World-class Universities? Interrogating the Biases and Coloniality of Global University Rankings

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United Nations University – International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH). Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is the designated UN think tank on global health, serving as a policy translation hub for UN member states, agencies and programmes.

Decolonising Global Health (DGH) is a programme of work within UNU-IIGH working to improve the Global Health system by catalysing equitable shifts in power and new forms of global health practice that are better tailored to the needs and contexts of low- and middle-income countries and marginalised population groups.
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1. Introduction

In recent years, conversations amongst global health academics and practitioners about the need to ‘decolonise global health’ have increased in frequency. One prominent topic of these conversations has been the power imbalances between universities in the Global North and those in the Global South[1] and the disproportionate and inappropriate influence of the former over the education and research activities of the latter and over the shaping of global health priorities and policies.[2] Another concern has been the perpetuation of various stereotypes, biases and prejudices rooted in colonial histories.[3]

Calls have consequently been made for a decolonisation of academic global health and a more critical appraisal of the dominant ideas, narratives, and perspectives in education and research that are propagated by the more powerful institutions of the North.

This paper discusses one mechanism by which the concentration of power and prestige among universities in the Global North is maintained and reproduced: ‘global university rankings’.[4]

Global university rankings have many impacts. They influence the international movement of students and faculty and shape the allocation of hundreds of millions of dollars in public funding and private investment. They consume a vast amount of administrative and academic time and effort. And by affecting a university’s reputation, they help determine the ability of universities and academics to access decision-makers and shape public policy. Although universities have always competed on an uneven playing field, globalisation and the extensive marketisation of higher education over the past few decades has heightened international competition and accentuated the importance of university

[1] The terms Global North and Global South are not used literally: Australia and New Zealand are considered part of the Global North despite being in the southern hemisphere, while many countries of the Global South are in the northern hemisphere. Instead, the terms are used to make a distinction between more powerful and economically developed countries, and countries and populations that are more marginalised, disempowered and economically under-developed. The terms are associated with the concept of neo-colonialism in which some countries in the Global North are able to exploit the resources of countries in the Global South. However, there are limitations to the validity of this binary distinction especially given the more complex reality of a globalised economy.
[4] The ranking of universities can be traced back to the late 19th century when the Commission of the United States Bureau of Education produced a ranking of American colleges (Nassa AK and Arora J, 2021. Revisiting ranking of academic institutions: An overview. DESIDOC Journal of Library & Information Technology). The UK followed in 1900 with the publication of a report entitled Where We Get Our Best Men (Baldock C, 2013. University rankings and medical physics. Australas Phys Eng Sci Med). Both these rankings were based on subjective reputational surveys of universities, and it wasn’t until the 1980s that efforts were made to rank universities using objective measures of quality and performance. Since then, the number of universities participating in global university ranking systems has been rapidly expanding, especially in the past two decades.
of university rankings.[5] [6] [7]

There are reportedly more than 20 university ranking reports or organisations with a global focus, and even more with regional or discipline-specific rankings.[8] Most are managed and run by commercial companies who analyse data obtained from universities to compute a measure of performance which is then used to rank universities, often on an annual basis.

This briefing paper describes and critically appraises two of the most prominent global university ranking systems: the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) produced by the ShanghaiRanking Consultancy.[9] A third prominent global system is the QS world university rankings, named after the founder of Quacquarelli Symonds, a UK-based company. QS demonstrates similar flaws to THE and ARWU and is therefore not described in detail.

The briefing paper also describes the only subject-specific ranking system for the discipline of public health produced by the ShanghaiRanking Consultancy’s Global Ranking of Academic Subjects (GRAS)[10] as well as two new initiatives aimed at ranking universities according to their performance in contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The aim of this briefing paper is to catalyse debate about the validity of global university rankings industry and to encourage universities and academic health departments, especially from within the Global South, to question their value.

**BOX 1. Using the term colonial**

In this paper we use the term ‘colonial’ broadly to refer to structures and systems that are characterised by power asymmetries and relationships between parties that are dominant and those that are subservient or subjugated, and which sustain arrangements that are exploitative, extractive or economically unjust. While the term is most often used to describe territorial occupation or control by one nation or group of people over another, we extend its use to also describe power asymmetries and economic arrangements within globalised sectors and systems that enable unfair wealth accumulation and resource extraction, as well as to the unequal control or domination of structures and systems of global governance. We also apply the term not just to nation states but to other actor types involved in unfair political and economic arrangements, in particular the large trans-national corporations and private financial institutions that wield tremendous political and economic power across the world.

