

## The THE-QS World University Rankings, 2004 – 2009

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper reviews the origin, development and demise of the Times Higher Education Supplement (now Times Higher Education) – QS Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings between 2004 and 2009. It describes the structure and methodology of the rankings, their public impact and various criticisms that have been made. It also analyses changes that were introduced between 2005 and 2009 and concludes by noting the development of two distinct ranking systems by the magazine Times Higher Education (THE) and by its former partner, the consulting company Quacquarelli Symonds.*

**Keywords:** Rankings, universities, quality, globalization, evaluation

### Introduction

During the five years of their existence, the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES), later Times Higher Education (THE) – QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World University Rankings (Times Higher Education, 2010; QS Topuniversities, 2010) had a remarkable impact on higher education around the world. They were not the first attempt to rank universities or even the first attempt at comparative international evaluation. They did, however, arouse an unprecedented degree of public interest, shown in hits on the websites of THE, the publisher of the rankings, and QS, the consultants who collected and analysed the data on which they were based. At the end of October 2009, THE declared

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that they would no longer use QS to provide data. Instead, they would form partnerships with Thomson Reuters, the compiler of data on scientific publications and citations, and Ipsos MORI, a UK based polling company, and produce an entirely new ranking system that they claimed would be more robust, valid and transparent than the old one (Baty, 2009). For their part, QS announced that they would continue to produce the World University Rankings by themselves with no significant changes (QS Topuniversities, 2009). At the time of writing, THE was developing a new ranking system while QS had stuck to the old one. The two rival rankings were scheduled for release in September, 2010.

The idea of ranking universities is not new. The first major systematic ranking was America's Best Colleges started by the newspaper *US News and World Report* in 1983 (Meredith, 2004). In the US, there followed a proliferation of rankings of various kinds that included the detailed examination of particular disciplines especially in law and business management such as the *Top 2010 Law School Rankings* (2010) and *Which MBA?* (2009). There are also several frivolous indexes, an expanding category that now includes top party schools (Marketing Charts, 2009), hottest student bodies (Popcrunch, 2009) and best universities for squirrels (Campus Squirrel Listings, 2009). The Princeton Review (2010) also has a range of rankings of various kinds, based on a large student survey. Even so, for most people *America's Best Colleges* remains the dominant force in the US rankings world, although it now faces a serious challenge from the Center for College Affordability and Productivity (2009). The ranking of universities has also proliferated in the UK where there are now four general rankings, produced by newspapers, namely the *Times*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*, of national universities.

The first international, although not global, university ranking was that conducted by the Hong Kong based magazine *Asiaweek* in 1999 and 2000 (Asiaweek, 2000). This was the first attempt to produce a general ranking of large numbers of universities internationally. A wide variety of measures were combined to give an overall score although the reasons for the weighting of various factors were not fully explained. Asian universities were assessed by academic reputation, student selectivity, faculty resources, research, financial resources, students per academic staff member, graduate students, citations in international journals, and internet bandwidth.

These rankings showed a high degree of face validity. The placing of the universities did not contain any gross anomalies although there

were clearly a few sobering moments for some. It was noticeable, for example, that Australian universities were beginning to lag behind those in Hong Kong and Japan.

The big problem with the *Asiaweek* rankings was that they were too dependent on data derived from the universities themselves which meant that those dissatisfied, whether because they were bad losers or because of a principled objection to ranking or quantification, could sabotage them by refusing to take part. In 2000, a total of 35 leading Asian universities did not participate. They included Peking, Tsinghua and fifteen other mainland Chinese universities. The universities of Calcutta, Delhi and Madras, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the International Islamic University Malaysia, Massey University in New Zealand and Chulalongkorn University in Thailand also opted out. The most noticeable absentee was the University of Tokyo, then and now considered by many to be the best university in Asia. As a result, the ranking was cancelled in 2001, ostensibly because it was not expected that there would be significant changes since the previous year.

Nevertheless, it is a tribute to the quality of the *Asiaweek* survey that when the initial selection for the THES – QS rankings did not produce enough Asian universities, the consultants simply added universities from the *Asiaweek* list, even though a few years had passed.

