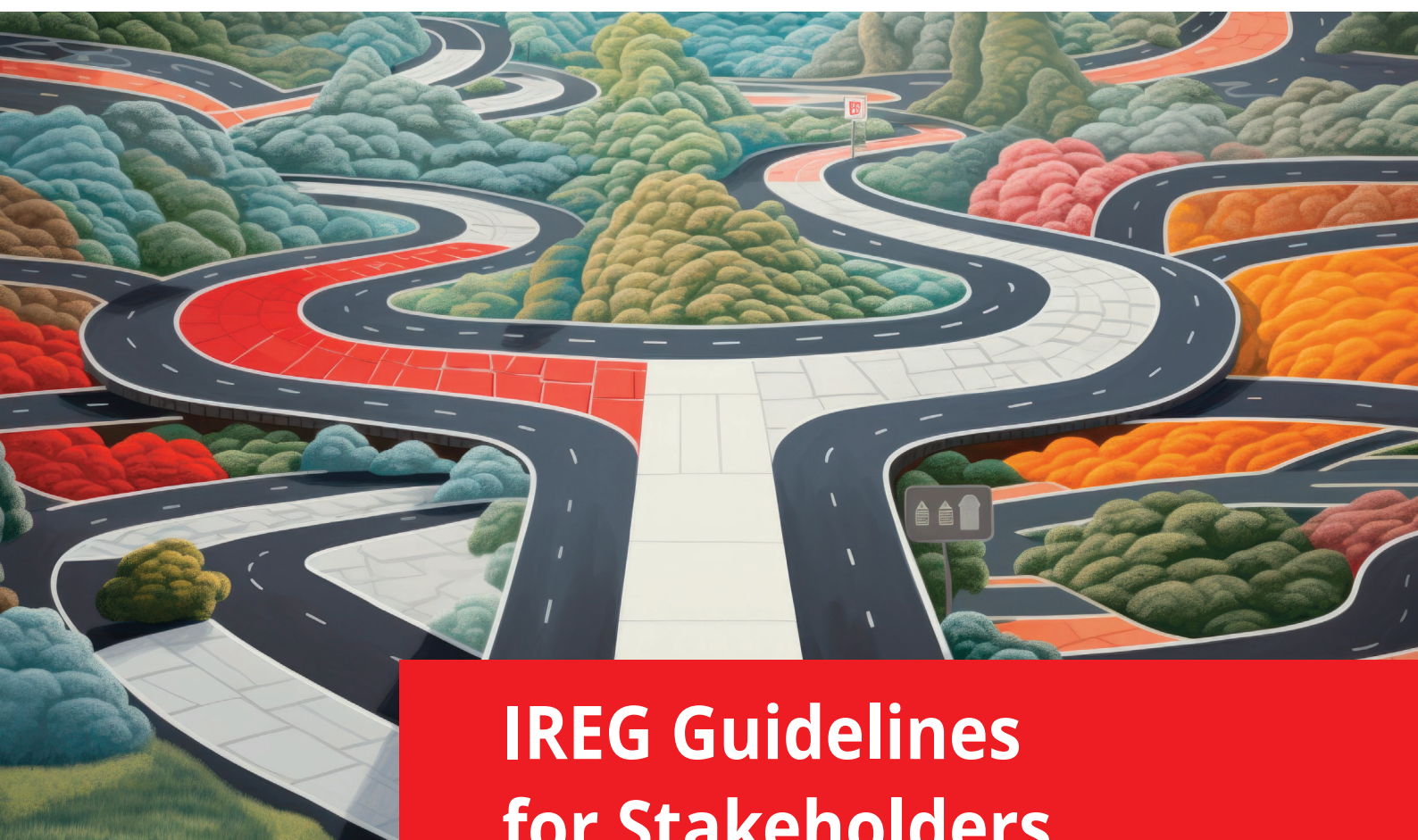




IREG Observatory on Academic
Ranking and Excellence



IREG Guidelines for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings

www.ireg-observatory.org



The purpose of IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence is to strengthen public awareness and understanding of university rankings and their role in reflecting quality of higher education and academic excellence.

From the IREG Statute

IREG Guidelines for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings

2023



IREG Observatory on Academic
Ranking and Excellence

(IREG stands for International Ranking Expert Group)

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This publication is available at

www.ireg-observatory.org/en/guidelines2023

Brussels 2023

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Foreword

How to use rankings wisely

The IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence (IREG Observatory) believes that academic rankings are one of the many tools available for improving higher education by providing transparency about the performance of individual institutions. IREG is dedicated to enhancing the understanding of the use of rankings for assessing the quality and performance of higher education. These Guidelines for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings are intended, in combination with other initiatives of the IREG Observatory, to improve quality, assure reliability of information, and give rankings users a tool that is functional and trustworthy.