[9] The ARWU ranking was created by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003 as part of a Chinese government plan to encourage Chinese universities to pursue ‘world-class status’.
[10] While we were only able to identify one ranking of public health departments, it’s important to note that there are several rankings of the performance of universities in medicine and the clinical sciences.
2. Ranking results

2.1. THE and ARWU University Rankings

Both THE and ARWU show a striking dominance of universities from the United States and United Kingdom in their top 200 universities (Figure 1) with universities from Africa and Latin America barely featuring. US and UK universities further account for 19 of the top 20 ranked universities in both lists (Table 1). The pattern of the ARWU and THE rankings both appear to be relatively stable. An analysis of the top 20 universities ranked by ARWU from 2003 to 2021 shows strong US dominance across the years, with US universities occupying 15 to 17 spots each year and the top three spots for eleven of the nineteen years. Harvard University is consistently ranked number one while Stanford University was ranked second sixteen times.

The University of Cambridge is the only non-US university to have made ARWU’s top three, and is one of only four UK universities to have featured in the top 20. Over the years the presence of UK universities has dwindled with only Cambridge and Oxford consistently appearing in the top 20. Universities from only three other countries have ever made it into ARWU’s top 20. Japan’s University of Tokyo has featured nine times; Switzerland’s ETH Zurich has appeared 8 times since 2013; and France’s University of Paris-Saclay has appeared twice in 2020 and 2021. At no point has ARWU ever featured more than four countries in its top 20.

Figure 1: Top 200 (top quintile) universities by geographic region as ranked by ARWU and THE in 2021

WHERE ARE THE WORLD’S 'BEST' UNIVERSITIES LOCATED?

2021 Academic Ranking of World Universities

2021 THE World University Rankings

Two countries - the UK and US - alone make up 41% of the Top 200, compared to a combined total of 20.5% from the regions of Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Two countries - the UK and US - alone make up 44% of the Top 200, compared to a combined total of 12.5% from the regions of Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

[11] While ARWU assesses a total of 1800 universities and THE ranks over 1500 universities, ARWU only publishes rankings for the top 1000 while THE stops ranking universities by classes (201-250, 251-300) after 1000.
THE’s rankings show slightly more variation across the years although during its partnership with QS (2004-2009), it displayed the same US-leaning tendencies. From 2004 to 2009, Harvard University was consistently number one and US universities occupied 11 to 13 spots in the top 20 list. The UK consistently held four spots each year, making for a combined US and UK representation of between 15-17 spots each year. Other countries with universities that have appeared in the THE/QS top 20 were: Australia (six times), Japan (five times), China including the Hong Kong, China (four times), Canada (three times), France (twice), Singapore (twice) and Switzerland (twice).

After parting ways with QS,[12] THE deployed a new methodology that resulted in a noticeable reduction in variation.

The rankings in 2010 and 2011 featured 15 US universities, 3 UK universities, and 1 university each from Canada and Switzerland. Since then, only universities from Canada and Switzerland have broken a US and UK monopoly to make the top 20. US universities occupy 14 to 15 spots each year while UK universities maintain a steady presence with 3 to 4 spots annually. On three occasions, the US and UK have claimed 19 spots in the top 20. Notably, Harvard does not consistently occupy the top spot. The California Institute of Technology ranked top from 2010-2011 and 2015-2016, and Oxford has been number 1 since the 2016-2017.

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[12] Initially THE was part of a rankings system that was co-managed with a data company called Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). However, the Times broke away from QS in 2010 following criticism that the QS-Times system was over-reliant on reputation surveys. QS continues to publish rankings using the same methodology.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>ARWU</th>
<th>THE</th>
<th>Total score</th>
<th>Total score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Harvard University (US)</td>
<td>University of Oxford (UK)</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>95.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Stanford University (US)</td>
<td>Stanford University (US)</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>University of Cambridge (UK)</td>
<td>Harvard University (US)</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>94.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Massachusetts Institute of Technology (US)</td>
<td>California Institute of Technology (US)</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>94.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>University of California, Berkeley (US)</td>
<td>Massachusetts Institute of Technology (US)</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>94.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Princeton University (US)</td>
<td>University of Cambridge (UK)</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>University of Oxford (UK)</td>
<td>Yale University (US)</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>92.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Columbia University (US)</td>
<td>Princeton University (US)</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>91.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>California Institute of Technology (US)</td>
<td>University of Chicago (US)</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>91.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>University of Chicago (US)</td>
<td>Imperial College London (UK)</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Yale University (US)</td>
<td>Johns Hopkins University (US)</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>89.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Cornell University (US)</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania (US)</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>89.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Paris-Saclay University (France)</td>
<td>ETH Zurich (Switzerland)</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>University of California, Los Angeles (US)</td>
<td>University of California, Los Angeles (US)</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>87.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania (US)</td>
<td>University College London (UK)</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>87.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Johns Hopkins University (US)</td>
<td>Columbia University (US)</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>86.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>University College London (UK)</td>
<td>University of Toronto (Canada)</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>86.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>University of California, San Diego (US)</td>
<td>Cornell University (US)</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>University of Washington (US)</td>
<td>Duke University (US)</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>85.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>University of California, San Francisco (US)</td>
<td></td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>84.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2. Shanghai Ranking
Consultancy’s GRAS rankings of public health programmes

The GRAS rankings of public health programmes also demonstrate a pattern of US and UK dominance: 79 of the top 200 public health programmes are in the US and UK (Figure 2) and US and UK universities make up 14 of the top 20 programmes (Table 2). The GRAS rankings were first published in 2017, and an analysis of the top 20 public health programmes over the years reveals little geographic variation. While the US has seen its slice of the pie shrink slightly (from 11 spots in the original 2017 rankings to 8 spots in 2021), the UK has made gains, going from four spots in 2017 to six in 2021.

