues are minimal.

More so, ranking levels are also determined by the credibility of the institutions that do the rankings. There are many rogue websites that do rankings that should not make us rejoice if they give us a high place in the league. I will be pleased if one of our universities came in the top 10 of the three ranking organisations; Shanghai Jiao Tong Institute of Higher Education (SJTIE); sometimes known as "The Shanghai Index", the *Times* or *Newsweek* rankings.

Lastly, we should know that most ranking, even the most credible ones, do not cover all university activities or programmes. They select few areas to include in the competition for league positions.

This article argues that rankings are not an indica-



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tor of the quality of all the activities a university offers, and should, therefore, not influence our decisions in funding and student placement behaviour.

GLOBAL RANKINGS HAVE LOCAL IMPACT

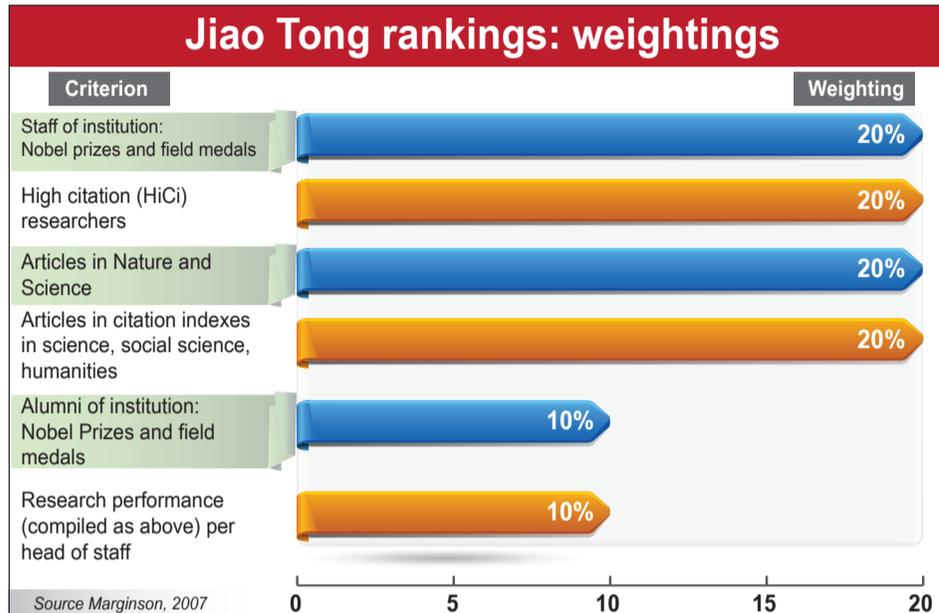
Unfortunately, for now, ranking of universities is done globally, but has impact on virtually all universities all over the world. Our universities may be administered locally as "national institutions", but when it comes to ranking, even government officials, who restrict the autonomy of public universities by the chains of their bureaucratic red tape, are interested in the global ranking of our universities.

International students choosing foreign universities, policy makers, the media, universities themselves and funding agencies, all pay attention to rankings.

Every university wants to lift its league position in global ranking and to prove its worth. However, ranking is a global affair, using global and not national standards. It is also an indicator of resources at the disposal of a university, the wealth of the nation and the institutional autonomy of a university.

Furthermore, rankings deflect the attention of institutions from their mission to foreign global 'standards'. Each country should design areas where it wants its universities to excel and make those the areas of rankings.

Most global rankings do not



WHY IGNORE GLOBAL RANKINGS?

cover all university activities or programmes. They are selective in what they rank. The Shanghai Jiao Tong Institute of Higher Education, *The Times* and *Newsweek* have been the most known, and I must add, credible, ranking organisations in the last 10 years.

The Shanghai Jiao Tong ranking methods are now considered the most credible. They are ranking are based on research, publications, citations, Nobel prizes and field medals in mathematics.

One global factor that is evident in being at the top of the league is the relationship between the economic capacity of nations, their universities, the ability and levels of investments in research and development, as well as the ability of institutions to exploit opportunities.

Universities located in countries with massive economic power, good investment in research and development, and a traditional of having institutional autonomy, make it to the top in global rankings. For example, in 2007, the United States had 54 of the SJTIE top 100 research universities, led by Harvard. The UK with 11 (including Oxford and Cambridge) was number two, Canada (four), and Australia (two). All these

institutions were from the English-speaking world indicating the rise of English as a global language of communication research and science.

The Times Higher Education Index and *Newsweek* still publish rankings, but are no longer as famous as the SJTIE Index.

In my time as executive director of the National Council for Higher Education from 2002 to 2012, I resisted calls for ranking of Ugandan universities.

The majority of these universities are in their early formative stages and their financial bases were so low that ranking would not be of any benefit to them or society.

Time had not come to get involved in the ranking of universities. In future, say, 10 to 20 years from now, ranking by faculties of the various Uganda institutions might be considered. But, of course, the choice will be made under a new management in light of changes in the higher education landscape.

The writer is the former executive director, National Council for Higher Education



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