The first Guidelines for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings were presented to the IREG General Assembly in Aalborg, Denmark in June 2015. The Guidelines were drawn from and supplemented the other initiatives of the IREG Observatory, such as the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions (2006), and the IREG Ranking Audit Initiative (2009).

Since then, several new national and international rankings emerged, and rankings have become more influential around the world. On the other hand, recently several international initiatives raised concern and criticism about the use and impact of rankings among them the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), which received support in European higher education. The academic work on rankings in higher education has also addressed the university ranking dilemma in depth, much of which has been discussed at IREG-related conferences, so our knowledge base on rankings has significantly expanded. The updated IREG guidelines considers these developments. On this background, it is more than ever important to provide guidance to users and stakeholders of rankings on how to make the best use of rankings, including a clear view on the limitations of rankings.

A preliminary draft of this edition of the Guidelines was drafted by the IREG Executive Committee taking into consideration the IREG position paper “Assessment and Rankings are different Tools” (2022). Further work on the Guidelines included consultation with the members of the IREG Observatory and invited external experts. Their comments and recommendations had been considered in drafting the final text approved by the Executive Committee.

The IREG Observatory wishes to thank all persons and institutions involved in the process of drafting these Guidelines for their valuable contributions.

Waldemar Siwinski
President, IREG Observatory

December 2023

Introduction and General Advisory Statement

Purpose of the Guidelines

An “academic ranking” is a numerical, quantitative assessment of the performance of a program, activity, higher education institution or entire system of higher education, based on an agreed-upon methodology. One-dimensional rankings assess performance according to one set of indicators that are combined into a composite overall score based on specific weights attached to each given indicator. This approach is applied by most global rankings, such as ARWU; QS, and THE rankings.

Multi-dimensional rankings provide a series of tables on individual indicators rather than just one overall table. This allows users to weigh indicators according to their own preferences and to construct personalized rankings. Examples for such multi-dimensional approach are the Leiden Ranking and U-Multirank.

Common to all rankings is that they measure and compare academic performance by quantitative indicators. In this way, rankings differ from other instruments of quality assurance within higher education, notably peer review, which is the basis for most both personal and institutional evaluations and for accreditation systems.

Though being used in academia and by higher education institutions too, rankings are predominantly made for users outside the higher education system. When addressing students as well as the broader public, rankings are addressing “lay” users – compared to expert users within the higher education system. In order to reach these target groups, rankings are reducing the complexity of information on higher education. They cannot replace existing internal quality assurance systems in higher education and academia to monitor and improve quality. At the same time, those expert systems are not meant to inform “consumers” and the broad public about higher education and its performance.

The purpose of the Guidelines is to provide recommendations for appropriate interpretations, uses and applications of rankings by potential interested parties, including students and parents, institutions of higher education, policymakers, quality assurance and funding organizations, employers, and the media. Specific recommendations have been formulated for each group of stakeholders. They reflect the potential as well as limitations of rankings as transparency tools.

Rationale for Presenting the Guidelines

In their modern format, academic rankings (also referred to as “university rankings” or “league tables”) were first presented in the 1980s as a student guide by U.S. News and World Report, in order to meet the need for easily readable comparative data about the performance of the increasingly diverse study programs of American colleges and universities. Since then, rankings of similar types have been produced in many other countries. For 2023 an IREG Inventory of National Rankings listed more than 60 national rankings in 26 countries.

Increasing globalization of higher education has, starting in the first decade of our century, spawned global rankings (sometimes referred to as “world ranking” or “international ranking”) to supplement national rankings systems. Worldwide attention to such rankings grew with the publication of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) (often referred to as the “Shanghai Ranking”) in 2003, and of the World University Rankings by Times Higher Education and QS (Quacquarelli-Symonds) in 2004. Within one decade, a variety of global rankings have been launched– with different purposes, different methodologies and different indicators. In 2021 an IREG Inventory of International Rankings identified 44 rankings of higher education institutions plus two rankings of national higher education systems.

While rankings have been controversial from their beginning, they are widely used throughout the world, especially by those who are looking for easily accessible comparative information. Students and their parents use information from rankings to decide which college or university to select. The governing bodies of higher education institutions use rankings to set benchmarks, to select indicators for their strategic management, to determine policies for achieving excellence, and for reference in their marketing and public relations. Governments use rankings to identify the position of their higher education system in a globalized world, especially in countries where quality assurance mechanisms are relatively new or weak. Funding agencies use rankings to assess the capacity and financial strength of a given institution. Employers use rankings to identify university partners for cooperation and to find potential employees. Global university rankings have had an impact on national academic exchange programs as well as immigration policies.

The IREG Observatory believes that when properly used and interpreted, rankings can be an important tool to inform about assessing higher education institutions and programs. Using the fundamental tenets of the Berlin Principles of Rankings of Higher Education Institutions, these Guidelines should maximize the usefulness of rankings and respond to practical problems which have arisen as the world of higher education implements a new and valuable source of information.