Together, these two countries account for 70-80% of the top 20 public health programmes since the inception of the GRAS rankings. Notably, Harvard University and Johns Hopkins University have consistently retained the #1 and #2 spots respectively, while the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine held the #3 spot in 2018, 2020, and 2021.

Figure 2: A geographic analysis of the Top 200 public health programmes as ranked by the 2021 Global Ranking of Academic Subjects, prepared by Shanghai Ranking

WHERE ARE THE WORLD’S ‘BEST’ PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAMMES?

2021 Global Ranking of Academic Subjects

Two countries - the UK and US - alone make up 39.5% of the Top 200, compared to a combined total of 18% from the regions of Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.
Table 2: Top 20 public health programmes as ranked by the 2021 Global Ranking of Academic Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total score (out of 300)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>284.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Johns Hopkins University</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>217.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>London School of Hygiene &amp; Tropical Medicine</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>211.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>University of Washington</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>207.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>University College London</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>203.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Imperial College London</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>202.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Karolinska Institute</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>201.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>200.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>University of Bristol</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>198.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>University of Oxford</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>197.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>197.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>189.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>University of Copenhagen</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>187.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>University of California, San Francisco</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>184.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Emory University</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>182.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>University of Melbourne</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>182.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>University of Michigan-Ann Arbor</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>181.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Utrecht University</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>181.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Erasmus University Rotterdam</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>180.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>University of Cambridge</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>177.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Ranking methods

3.1. ARWU 2021 rankings

ARWU’s rankings [13] are based on a composite index made up from measures of six performance criteria:

- **ARWU criterion 1 (10%) – Illustrious Alumni:**
  The number of alumni who have won Nobel Prizes (for physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, economics, literature and peace) and Fields Medals (mathematics).

- **ARWU criterion 2 (20%) - Illustrious Staff:**
  The number of alumni who have won Nobel Prizes (for physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, economics, literature and peace) and Fields Medals (mathematics).

  Note: Both the Nobel Prizes and Fields Medal are awarded by bodies based in Europe: Nobel Prizes are awarded in Sweden and Norway, while the Fields Medal is given out by the International Mathematical Union whose secretariat is in Berlin.

- **ARWU criterion 3 (20%) - Number of Highly Cited Researchers as identified by Clarivate Analytics [13]**

  Note: Highly Cited Researchers are individuals who have published “multiple highly-cited papers ranked within the top 1% by citations” in the Web of Science between 2010 and 2020. Clarivate also describes them as “true pioneers” and “one in 1,000” researchers.

- **ARWU criterion 4 (20%) – Number of articles published in Nature and Science from 2016 to 2020.**

- **ARWU criterion 5 (20%) – Number of articles indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded (SCI-E) and Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) in 2020**

  Note: A “weight of two” is given to papers indexed in SSCI as compared to those indexed in SCI-E.

  Note: Some weighting is given to the status of authorship. A full score is assigned to corresponding authors. A 50% score is assigned to non-corresponding first authors or second authors when the first author is also the corresponding author. A 25% score is assigned to the next author and a 10% score for all others. If there is more than one corresponding author, 100% is assigned to the first corresponding author, 50% to the second corresponding author, and so on.

- **ARWU criterion 6 (10%) – Productivity:**
  Weighted scores of criteria 1-5 divided by the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff

  Note: When data on the number of FTE staff is unavailable, ARWU simply uses the weighted scores from the first five criterion.

The Harvard factor

An odd feature of the ARWU system is that it appears to rank universities relative to Harvard University which is always awarded perfect scores for the six criteria. As shown in Table 1, Harvard has a perfect score of 100, with Stanford University trailing behind in second place with a score of 75.9.


[14] Clarivate Analytics is an American publicly listed company that bibliometric and scientometric services. It is a prominent player in the rankings industry through the supply of data, but has no direct involvement in rankings.
3.2. THE 2021 rankings

THE uses thirteen performance-based indicators across five criteria as presented below:[15]

- **THE Criterion 1 – Teaching Performance (30%)** made up of 5 elements:
  - 15% from a reputation survey of academics (selected by the company Elsevier) who are asked to name universities that they perceive to be the best at teaching in a given field;
  - 4.5% for staff-to-student ratio;
  - 2.25% for doctoral-to-bachelors ratio;
  - 6% for number of PhDs awarded;
  - 2.25% for the amount of institutional income per faculty member.

Note: The document describing THE’s methodology does not describe how institutional income is defined but a reasonable assumption is that this is teaching income.