In 2003, Shanghai Jiaotong University produced its first Academic Ranking of World Universities (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2003). This index combined several weighted indicators, the number of alumni who had won Nobel prizes in economics, physics, chemistry and medicine (peace and literature were not counted) and Fields medals for mathematics, the number of staff who had won these awards, the number of highly cited researchers listed by Thomson ISI, the number of publications in *Nature* and *Science* between 1998 and 2002, the number of publications in journals included in the Science Citation Index – expanded and the Social Science Citation Index, and productivity per capita which was calculated by adding these totals and then dividing by the number of faculty as indicated by national public data.

The publication of the first Shanghai rankings in 2003 aroused much interest in academia. It clearly showed that English was the dominant language of international research, with US universities taking a disproportionate share of the top places. Chinese universities did not do particularly well and Asian universities in general were unimpressive. The impact of the rankings was most pronounced in continental Europe, especially France whose schools fared very badly.

The Shanghai rankings received much criticism. There was no adequate justification for the weighting of the various components. Nor was there any attempt to measure teaching quality, apart from Nobel and Fields laureate alumni, which referred to previous decades. The data came from widely different periods, one year for publications, a century for Nobel award winners. They were heavily biased towards the natural sciences and medicine and against the social sciences and even more so the arts and humanities. Nonetheless, the Shanghai rankings have acquired considerable respect over the years, not least because the compilers have steadfastly refused to change their methodology.

### **Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds**

The first THE (then THES)-QS ranking came out in October 2004 and was followed by annual rankings until 2009. THE decided the overall structure of the rankings and provided the commentary. The collection of data was entrusted to QS Quacquarelli Symonds Ltd and data on citations of research was at first collected by the British company, Evidence Ltd. which was headed by Jonathon Adams, formerly of Imperial College London.

It is necessary to clarify the relationship between *Times Higher Education* or *The Times Higher Education Supplement* as it was known until recently and the national daily newspaper, *The Times*. It seems that many university administrators and journalists still think that *Times Higher Education* is in some way connected with the *Times* or at least produced by the same publishers. There are many references to the World University Rankings being produced by the “Times of London”. For example, we find the Brazilian periodical *Pequisa FAPESP* reporting that “the British newspaper the Times published for the first time a ranking of the best 200 universities on the planet” (Marques, 2005). In October 2006, the University of Rochester in New York State observed that the “University of Rochester is ranked 21st among U.S. universities in the global ranking table issued by the *Times of London* today. Overall, Rochester moved up to 48th in the world from 73rd last year” (Rochester in Top 25, 2006). The author of this paper has also noticed that senior university administrators in Southeast Asia and the Middle East often refer to “*The Times*” as the producer of the rankings.

The first of *The Times* “supplements”, *The Times Education Supplement*, founded in 1910, was originally a free supplement folded

inside *The Times* newspaper once a week but it became an independent weekly publication in 1914. *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) was first published in 1971, going online in 1995 and was always a separate weekly newspaper produced, like *The Times* by the Thomson Organisation. It has been through several reorganizations over time. In 1981, News Corporation bought *The Times*, the two educational “supplements” and the Times Literary Supplement and in 1989, a completely separate company, Times Supplements Ltd. was set up to run the TES, THES and the TLS. In 1999, the company changed its name to TSL Education Ltd. to indicate that the relationship with *The Times* was now “purely historic”. In 2005, Exponent Private Equity acquired the educational supplements and Nursery World for 235 million pounds, so that TSL Education no longer had even a tenuous connection with *The Times* (News International Poised to Offload TES, 2005). In December 2008, the publication was renamed *Times Higher Education* and adopted a magazine rather than a newspaper format. THE is supposed to be the leading source of information about education in the UK although it is perhaps most appreciated by academics for its job advertisements and Laurie Taylor’s satirical column. There is also a lot of news, letters and book reviews. It is not, however, an academic journal that publishes original scholarly research and has no pretensions to being such.

