



# Decode, Track, and Use Ranking Information

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## Question

1

**There are too many rankings, which one should we track? How can you assess the validity and rigor of each ranking agency?**



**U.S. News:** There isn't an easy way to do that. The only way to attempt to do that is read each rankings' methodology and make a judgment based on its credibility and the data used. Also transparency of the data presented needs to be considered.



**QS:** Options are a good thing. They help to calibrate the results for students, providing different lenses on the same issue. They also motivate the rankings agencies to improve, quality check and innovate. It's unlikely when choosing any significant product in life (university, a new house, a new career) that you would only rely on one source. It takes minutes to look at a ranking and flick through the methodology. For students with a deeper interest in the methods behind it, they can do a deep-dive and find out which suits their preferences more. Our rankings have both a stable internal validity (moderate correlations between like-indicators) and good external validity, both in terms of comparison to other rankings results, but also to national measures and student perceptions.



**Shanghai:** From the perspective of ranking indicator design, each ranking has its characteristics. Taking ARWU as an example, it is widely known that the methodology of ARWU is scientifically sound, stable and transparent. The data collected for ARWU all come from the third parties, including the official website of the Nobel Prize, Fields Medal, the highly cited researchers and the Web of Science database, etc. That is why ARWU has been recognized as the precursor of global university rankings and one of the most objective league tables by universities, governments, and public media worldwide. We highly recommend universities and governments assess the level of teaching and research of world universities by referring to ARWU.

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**TIMES:** There's no reason just to track one. More important though is to use the data underlying the rankings themselves, rather than worrying about the surface of rankings positions. Start from your own mission priorities, find the ranking that has data that's relevant to that, and go from there.

## Question 2

**What data do schools usually need to submit for ranking? How does the ranking agency ensure the accuracy of the data?**



**U.S. News:** For the US News Best Global Rankings schools don't submit any data used in the rankings. It's all from Clarivate or reputational surveys. Clarivate takes a large number of QA steps to ensure the accuracy of publication and citation counts that are used. For Clarivate this is an ongoing process. For the US News Best Colleges and Best Grad school rankings -US News collects it own statistical data from schools and has many steps in order to ensure data accuracy - including verification of the data by top school officials, 3 party data checks and a rigorous quantitative assessment of a schools data submission each year.



**QS:** For our world and regional rankings, the directly data typically relates to staff and students. We use this to calculate various metrics, including faulty student ratio, citations per faculty, international student and faculty ratio, staff with PhD and inbound/outbound exchange students. For US institutional data, we use IPEDS, and for the UK we use HESA. We have a large team of researchers working on data validations and ask institutions for confirmation before using the data in our rankings. We then use analytical tools, such as variance thresholds / country and regional averages, year to year swings - and apply tools to counter these. Finally, it is not unheard of for us to receive information from the sector that submitted data may be faulty / inaccurate / misleading, and we investigate these thoroughly and have sanctioned universities who may have tried to use incorrect submissions for performance gains.

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**TIMES:** The data should be specified clearly in the rankings methodology, but it will vary hugely depending on the ranking in question. In terms of the data validation – this is a huge part of the process for us all, comparing values to previous years and other institutions in the space, and where it exists (and is comparable) comparing to national sources. In the US that would mean IPEDs, College Scorecard etc. If we find inconsistencies then we will challenge universities!

## Question

3

### Will there be methodology changes post-COVID?



**U.S. News:** US News doesn't announce methodology changes in advance. US News constantly evolves its methodology so there will be methodology changes (independent of COVID ) as part of the normal course of events.



**QS:** We have no methodology changes planned directly related to Covid, but rather the move in the sector from heavily campus based to hybrid learning is challenging us to rethink some of our data definitions and how we operationalize them. Most international borders have reopened, and as universities were allowed to submit pre-covid international students in their submissions, we expect the metrics that would be affected by this (namely the international metrics) to level out.



**Shanghai:** The methodology of ARWU will not be changed.



**TIMES:** For the Impact Rankings, yes, absolutely – we explicitly changed the date range of data for the latest iteration to account for Covid-19. But this was partly because of what we choose to measure there. For the World University Rankings we aren't making changes explicitly because of Covid, but we will soon be making other changes.