- **THE Criterion 2 – Research Performance (30%)**
  - 18% from a reputation survey of academics (selected by the company Elsevier) who are asked to name universities they believe are best at research in a given field;
  - 6% for research grant funding;
  - 6% for number of papers published in peer-reviewed journals.

Note: These are provided by Elsevier using more than 24,000 journals indexed by Elsevier’s Scopus database and all publications indexed between 2015 and 2019. Citations to these publications made in the six years from 2015 to 2020 are also collected. These data are also "normalised" by Elsevier to reflect variations in citation volume between different subject areas.

- **THE Criterion 3 – Citation impact (30%)** made up of 1 element:
  - The average number of citations garnered by the university’s published works.

Note: These are provided by Elsevier using more than 24,000 journals indexed by Elsevier’s Scopus database and all publications indexed between 2015 and 2019. Citations to these publications made in the six years from 2015 to 2020 are also collected. These data are also “normalised” by Elsevier to reflect variations in citation volume between different subject areas.

- **THE Criterion 4 – Industry Income (30%)** made up of 1 element: [16]
  - Research income generated from industries, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) and divided by the total number of FTE academic staff.

- **THE Criterion 5 – International Outlook (7.5%)** made up of 3 elements:
  - 2.5% for international-to-domestic student ratio;
  - 2.5% for international-to-domestic staff ratio;
  - 2.5% for publications with international co-authors.

Note: Only one international co-author is needed for inclusion, although THE states that they “reward higher volumes” of international co-authors.

[16] According to THE, this criterion captures the extent to which businesses are willing to pay for research and an institution’s ability to attract funding “in the commercial marketplace”. This variable is normalised after calculation.
3.3. GRAS rankings of public health

The ShanghaiRanking Consultancy’s ranking of public health programmes uses five weighted criteria as shown below.[17]

- **GRAS criterion 1 (100) – Q1 publications**
  - The number of articles published in an academic subject journal with a Q1 impact factor.

- **GRAS criterion 2 (100) - Normalised Citation Impact**
  - Ratio of citations for articles published compared to average citation rate of articles in the same category, year and type of journal publication.

- **GRAS criterion 3 (20) - International collaboration**
  - Level of international collaboration between institutions, measured by authorship of articles where there are authors based in at least two countries.

- **GRAS criterion 4 (100) - Top journals**
  - Number of articles published in three ‘top journals’: International Journal of Epidemiology, Environmental Health Perspectives, and Annual Review of Public Health.

  Note: These journals were identified through ShanghaiRanking’s Academic Excellence Survey. The International Journal of Epidemiology is published six times yearly by Oxford University Press and covers advances and developments in the research, teaching and application of epidemiology, including research into health services and medical care. It also covers methods used in social and preventive medicine.

  Environmental Health Perspectives is published by the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences monthly and covers all established and emerging disciplines that examine the relationship between the environment and human health.”

  The Annual Review of Public Health is published once a year from the US and covers “significant developments” in public health, including epidemiology and biostatistics, environmental and occupational health, social environment and behaviour, health services, and public health practice and policy.

- **GRAS criterion 5 (0) – Awards and Prizes**
  - Because no significant award or prize exists for public health, this criterion is not used.

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[17] Weights are allocated to the five criteria differently for other subject areas.
3.4. Comparison of ranking methods

The Table below summarizes the differences between the three ranking systems described above. Of note is the fact that ARWU and GRAS-Public Health do not include any measure of teaching performance, whereas 37.5% of THE’s score is based on educational performance.

Table 5: Comparison of ranking methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARWU</th>
<th>THE</th>
<th>GRAS – public health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Awards and Prizes (30%)**:  
- Number of alumni who have won Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals (10%)  
- Number of staff who have won Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals (20%) | **Teaching (30%)**:  
- Reputation (15%)  
- Staff-to-student ratio (4.5%)  
- Doctoral-to-bachelors ratio (2.2.5%)  
- PhDs awarded (6%) | **Publications and citations (93%)**:  
- Number of articles in a public health journal with a Q1 impact factor (31%)  
- Ratio of citations for published articles compared to average citation rate of articles in the same journals (31%)  
- Number of articles in Int J of Epid, Env Hlth Pers, and Ann Rev of Pub Hlth (31%) |
| **Publications and citations (60%)**:  
- Number of Highly Cited Researchers (20%)  
- Number of papers published in Nature and Science (20%)  
- Number of papers indexed in SCI-E and SSCI (20%) | **Research (24%)**:  
- Reputation (18%)  
- Research grants (6%) | **International outlook (7%)**:  
- International collaboration measured by articles with authors based in at least two countries (7%) |
| **Productivity (10%)**:  
- Weighted scores of the above indicators divided by the number of full-time equivalent staff (10%) | **Publications and citations (36%)**:  
- Citation impact (30%)  
- Papers in peer-reviewed journals (6%) | **International outlook (7.5%)**:  
- International-to-domestic student ratio (2.5%)  
- International-to-domestic staff ratio (2.5%)  
- Publications with international co-authors (2.5%) |
| **International outlook (7.5%)**:  
- International-to-domestic student ratio (2.5%)  
- International-to-domestic staff ratio (2.5%)  
- Publications with international co-authors (2.5%) | **Productivity**:  
- Institutional (teaching) income per faculty member (2.25%)  
- Research income generated from industries, divided by the number of FTE academic staff. |
4. Limitations and flaws of ranking methods and approaches