The editor of THE during the period of the first three rankings was John O’Leary, a graduate of Sheffield University, whose career started with the *Evening Chronicle* in Newcastle and who was formerly the Education Editor of *The Times* (EUPRIO, 2006). He is also the author of the *Times Good University Guide*. In February 2007, he left THE “apparently after a period of disagreements with the paper’s owner over its future direction” (Brook, 2007).

The editor with specific responsibility for producing the World University Rankings was Martin Ince who is described as “a journalist and communications adviser”. He is also a media adviser to several British research councils and has written a number of books on science and education (*Assessing Quality*, 2005). O’Leary and Ince have now left *Times Higher Education* and have joined the ranking team at QS Quacquarelli Symonds Ltd., thereby reconstituting the original group but this time entirely under QS auspices.

The task of collecting data for the rankings was assigned to QS who describe themselves as “one of the leading international networks for top careers and education. Their mission is to provide a lifetime of career and educational support for high achievers”. It was founded in 1990 by

Nunzio Quacquarelli. QS's main office is in London and in 2004, it had branch offices in Paris, Singapore, Washington DC, Sydney and Beijing (Going Global 2, 2006). It started off as an agency that acted as an intermediary between managers and future managers and their trainees and employers. It has a noticeable penchant for flattering its clients. Its websites and publications are full of phrases like "the best in higher education", "market leading publications", "high-calibre graduates and executives", "major recruiters" and "top universities".

The founding director of QS, Nunzio Quacquarelli, has an MA from Cambridge and an MBA from The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where he won the Frederick H. Glockner Prize for Management and the Moot Corp Business Venture Award. He is an editor of *the MBA Career Guide*, producer of the Global Top 100 business schools report and has also written for the *Guardian Weekly*, *Handelsblatt*, *South China Morning Post*, *Chief Executive China*, *Il Mondo* and other publications (Going Global 4, 2010). The other director of QS, Matt Symonds does not appear to be directly involved in the rankings.

It is interesting that THES should have assigned the job of compiling the data to a company that had specialized in the recruitment of MBAs and the ranking of MBA programs. It is surely inconceivable that university administrators would be so blase about allowing a group of post-modern cultural theorists to classify, categorise and compare the overall performance of every other discipline. The confidence placed in QS is especially noteworthy since management studies have all the characteristics of immature disciplines (Micklethwaite & Wooldridge, 1996). The choice of QS as compilers of the rankings seems yet another example of the extraordinary deference displayed by senior academics to management theorists as shown in the rush for ISO certification, team-building games and the cult of personal development.

The background of those who saw the rankings through their formative years was therefore in journalism and marketing rather than academic research or university teaching. It was somewhat different from Nian Cai Liu, whose background is in chemistry and engineering, and Ying Cheng, trained in statistics, who were responsible for the Shanghai rankings (Liu, 2006). The founders of the THE-QS rankings were certainly skilled in marketing, public relations and writing, if we forgive things like "West is best but there's a rich feast in the East" (Ince & Jannuzi, 2004), but it is debatable whether this was enough to create a global ranking system.

## The First THES-QS Ranking

The first ranking that appeared in 2004 started with an initial list of 500 universities selected on the basis of research impact (Sowter 2008a, 2008b). A number of universities, mainly German, were then added based on subjective impressions and Asian universities were taken from the *Asiaweek* rankings. Since then, universities have been admitted to the “initial list” on a case by case basis. In the early years, there were some notable omissions, some of which are described below, although these were gradually rectified.

The 2004 ranking was composed of just five indicators. Of these a survey of academic opinion, inappropriately called a “peer review” was given a weighting of fifty per cent. Twenty per cent went to faculty student ratio, supposedly a measure of the quality of teaching, twenty per cent to the number of citations over the last ten years divided by the number of current faculty and five per cent each to the proportion of students and faculty who were international, that is not citizens of the country where they worked or studied.