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## Question

4

**Are there trends or changes in higher education during the pandemic you have seen that based on your ranking results?**



**U.S. News:** The main change in the US News is the continuation of the trend away from admission tests at all levels- more schools at all levels are test optional or test blind; it's unclear if admission policies that require the use of tests (SAT, ACT, LSAT, GRE, GMAT) will return to the pre-pandemic status quo.



**QS:** Employer reputation seems to have taken a hit this year. The nature of rankings data means that drawing a straight line from cause to effect is often very tenuous, but we wonder if a very competitive (and challenging) job market has meant that employers have started to lean back on old stereotypes and 'halo effects', making it more difficult for less prestigious universities to be heard among the noise.

Interestingly, the pandemic has not, as yet, seemed to slow down global research production – we are still seeing strong year on year increases in both paper production and citations production. Of course, the lead times in academic publishing can be a year or longer, so we still may see a slowing of this to come – but it seems as though academics have been just as busy as ever.



**TIMES:** Obviously there have been learnings around teaching methods, which we have reported on extensively in our editorial. One big, long-term challenge is around finance. The world we live in is seeing pressure on government spending and that will reflect on direct and indirect funding. We also see more universities becoming aware of the importance of sustainability as a key part of their mission.

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## Question 5

**Philosophically, the metrics that rankings publishers choose to represent a vision of an ideal university. It seems that many of the metrics that are chosen positively to correlate with the wealth of the university and negatively correlate with the student body size. Instead of holding small rich universities as the ideal, will you continue to evolve to reflect the value that a university should benefit its society by being accessible and by scaling to include \*large\* numbers of \*non-elite\* students. That seems healthier for society.**



**U.S. News:** US News has evolved its Best Colleges rankings to take Social Mobility and Debt at graduation into account and is studying ways of adding other indicators that measure equity and student success.



**QS:** Universities are typically said to have three missions: teaching, research and engagement. To do any of these things well in a global context requires significant investment of people and money. It is not the case that metrics are chosen to positively correlate with wealth, but that metrics which indicate quality are naturally correlated with investment. If we take research as an example: highly cited academics are often mid to late career professors, commanding a higher salary. In many fields, but particularly the sciences, the research itself is expensive and time consuming often requiring significant investment in equipment, trials, legal advice, postdoc hiring and so on. Many journals also require 'pay to publish', increasingly in OA journals. In order to free up a lot of the top researchers to do the publishing, the universities need to backfill the teaching capacity – so such universities hire support staff, non-research lecturers and then likely have well developed online learning platforms where much of the student learning is self-service.

There are myriad other reasons students might choose to go to university, from the proximity to their home, to the nightlife of the city (see QS Best Student Cities Ranking) to whether or not it has a good hockey or debating team. Not all of these will correlate with university wealth,



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and it is important to remember that rankings are just one vision of ‘good’, and we encourage students and universities to use them with a requisite amount of good (and subjective) judgment.

Our sustainability ranking, due later this year, has been designed with a very different set of indicators to our main rankings. While there is always going to be a sensible correlation between university finances and performance, it may well produce a very different list to the usual top performers, and allow more mid-tier universities, and those outside of Anglo-dominant cultures to shine.



**TIMES:** Yes – please look at the Impact Rankings, especially SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 1 (no poverty).

## Question 6

**Can you provide a specific example of how the university used the ranking data to improve performance such as teaching, and student engagement?**



**U.S. News:** I think there are many US schools that are using the US News Best Colleges data and ranking indicators to make such improvements. The State University of FL System (2nd largest in USA , with 12 schools/universities and 430,000 + students <https://www.flbog.edu/> ) uses many of the US News ranking metrics to measure performance and outcomes.



**QS:** QS has worked with hundreds of universities on this, and I wouldn't like to pick any single one. We offer a variety of services to more deeply understand and track our rankings data (from analytical trackers to full-service consulting). At the lighter end of the scale, many universities proudly display their rankings performance on their websites, and this helps to a) attract students and staff and b) encourage their peers to

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to a) attract students and staff and b) encourage their peers to do the same. It also encourages them to strategize their hiring – strong research credentials, and a diverse faculty body, are likely outcomes from universities who follow a rankings-related strategy.



**TIMES:** I'm going to ask you to look outside the US (there are US examples, but this way preserves some anonymity!) – we're seeing universities and governments using our data to shape their strategies and approaches. In Japan, for example, we've seen the data on student engagement steadily rise since we started to measure and report on that data.