The use of quantitative metrics and structured methodologies gives the impression that rankings are rigorous, scientific and objective measures of university performance.\[18\] In fact, there are various methodological limitations as well as problems with their underlying logic and purpose.

Data quality

The extent to which the raw data used to produce university rankings are accurate, complete and consistent is unclear - but there are some well-recognised concerns. Much of the data submitted by universities is not subjected to independent verification and quality control. Universities can (and have) game the system or submit false data.\[19\] Columbia University recently lost its’ #2 spot in the US News and World rankings after a report found that some of the data supporting Columbia’s high ranking were “inaccurate, dubious, or highly misleading.”\[20\] Data on research publications and citations provided by private companies is also known to have shortcomings concerning accuracy and completeness.\[21\]

Reputation Bias

The use of subjective surveys to determine a university’s quality (especially when based on small sample sizes and low response rates) produces a bias towards universities with historical legacies and reputations built over decades or centuries. There is also some evidence that reputation bias influences the ostensibly objective quantification of publications and citations because journal reviewers and editors are swayed by the reputation of the universities that authors are attached to.\[22\] \[23\] \[24\]

Anglophone bias

The heavy emphasis on anglophone journals and bibliometric systems creates an unfair advantage to English-speaking authors and universities in English-speaking countries.\[25\] Many of these journals are based in the Global North and have editorial boards dominated by scholars from the Global North.

Research bias

There is a heavy weight given to research performance. In fact neither ARWU nor the GRAS public health rankings include any measure of teaching quality, nor of the social role of universities in shaping societal norms and values; promoting open access, equality and diversity in science and research; strengthening democracy through public education and by informing public debate; and holding governments and other powerful actors to account through research and evaluation.

\[25\] The European Commission supported the development of a rating system (U-Multirank) as a response to the dominance of American and Anglo-Saxon universities in the then THE-QS rankings.
STEM bias

Both THE and ARWU give added weight to the hard or natural sciences relative to the humanities and social sciences. The privileging of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects implicitly diminish the importance of the humanities and social sciences and characterises them as parochial, inefficient and stifling international reputation. Global university rankings are also biased in favour of research that is considered ‘cutting edge’ or at the frontiers of human knowledge as opposed to more applied forms of research that are focused on the use of existing knowledge.

Faulty metrics

Some of the metrics used to assess university performance may produce misleading results. For example, it has been shown that one member of staff who is part of a single study with a small number of highly cited papers can produce a dramatic improvement in a university’s ranking. In other words, a small contribution made by one person can give the impression that the quality of an entire university has improved even if nothing has substantially changed.

Validity of a universal composite measure of performance

Because universities are complex organisations with multiple functions, operating across diverse social, economic, historical and country contexts, no single composite measure of quality can ever be an adequate or fair representation of a university’s quality or rank.

Universities are also a heterogeneous group of organisations that range from broad multi-faculty institutions to narrow single-faculty institutions, and from large, federated institutions on multiple sites to small and local institutions. They also vary in terms of their legal status, and whether they function as public or private for-profit institutions. The idea that the highest standard of performance can be universally defined, objectively measured and then ascribed to all universities is thus not only epistemologically invalid, but also constitutes a top-down enforcement of norms and standards through a ‘disciplining’ calculative logic that undermines local autonomy and agendas.

A game of winners and losers

Because universities can only improve their rank if other universities worsen theirs, university rankings incorrectly imply a finite amount of good quality education and research that universities must compete over and effectively embody a system of winners and losers that negates the notion of standards rising across the board. Such an imagined zero-sum game institutionalises and accentuates inequality within the higher education sector at the expense of promoting high quality education universally.

Neglect of sector-wide performance

By catalysing competition between universities, ranking systems influence the relationship between universities, the state and society.[30] Specifically, they may undermine efforts to design, build and strengthen the higher education sector as a whole by incentivising universities to behave as competitive and self-serving market actors directed towards serving a global elite class[31] at the expense of encouraging collaboration aimed at improving the performance of the sector as a whole or of behaviour designed to serve the public interest.

Conflicts of interest

University ranking systems are fundamentally commercial and privately driven enterprises.[32] The major ‘rankers’ are businesses that generate revenues through the sale of advertising, data and analytics, consulting and access to events and workshops about university rankings.[33] The system is built on a mutual dependency between universities who rely on favourable rankings and rankers who sell services to help universities improve their rankings.