## Changes

Several changes were made in subsequent years. Those that occurred before 2008 are listed in Sowter (2008c). In the second edition in 2005, a survey of employers of graduates was added with a weighting of ten per cent while the academic survey was reduced to forty per cent. There was also a modest change with citations being counted over a five year rather than a ten year period, which might have helped new and growing institutions and those with strengths in disciplines in which papers were most frequently cited a few years after publication.

A flurry of changes came in 2007. First was a measure to prevent a problem which had, perhaps somewhat belatedly, come to the notice of QS, namely that of institutions encouraging large numbers of junior staff or students to join the academic survey, something that would not seem to be very difficult, and nominate their own schools en masse. QS therefore prevented respondents from nominating their own institutions. It was probably at this time that QS also imposed a limit of one response per computer.

QS also introduced Z scores to present the data. Previously, a score of 100 was assigned to the top school in each category and then other scores calculated proportionately. If, for example the top university for the faculty student ratio indicator had two students for each faculty member, then it received a score of 100, a university with eight per faculty a score of 25 and so on. Under the new system, the mean for each indicator was converted to a score of fifty and then scores for each university were calculated by determining the standard deviation from the mean. Effectively, this meant that scores were now bunched around the mean so that universities would no longer get a disproportionately high overall score as a result of doing well on one or two indicators even if their performance on others was mediocre or worse. Thus, one result of this change was that the London School of Economics fell from 17<sup>th</sup> in 2006 to 57<sup>th</sup> in 2007 (World University Rankings 2006; 2007), a slight that rankles many of its supporters even today. What happened was that in 2007, many universities with modest percentages of international students and lecturers but with high scores on other indicators now got more points for these criteria thus catching up or overhauling LSE in the overall rankings.

In addition, QS now obtained its citation data from Scopus, which is owned by the Anglo-Dutch publishing company Elsevier rather than Thomson Reuters. This database was larger and included more publications, particularly from non-English speaking countries. However, the list contained a disproportionate number of publications from the UK and the Netherlands compared to the US. It is also likely that in its attempt to be as comprehensive as possible, Scopus had become less selective and was therefore measuring the sheer quantity of published research rather than its quality.

The introduction of Z scores, prohibiting correspondents from voting for their own universities, the extra weighting given to nominations from outside a university's own country and the introduction of a shorter period for counting citations meant that the THE-QS rankings did become more professional and rigorous. Nonetheless, the insistence on assigning 50% of the total score to a subjective and not very well controlled pair of indicators, the bias against the humanities and social sciences and the reliance on data submitted by institutions themselves undermined academic confidence in the rankings although they still continued to get more media attention than the more stable but less interesting Shanghai rankings.



## Reactions

There has been a very broad range of reactions to international university rankings since the publication of the first Academic Ranking of World Universities by Shanghai Jiao Tong University (2003). Some academics and political figures have welcomed them whole-heartedly while others have criticised them vigorously. Few, however, have been able to completely ignore them. In general, support for international rankings has tended to come from those who have performed well or hope to perform well in the future while those who have fared less well, have been tended to be negative.

In a few cases, universities and governments treated a poor or mediocre showing as a challenge. Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, then Higher Education Minister in Malaysia commented that “vice-chancellors have come to accept international university rankings as important guides to performance and a gauge of their progress in building the human capital Malaysia needs to remain globally competitive” (Mustapa Mohamed, 2007).

Another response has been the creation or extension of a multitude of national rankings, ratings and quality enhancement programs especially in places where not many universities have any hope of a place in an international ranking. National rankings include long established ones in the USA and UK and there are now recent arrivals in countries such as Kazakhstan (Ministry of Education and Science, 2007), Ukraine (Shantsev, 2008) and Taiwan (Hou and Morse, 2009).

The first Shanghai ranking in 2003 showed that universities in continental Europe, especially in France and Germany were lagging behind those in the English speaking countries, especially the United States. The response by French academics and political leaders was to create a ranking that included exactly one indicator, the number of CEOs of companies in the Fortune Global 500 (Mines Paris Tech, 2009). Perhaps unsurprisingly, French institutions, especially the grandes ecoles did very well although cynics might suspect that this had something to do with the linguistic and cultural introversion of French businesses who prefer to recruit local talent for top executive positions. French academics and civil servants also sought to sponsor the development with Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium of a new general ranking system (Spongenberg, 2010). This, however, at the time of writing, seems to be slow to get off the ground.

Again, Russian universities have generally done badly in all rankings, prompting the creation in 2009 of a new global ranking of universities (Global Universities Ranking, 2009) that put Lomonosov Moscow State University in fifth place ahead of Harvard, Stanford and Cambridge.

Administrators of major universities generally welcomed the rankings, seeing them as an important element in the development of an international mission or as providing useful public relations material. Thus, Harvard's Director of Undergraduate Admissions has said that *the Times Higher Education Supplement* "was correct to include a large number of great universities" (Ince, 2004). Shih Choon Fong, who was the President of the National University of Singapore and is now head of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, told the *Straits Times* of Singapore that "higher education had become a global industry and NUS had to compete globally with the best for academic talent and students" and said that "(w)e welcome these international comparisons, because we are confident of the quality of our education at NUS, and we can only raise our profile further if we make it to such lists" (*Straits Times*, 2004).

Chris Patten, former Governor of Hong Kong and now Chancellor of Oxford University has said "in the last month, another respected international survey placed Oxford and Cambridge joint second to Harvard in the league table of world-class universities. This confirms what others have suggested in recent years" (Holmes, 2007c). He was using the excellent performance of Oxford and Cambridge in the THE-QS rankings to argue that these universities should have the right to set their own tuition fees. Similarly, ranking performance was used to support the case for Imperial College to become completely separate from the University of London and issue its own degrees (University of London, 2006).

Other university administrators were hostile to rankings in general and to the one produced by THE and QS in particular. The Vice-Chancellor of RMIT Melbourne, Margaret Gardner, claimed that international university rankings had seriously undermined the quality of Australian university education by emphasizing generalist rather than vocationally orientated education (Rood, 2006).

It is now widely recognized that the THE-QS World University Rankings and other rankings have had an important influence on international education policy. Justin Lin, Senior Vice-president and Chief Economist of the World Bank in his foreword to Salmi (2009) referred to the "the emerging power of league tables and rankings in driving the tertiary education policy debates world wide". This is

especially true of major research universities. Simon Marginson, a respected Australian critic of university rankings, has studied the views of major research universities and interviewed presidents, rectors and vice-chancellors. He found that “the most important single influence shaping the global sector was university rankings”. He noted that such rankings were regarded as significant everywhere except for the USA, where national rankings such as those produced by the *US News and World Report*, still dominated public debate and Mexico. He also observed that the policies of many universities were greatly influenced by rankings. Thus, David Naylor, President of the University of Toronto acknowledged that “we certainly have changed our behavior in the light of rankings” (Marginson, 2009).

A useful summary of international academic opinion is provided in a recent report from Thomson Reuters (Adams & Baker, 2009), produced for Times Higher Education in preparation for the development of a new ranking system. They found that 45% of the respondents thought that rankings were somewhat useful and 40% very useful or extremely useful. Nonetheless, respondents to the survey did in many respects hold negative views of existing rankings.

While the significance of rankings cannot be disputed, many observers found much about the THE-QS rankings to criticise. Detailed criticism can be found in Holmes (2006) and in the Thomson Reuters report, where respondents identified major problems such as improper methodology, inappropriate weighting, bias, manipulation, lack of transparency and excessive emphasis on research.

Many observers simply found that the evaluations of the THES-QS rankings, especially the opinion surveys did not accord with their own observation and experience. Thus Garry Stevens, an Australian architectural sociologist observed that “*THE/QS* ranks the top 200 of the world’s universities, down to the very rank. *THE/QS* ranks the Australian universities much higher than ARWU does. We are more than dubious. The 2007 *THE/QS* ratings also place one Australian university as better than every university in Europe and every university in Japan. We don’t think so” (Stevens, 2010).