For rankers, their interests are served by promoting constant and intense competition between universities, creating the perception that higher education is a rapidly changing and dynamic field, and generating anxiety and fear about low rankings. [34][35]

Commercialization and privatisation

University rankings both reflect and reinforce a neoliberal logic of market competition within the higher education sector. By encouraging competition within an increasingly financialised economic environment, they contribute to the commercialisation and commodification of higher education, with ensuing consequences. In treating public and private universities alike, they also put public universities with social responsibilities and a broader public mission at a disadvantage with respect to competing with private universities that are more narrowly focused on delivering a service to paying customers. This in turn may also cause some public universities to also act like businesses and reduce access for poorer and disadvantaged students who are considered a risk to their financial performance and to their rankings.

[32] For example, THE was acquired by Inflexion, a private equity firm that has stated its intent to expand the business into new and lucrative markets. The research publication industry is also commercial and run by private businesses, some of whom operate in highly oligopolistic and vertically integrated markets. Elsevier, for example, has over 2,500 journals in its portfolio and has transitioned into also becoming a data analytic firm. Rankings thus expand their ability to monetize further their journal holdings through the link between publication in high-impact journals and improvement in rankings. See Larivière et. al, 2015; Fyfe et al, 2017; and Posada & Chen, 2018). However, a lack of transparency allows companies to evade scrutiny that should come with occupying a critical public function in university evaluation. See https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/jun/27/profitable-business-scientific-publishing-bad-for-science and https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/13/scientific-publishing-rip-off-taxpayers-fund-research
5. Rankings, colonialism and coloniality

The rankings described in Section 2 reflect a colonial hierarchy, with well-endowed and historically privileged universities from the Global North dominating. Once successful in global rankings, universities are better able to maintain their position by devoting bigger budgets towards the generation of data that can improve their rankings further. Rankings can thereby entrench the global dominance of universities from the Global North while driving universities in the Global South to focus on priorities that are externally determined and which may require them to divert significant resources away from core academic activities towards the intensive and time-consuming business of data collection and international competition.[36]

The fact that the high rank of some universities is partly due to wealth generated historically from former colonies or the slave trade adds moral weight to the charge that global ranking systems are both unfair and colonial.[37] Furthermore, ranking systems may continue exploitation by enabling higher ranking universities in the Global North to extract higher quality students and staff from the Global South, further strengthening their ability to improve or maintain their high ranking positions. According to the Association of International Educators, international students at US colleges and universities contributed $41 billion and supported 458,290 jobs to the US economy during the 2018-2019 academic year.[38]

A high proportion of students from the Global South also end up staying in their Global North host countries after their studies, contributing to the economies of higher income countries at the expense of low and middle income countries (LMICs).[39] [40]

The hierarchy produced by global rankings may also influence the opportunities that a university (and their staff) may have to present evidence and make policy recommendations to global institutions. In the Global Health arena, universities from the US and UK have a disproportionate influence over the formulation of global health policies and the design of programmes compared to their counterparts in the Global South.

Although all universities are equally subjected to the same flaws and limitations of simplistic, biased and somewhat arbitrary ranking methods, the degree to which global rankings distort priorities and divert universities away from their academic and social missions are likely to be greater in the Global South. Certainly, from a public health perspective, the priorities and needs of populations differ hugely from region to region and across the wealth-poverty spectrum, and the main global university ranking systems appear more aligned to the public health priorities and needs of the Global North than for the Global South.

[37] A number of universities are examining their legacies to colonialism and the slave trade. See for example here, here, and here.
Moreover, in LMICs, national education systems and institutions are younger and may be more in need of coherent and strategic sector-wide development which is harder to achieve if universities are being incentivised to act as self-interested and competitive market actors. The global rankings system may thus weaken both the ability and resolve of Ministries of Education and other stakeholders to develop and govern their education sectors in ways that are most appropriate, democratic and socially responsible from a national perspective.
6. What can be done?

How should governments, universities and academics from the Global South respond to the methodological and conceptual flaws of global university rankings?

One possible response would be based on the view that global university rankings cannot be disestablished, and that universities cannot afford not to play the game. Efforts should therefore be directed towards improving the way global rankings are produced and managed. Improvement might be achieved by expanding the range of university processes and outputs that are evaluated; giving greater weight to the social functions of universities; correcting for bias; and including measures of performance that take historical advantage/disadvantage into account.

Such improvements could be accompanied by calls to diminish the importance of global rankings and to instead emphasise greater use of more focused or segmented ranking systems. For example, greater importance could be attached to regional ranking systems or to rankings that are segmented according to country income status. An example is THE’s ‘Young University’ rankings which allows universities that are less than 50 years old to compare themselves against each other.

In fact, there are already several efforts aimed at constructing a more diverse range of global rankings (see Appendix 1). Of note are two new global rankings of universities’ contributions to the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one developed by THE and the other by QS (see Appendix 2). Although these assessments suggest a positive shift in emphasising university responsibilities towards urgent environmental and human development needs, they still suffer from the same conceptual flaws and methodological limitations described earlier.