## **Errors**

One source of criticism was a succession of errors that might have resulted from QS’s lack of experience of higher education, undue reliance

on junior staff and a need to cut corners to meet publishing deadlines. By 2008, the rankings had become largely error-free but it took a long time to get there. At first, it seemed as though QS were forgiven for these and other errors. The author of this paper has heard the consequences of the error involving “international” students and faculty at Malaysian universities (see below) ascribed on at least two occasions to a “change in methodology”. Eventually, however, the accumulation of errors combined with other flaws, served to turn a large section of academic opinion against the rankings.

Perhaps the worst error was not in the rankings themselves but in the book, *Guide to the World’s Top Universities*, published in 2007 incorporating the 2006 rankings and written by two editors from THES and Nunzio Quacquarelli, the director and founder of QS (O’Leary, Quacquarelli & Ince, 2007).

This error was a beautiful example of the butterfly effect, where a very simple data transfer error led to hundreds of mistakes. Among other things, the book contained data about student faculty ratios of over 500 ranked universities. It should have been obvious immediately that there was something very wrong with these data. Many figures were far too high. Yale was assigned a ratio of 34.1, Harvard 18, Cambridge 18.9 and Pretoria 590.3. On the other hand, there were some implausibly low figures such as 3.5 for the Dublin Institute of Technology and 6.1 for the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines. Sometimes the ratios flatly contradicted information given on the same page and there was also no relationship between the ratios and the scores in the THES-QS rankings. What happened was very simple. Someone slipped three rows when transferring data so that every single student faculty ratio in the book, over 500 of them, was incorrect. Duke University’s ratio of 3.5, which was incorrect to begin with, was given to the Dublin Institute of Technology. The ration of 590.3 faculty per student at the University of Pune in India was given to the University of Pretoria while the ratio that should have been assigned to the University of Wales at Aberystwyth went to Aachen RWT. (Holmes, 2007a; 2007b)

Neither QS nor the authors of the book ever acknowledged this error although when the 2008 edition appeared it had a new title and was no longer published by Blackwell’s of Oxford (O’Leary, Quacquarelli & Ince, 2008).

There was an error that, in contrast to the above, received a great deal of attention, at least in Malaysia. In 2004, there was great jubilation at Universiti Malaya (UM), the country’s oldest university, when it

was learnt that it had reached 89th place in the first THES-QS world rankings. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) also did very well. Then in 2005 came disaster. UM crashed 100 places, seriously damaging the Vice-Chancellor's career (Preliminary Announcement, 2010), and USM disappeared from the top 200 altogether. The Malaysian political opposition had a field day blasting away at the supposed incompetence of the university leadership.

The dramatic decline should have been no surprise at all. A Malaysian blogger (Pua, 2005) had noticed that the figures for international students and faculty in 2004 were erroneous. What happened was that in 2004 QS were under the impression that large numbers of foreigners were studying and teaching at the two Malaysian universities. Actually, there were just a lot of Malaysian citizens of Indian and Chinese descent. In 2005, the error was corrected causing the scores for international faculty and students to fall precipitously.

Later, THES referred to this as “a clarification of data”, a piece of elegant British establishment obfuscation that is almost as good as “being economical with the truth” (Rankings Spur Change, 2005)

Another error involved Duke University, an elite institution in North Carolina. Between 2004 and 2005, Duke rose dramatically in the rankings from 57<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> (World University Rankings 2004, 2004; World University Rankings 2005, 2005). It did so mainly because it had been given a very low and incredible student faculty ratio in the latter year, less than two students per faculty. This was not the best ratio in the rankings. That supposedly belonged to Ecole Polytechnique in Paris (see below). But it was favorable enough to give Duke a powerful boost in the rankings.

The ratio was the result of a ludicrous error. QS listed Duke as having 6,244 faculty, well in excess of anything claimed on the university's web site. Oddly enough, this was exactly the number of undergraduate students enrolled at Duke in the fall of 2005. Somebody evidently had copied down the figure for undergraduate students and counted them as faculty, giving Duke four times the number of faculty it should have. (Holmes, 2006b).