Alternatively, rankings could be replaced by benchmarking approaches that do not produce a numeric rank but only places universities within a class or grade alongside others.

Another response is to reject global ranking systems altogether. Reasons for this include the impossibility of measuring university performance accurately, comprehensively and appropriately, the negative impacts on equity and access to education, and the idea that there are other ways to assess and incentivise quality improvement. Moreover, there are valid reasons for removing the power of rankings to shape higher education policy and university behaviour from the control of private for-profit industry. Given the important public and social mission of universities, governments and university leaders should at the very least examine and challenge the conflicts of interest and lack of accountability that currently characterise the university ranking industry.

[42] Indeed, two decades ago, the president of the Washington-based Institute for Higher Education Policy stated that ‘whether or not colleges and universities agree with the various ranking systems and league table findings is irrelevant; ranking systems clearly are here to stay’. Ref: Brankovic et al, 2022.

[43] Crucially, most ranking systems are based on absolute measures of performance and not on relative measures of performance based on a university’s resources and socio-historical context.

[44] THE Young University Rankings 2022 enjoyed the participation of 539 universities around the world. Evaluations were based on educational conditions (30%), research performance (30%), paper citations (30%), globalization (7.5%), and university-industry cooperation (2.5%).

[45] The global university rankings ‘system’ consists of an elaborate network of different actors. These include the major ranking organisations (eg. THE, ShanghaiConsultnancy and QS), publishing and data analytics businesses (eg. Elsevier), private financiers, and semi-independent groups which exist to promote rankings and broker conversations among the producers of university rankings, policymakers, university administrators, international organizations, data companies, consultants and scholars. See: Brankovic et al 2022 Spreading the gospel: Legitimating university rankings as boundary work. Research Evaluation, 2022, 00, 1–12 https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvac035

## Appendix 1: Different rankings produced by ARWU, THE and QS

### Table 5: Different rankings produced by ARWU, THE and QS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ARWU</th>
<th>THE</th>
<th>QS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall global ranking</td>
<td>Overall global ranking</td>
<td>Overall global ranking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Global rankings by subject (54 subjects)</td>
<td>Global rankings by subject (11 subjects)</td>
<td>Global rankings by subject (48 subjects)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Global rankings by field (5 fields)</td>
<td>Geographic rankings (US, Japan, Europe, Latin America, Asia)</td>
<td>Global Business Masters rankings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Global ranking of sport science schools and departments</td>
<td>Emerging economies university rankings</td>
<td>Global Business MBA rankings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geographic rankings</td>
<td>Young university rankings</td>
<td>Geographic rankings (US, Arab, Latin America, Asia)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SDG impact rankings</td>
<td>Emerging Europe and Central Asia university rankings</td>
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<td>BRICS university rankings</td>
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<td>Best student cities</td>
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<td>Graduate employability rankings</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>SDG impact rankings</td>
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</table>


Appendix 2: Rankings related to the SDGs

The THE Impact Rankings

THE’s Impact Rankings assess universities against the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is designed to provide balanced comparisons of universities across four broad areas: research, teaching, outreach and stewardship. Unlike the main THE rankings, which focus on teaching and research, the impact rankings include assessments of the work universities do with their local, regional, national and international communities (outreach) and the way they act as custodians of resources, including their employees, faculty and students (stewardship).

Each of the 17 SDGs has a set of metrics used to evaluate the performance of the university on that SDG. Universities are allowed to submit data on as many SDGs as they are able. But only universities that provides data on SDG 17 and at least three other SDGs are included into the overall ranking. A university’s final rank is calculated by combining its score in SDG 17 with its top three other scores. SDG 17 accounts for 22% of the overall score, while the other SDGs each carry a weight of 26%. [47]

THE also provides a ranking for performance related to SDG3 (good health and well-being) specifically based on a composite index composed of the following:

- Research on health and well-being (27%)
  - Proportion of research papers that are viewed or downloaded (10%)
  - Proportion of research papers that are cited in clinical guidance (10%)
  - Number of publications (7%)

This metric focuses on research that is relevant to key diseases and conditions that have a disproportionate impact on health outcomes across the world. The data are provided by Elsevier’s Scopus dataset, based on a query of keywords associated with SDG 3 and supplemented by additional publications identified by Artificial Intelligence. The data include all indexed publications between 2015 and 2019.

- Proportion of health graduates who receive a degree associated with a health-related profession out of the institution’s total number of graduates (34.6%)

This metric used data from the 2019 academic year.

- Collaborations and health services (38.4%)
  - Smoke-free policy (8%)
  - Collaborations with local, national or global health institutions to improve health (7%)
  - Outreach programmes in the local community to improve or promote health (7%)
  - Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services for students (7%)
  - Access to mental health support for students and staff (7%)
  - Community access to university sports facilities (2.4%)

Data are provided directly by universities, evaluated and scored by THE.

[47] SDG17 concerns the strengthening of global partnerships for sustainable development and includes targets such as improving domestic resource mobilization through strengthening domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection, achieving the UN target for developed countries to allocate 0.7% of GDP to development assistance, and promoting the transfer of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries.
Table 5: Top 25 universities for the THE impact rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 25 Ranked Universities (overall SDG impact)</th>
<th>Top 25 Ranked Universities (SDG 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. University of Manchester, United Kingdom</td>
<td>1. Oregon Health and Science University, US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. University of Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>2. Australian Catholic University, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. RMIT University, Australia</td>
<td>3. RCSI UMHS, Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. La Trobe University, Australia</td>
<td>4. McMaster University, Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Queen’s University, Canada</td>
<td>5. La Trobe University, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Aalborg University, Denmark</td>
<td>6. Iran University of Medical Sciences, Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. University of Wollongong, Australia</td>
<td>7. Mahidol University, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Arizona State University (Tempe), United States</td>
<td>9. James Cook University, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. University of Auckland, New Zealand</td>
<td>10. Kaohsiung Medical University, Taiwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. King’s College London, United Kingdom</td>
<td>11. Semmelweis University, Hungary</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. University of Newcastle, Australia</td>
<td>12. University of Newcastle, Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. University of British Columbia, Canada</td>
<td>13. Indiana University-Purdue University, US</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. McMaster University, Canada</td>
<td>14. Western University, Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Newcastle University, United Kingdom</td>
<td>15. Griffith University, Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. University of Leeds, United Kingdom</td>
<td>16. Deakin University, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Western Sydney University, Australia</td>
<td>17. Chulalongkorn University, Thailand</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Monash University, Australia</td>
<td>18. University of Montreal, Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. University of Leicester, United Kingdom</td>
<td>19. University of Otago, New Zealand</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. University of Bologna, Italy</td>
<td>20. The University of Queensland, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. University of Coimbra, Portugal</td>
<td>21. King’s College London, United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. University College Dublin, Ireland</td>
<td>22. Dalhousie University, Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. Chulalongkorn University, Thailand</td>
<td>23. University of Saskatchewan, Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>24. University of Plymouth, United Kingdom</td>
<td>24. Edith Cowan University, Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. University of Southern Denmark, Denmark</td>
<td>25. Monash University, Australia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2023

This new ranking assessed 700 universities around the world to determine their environmental and social impact. Universities were evaluated across eight measures that are split into two sections: a) environmental sustainability measures and b) social impact measures.

Environmental impact measures

- Sustainable institutions – this is a measure of whether a university holds membership in officially-recognised climate action or sustainability groups, has a publicly-available sustainability strategy and energy emissions report, has student societies focused on environmental sustainability, and a published commitment to becoming NetZero.
- Sustainable education – this measures alumni outcomes and academic reputation within earth, marine and environmental sciences courses, and the availability of courses that embed climate science and/or sustainability within the curriculum. If a university has a research centre dedicated to environmental sustainability, further points are gained.
- Sustainable research – this measures the university’s research activity around the SDGs and whether the government is funding research and development in this area.

Social impact

- Equality – this measures the gender ratio of students and faculty, the availability of an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policy, and of disability support.
- Knowledge exchange – this measures commitment to knowledge transfer in collaboration with less-economically-supported institutions, and a university’s inclination to partner with other institutions and organisations.
- Impact of education – this looks at the university’s research into quality education, alumni impact and academic reputation in relevant social subjects, and how free students and academics are in pursuing their research without censorship.
- Employability and opportunities – this is made up of an employer reputation score and an employment outcomes score, based on how prepared students are for successful careers. Universities are also assessed on research into work and economic growth, and peace, justice and strong institutions, as well as the rate of unemployment within the country they’re based in.
- Quality of life measures an institution’s commitment to wellbeing within and outside of the university, as well as research activity into quality of life, health options on campus and air quality in the region, for example.
### Top 25 Ranked Universities (QS Sustainability)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>University Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>University of California, Berkeley (UCB), United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>University of Toronto, Canada</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>University of British Columbia, Canada</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The University of Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The University of Tokyo, Japan</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania, United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Yale University, United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The University of Auckland, New Zealand</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Uppsala University, Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lund University, Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>University of California, Davis, United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>University of Oxford</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Western University, London, Canada</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Harvard University, Cambridge, United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>University of Southern California, Los Angeles, United States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Delft University of Technology, Delft, Netherlands</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Arizona State University, Tempe, United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Cardiff University, Cardiff, United Kingdom</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
ABOUT UNU-IIGH

UNU International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is the designated UN think tank on global health, serving as a policy translation hub for UN member states, agencies and programmes. It was established by a statute adopted by the Council of the United Nations University in December 2005.

The Institute generates policy-relevant analysis by applying a gender lens to inform the development, implementation and evaluation of health programmes. UNU-IIGH also supports capacity development of local decision-makers and stakeholders to engage effectively with global health challenges within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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