Having made a mess of Duke's student faculty ratio in 2005, QS pulled off a truly spectacular feat in 2006 by making an even bigger mess. The problem, perhaps, lay with Duke's public relations office having its hands full with the Lacrosse rape hoax, an utterly implausible accusation of rape, abetted by influential faculty and administrators, against three students, so that the web site had not been fully updated since the fall of 2005. For students, QS apparently took undergraduate student enrollment

in the fall of 2005, subtracted the number of undergraduate degrees awarded and added the 2005 intake. This is a bit crude because some students would have left without taking a degree, Reade Seligmann and Colin Finnerty, victims of the rape accusation, for example, but probably not too inaccurate. Then, there was a problem because while the number of postgraduate degrees awarded was indicated on the site there was no reference to postgraduate admissions. So, QS seems to have deducted the degrees awarded and added what they thought was number of postgraduate students admitted, 300 of them, to the Pratt School of Engineering, which is an undergraduate, not a graduate school. Then, in a final flourish, they calculated the number of faculty by doubling the figure on the Duke site, apparently because Duke listed the same number classified first by department and then by status.

The result was that the number of students was undercounted and the number of faculty seriously overcounted, giving Duke the best student faculty ratio for the year. Although the ratio was higher than in 2005, Duke was now in first place for this section because QS had calculated more realistic ratios for the Ecole Polytechnique and the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Holmes, 2006b).

It is worth taking a look at the data for the Ecole Polytechnique. In 2005, it went zooming up the rankings to become the best university in continental Europe. Then in 2006, it went zooming down again. All this was because of extraordinary fluctuations in the student faculty ratio. What happened could be determined by looking at the data on QS's top graduate site. Clicking on the rankings for 2005 led to the data that was used for that year (it is no longer available). There were two very different sets of data for students and faculty for that year, evidently one containing part-time faculty and another with only full time faculty. It seems that in 2005, part-time faculty were counted but not in 2006.

Another error concerned China's best or second best university, Peking University. The name was not changed to Beijing University apparently to avoid confusion with Beijing Normal University. There are also over twenty specialist universities in Beijing teaching and researching in Traditional Chinese Medicine, Foreign Languages, Aeronautics and so on.

In 2004 and 2005, THES and QS referred to Beijing University finally correcting it to Peking University in 2006. This was perhaps not too serious an error except that it revealed something about QS's knowledge of its own sources and procedures. In November 2005, Nunzio Quacquarelli went to a meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Much of

the meeting was about the international students and faculty at Universiti Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia. There was apparently also a question about how Beijing University could have got a very high score on the academic opinion survey while apparently, according to the data published in THES, producing almost no research. The correct answer would have been that QS was trying to find research written by scholars at Beijing University, which does not exist. Quacquarelli, however, answered that “we just couldn’t find the research” because Beijing University academics published in Mandarin (Holmes, 2005).

This is revealing because QS’s “peer review” is actually largely a survey of the subscribers to World Scientific, a Singapore-based company that publishes academic books and journals, many of them Asia-orientated and mostly written in English. World Scientific has very close ties with Peking University. If Quacquarelli knew very much about the firm that produces his company’s survey, he would surely have known that it had a close relationship with Peking University and that Chinese researchers, in the physical sciences at least, do quite a lot of publishing in English.

Another issue concerns the omission or inclusion of certain institutions. THES and QS have apologized for omitting the British universities of Lancaster, Essex and Royal Holloway. A more serious omission was the omission of the State University of New York’s (SUNY) University Centres at Buffalo, Albany and Binghamton. SUNY has four autonomous university centres which are normally treated as independent and are now often referred to as the University at Buffalo and Albany and Binghamton Universities. Until 2008, THES-QS does refer to one university centre as Stony Brook University, probably being under the impression that this is the entirety of the SUNY system. Binghamton was ranked 82nd according to the USNWR and 37th among public national universities in 2008. It can boast several internationally known scholars such as Melvyn Dubofsky in labour history and Immanuel Wallerstein in sociology. To exclude it from the rankings while including the likes of Dublin Institute of Technology and the University of Pune is ridiculous. On the other hand, QS has included single-subject institutions such as the University of California at San Francisco, a medical school, in 2004 and Aston Business School in 2007 (Holmes, 2007d).

Another error concerned Washington University in St. Louis, a leading university in every respect. Yet in 2007, QS gave it a score of precisely 1 for citations per faculty (which actually represented zero publications with 1 being added during the normalization process), behind Universitas Gadjah Mada, the Dublin Institute of Technology and Politecnico di Milano

and sent it falling from 48th to 161st in the overall rankings. What almost certainly happened was that QS got mixed up with the University of Washington (in Seattle) and gave all WUSL's citations to the latter school. There were several other errors like this in 2007. The Indian Institutes of Technology, Stony Brook University (State University of New York) and Technion: Israel Institute of Technology all suffered the indignity of receiving a solitary point for the research indicator and all posted an apparently improved score in 2008. Again, the cause of the problem was almost certainly that QS had got them mixed up with other schools.

It is amusing that the remarkable but spurious rise of Israeli, Indian and Swiss universities between the 2007 and 2008 rankings was the subject of a solemn article in the *researchnews* of Scopus (page now unavailable) that praised the introduction of bibliometric strategies by these institutions (Holmes, 2009).

## **The End of the THE-QS Rankings**

In the end, criticism of the rankings was such that the new editorial team that had led THE since 2008 decided that something had to be done. Phil Baty, who is now Deputy Editor of *Times Higher Education* with responsibility for the World University Rankings told an Australian newspaper that “perhaps the most embarrassing aspect was the so-called “peer review” score. Forty per cent of a university’s overall ranking score was based on the results of a “peer review” exercise: in fact, a simple opinion survey of academics, asking them which institutions they rated most highly. Some critics object in principle to the use of such subjective measures in rankings, on the grounds that they reflect past, not current performance, that they are based on stereotype or even ignorance, and that a good or bad reputation may be mindlessly replicated”. He concluded that “rankings are here to stay. They do have positive effects. They can help students select courses, department heads choose new research partners and university managers benchmark performance internationally and set strategic priorities” (Baty, 2010).

It would seem that as the effects of globalisation continue to extend throughout the world’s higher education systems, some kind of comparison is necessary. There are schools like Reed College, the University of the Philippines and Universiti Sains Malaysia that refuse to have anything to do with rankings but the mass opposition that undermined the *Asiaweek* rankings seems to have evaporated.



Nonetheless, the shortcomings of the THE-QS were so glaring that few academics could be found to defend them. The assigning of 40% of the weighting to an opinion survey seemed quite unreasonable especially since reported response rates were so low. There were also strange irregularities in the distribution of responses with comparatively few coming from the United States. There was also concern that the citations per faculty measure favoured institutions that specialised in science and medicine and penalised those that were strong in the social sciences and humanities.

For the general public, the end of the partnership between THE and QS came suddenly and unexpectedly at the end of 2009 although apparently the new editorial group at THE had been concerned about the rankings since early 2008. Since then, THE has moved to construct an entirely new system. There was an elaborate process of consultation beginning with a meeting of the THE advisory board. This was followed by an opinion survey conducted by Thomson Reuters and then by consultations with several ranking experts including those who had been critical of the old rankings. The result was a ranking that included 13 different indicators. It contained a substantial teaching and learning component with a thirty per cent weighting. This certainly marked an improvement over the old rankings where teaching quality was measured by student faculty ratio, an indicator whose effectiveness was undermined by the counting of research only faculty. There were also several indicators that measured financial inputs of various kinds. The weighting of the subjective survey element was reduced.

At the time of writing, there were still ongoing discussions about the precise weighting of the various criteria. Meanwhile, QS had repeatedly made it clear that the THE-QS rankings would continue under the name of the QS World University Rankings.

Whatever happens, it is clear that the rankings business has now entered a new and very interesting phase.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Sections of this paper are based on postings to the blog *University Ranking Watch*. <http://rankingwatch.blogspot.com/>

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