Guidelines for Stakeholders

General Guidelines

While academic rankings can provide information about quality and performance and serve to promote transparency of information about higher education, they do not provide causal analysis of differences in performance among the systems, higher education institutions and their activity. One should expect rankings to identify strengths and weaknesses, but not to prescribe remedies or explain successes. Users of rankings can expect and should demand that rankings, as the Berlin Principles indicate, be clear about purposes and target groups, recognize the diversity of institutional missions and goals, be clear about sources of information used, and specify cultural and historical contexts, while taking care to understand that there are different values and beliefs about what constitutes “quality” in higher education. Readers should be aware that different rankings have different purposes, target different groups, select different indicators, and use different methodologies.

Given these characteristics of rankings all stakeholders should:

- a) Be clear about what academic rankings measure – and what they don’t measure: understand the purposes, the audiences targeted and the indicators and metrics of academic rankings.
- b) Use academic rankings as just one source of information: look at information provided by rankings in combination with other relevant sources whenever possible. Depending on individual needs, rankings should be considered as additional information
- c) Pay less attention to precise positions and annual changes: take a long-term view of rankings and pay less attention to exact numerical positions and single-year changes, since such short-term fluctuations more often reflect methodological flaws rather than actual changes.
- d) Carefully read and understand the methodologies: since typically each ranking has a different methodology, it is vitally important to understand for each ranking which data are used and how. In particular, users should check whether the set of indicators and the metrics of rankings correspond to their own demand for information and their ideas and preferences on relevance and quality. This understanding is necessary for determining how relevant any given ranking is to any given stakeholder.
- e) In communicating the rankings, it should be made clear that currently academic rankings do not directly reflect the quality of the teaching activity of the faculty. Academic excellence, publication activity or the various numerical ratios are relevant, but only indirectly reflected in teaching.

Guidelines FOR STUDENTS AND PARENTS

Providing comparable information for students and parents to decide which college or university to select has been and still is the primary purpose of the foremost national academic rankings. This is why some rankings present themselves as “study guides”, “best programs”, “best colleges”, etc.

Prospective students and their parents should realize that although they do help to support evidence-based decision-making, rankings are only one source of information, and, clearly, choosing a university depends on a number of factors, social, financial, and personal, which cannot be measured by academic rankings. While rankings can be used to produce a “short list” of universities for individual choices, student users of rankings should do their own research, e.g. look into curricula and, if possible, get into contact with teachers and actual students of universities they are interested in. Students should choose the program and institution that best matches their own professional ambitions, personal development and labor market aspirations.

At the same time, rapidly increasing international student mobility drew increasing attention to international rankings. Compared to national rankings, their purpose and target groups are often less explicit and clear. Hence it is even more important to have a close look into their indicators, methodologies and metrics: Research-based rankings have very limited use for the choice of an undergraduate education.

Higher education institutions are not homogeneous organizations – different departments and faculties can differ substantially in their quality and performance. Institutional rankings of entire institutions can give a first impression on the quality of a school but can be misleading on individual subjects and programs as they can only provide averages across the various fields and subjects. Hence students should look for subject rankings whenever possible.

Students and parents can use rankings in the following areas:

- a) **Choice of undergraduate programs:** consult rankings of the subjects they want to study wherever possible; pay attention to the performance of relevant indicators on teaching and learning such as class size and faculty resources. Prospective undergraduate students should get additional information from other sources that fits their preference, interests and individual job prospects.
- b) **Choice of professional programs:** look at international and national rankings of specific professional programs and relevant professional schools, particularly business schools and various management education programs, instead of general institutional rankings. Pay attention to relevant indicators reflecting employment conditions and labor market and career prospects.
- c) **Choice of doctoral programs:** look at academic rankings of specific departments/subjects/programs instead of overall institutional rankings, pay attention to relevant rankings indicators reflecting the quality of research and doctoral programs. Prospective doctoral students should get additional information about the conditions that can determine and facilitate their academic development and career.

Guidelines FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Higher education institutions that provide education, research and community service are the objects as well as users of academic rankings. Rankings can influence core university activities, such as teaching, research, and community engagement, as well as strategic planning, quality improvement, international collaboration, reputation, fundraising, marketing, and publicity. Best practices in each area include the following:

- a) **Teaching, research, community service:** use rankings to improve the activities developed according to each institution's mission. This may mean ignoring rankings assessing activities that do not match their mission. For example, a liberal arts and vocational or professional undergraduate program does not need to be worried that it ranks low in research. Within the institution, especially in the internal allocation of resources and academic human policy, decisions should not be optimised by achieving better positions in the global rankings.
- b) **Strategic planning:** use rankings to identify strengths and weaknesses relevant to individual missions, visions, traditions, and national roles. Be careful to balance long-term strategies and short-term needs. The strength and comprehensiveness of disciplines and the importance of interdisciplinary studies and research should be developed on their merits in the context of the institution's culture, not simply to optimize rankings.
- c) **Quality improvement:** use rankings to identify successful institutions, attractive study programs, excellent research achievements, and beneficial, socially engaged projects. Rankings can point to weaknesses in performance but strategic decisions to improve should be based on institutional priorities, missions and strategies. Share best practices in curricula, teaching and learning, research, innovation, technology transfer, but be careful not to copy simply the successes of other institutions if they do not fit the culture and mission.
- d) **International collaboration:** use rankings to develop international collaborations in research, engage in students and faculty exchanges, and build networks of excellence, but do not use rankings as the only criteria for identifying partners with whom to collaborate.
- e) **Fundraising:** take care not to overstate the importance of ranking indicators such as the percentage or amount of alumni donations.
- f) **Reputation, publicity and marketing:** be careful in using ranking positions as the major basis for reputation management, in particular if the rankings themselves are mainly based on reputation indicators. Explore what the rankings really measure and tell, cite rankings that are transparent about their methodology. In their external communication, use ranking results that are truly relevant and interpret positions according to their real content.
- g) **Interaction with ranking organizations and other providers:** ensure understanding of ranking methodologies. Avoid submitting inconsistent or incomplete data to ranking organizations. Offer feedback and recommendations to ranking organizations, taking into consideration the institutional, national, and international context. Understand that providing and signing off on institutional data for use in rankings gives an institution the right to access the methodology and calculations used in those rankings.

Guidelines FOR POLICYMAKERS, GOVERNMENTS AND FUNDING AGENCIES

The growing impact of global rankings on national policies has recently been observed in initiatives promoting national excellence, in funding schemes, in academic exchange policies and scholarship programs, and even in immigration policies. In some countries, academic rankings have stimulated mergers of institutions, while in others funding decisions are explicitly linked to national and/or global rankings.

Best practices in these areas include:

- a) **Initiatives promoting excellence:** pay attention to the balance between international competition and national development, between autonomy and accountability, and between prioritization and diversification. Do not set goals that simply expect high ranking levels. When aiming to build world-class universities, respect national capacity limitations and take into account the demand of the entire national higher education system.
- b) **Funding agencies:** make allocations based on the merits of the proposals as well as the strengths and weaknesses of various institutions. Do not simply fund projects proposed by high-ranked institutions.
- c) **Institutional evaluation:** ensure that rankings are used only as a starting point of the overall assessment efforts. Institutional and system evaluations should use proven instruments of assessment and evaluation, such as peer review. Ranking can inform them by providing empirical evidence and comparison, but cannot replace them. Allow higher education institutions sufficient autonomy to be able to introduce new curricula and major reforms, and to establish and use their independent institutional evaluation and/or accreditation mechanisms. Take into account the differences in the missions of higher education institutions, and do not make ranking-based comparisons between institutions with different socio-economic-cultural aims and characteristics.
- d) **Institution and scholarship selection in the context of internationalization:** take into account the results of the relevant field and subject rankings in addition to institutional rankings. Balance national needs and the quality of study programs. When using rankings to allocate funding for study abroad, do not use them as the sole criteria for scholarship selection, as over-reliance on rankings may destroy long-established cooperation between national universities and their foreign partners.
- e) **Interaction with ranking organizations:** provide platforms for discussion about academic rankings and actively contribute to improvement of the ranking systems quality. Establish verified information databases about higher education institutions and make them publicly accessible. Participate or at least follow the developments which contribute to improvement of rankings and their proper place in overall efforts of improving quality assurance in higher education.

Guidelines FOR EMPLOYERS

Employers, particularly large international corporations, sometimes use rankings as one of their information sources when determining whom to hire. Often they prefer to hire graduates of high-ranking colleges and universities. Employers can also be an important source of ranking-relevant information.

In this context, it is recommended that employers, in respect to:

- a) **Cooperation with higher education institutions:** look at rankings to identify potential partners for cooperation in R&D activities as well as in teaching and training.
- b) **Recruitment:** do not use rankings as the main criterion for screening, recruitment, and employment decisions. In addition to academic and professional qualifications, important sets of work-related competencies are found in personal, communication, intercultural and social skills which are not reflected in academic rankings.
- c) **Interaction with ranking organizations:** support data collection surveys on employability and employment by ranking organizations in order to contribute to the rankings' reliability

Guidelines FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE, ACCREDITATION, AND RECOGNITION ORGANIZATIONS

Quality assurance, accreditation and recognition organizations, like ranking organizations, have as their goals to assess, monitor, and improve the quality of higher education institutions and/or systems. Some of these organizations use the results and/or indicators of ranking systems for institutional evaluation.

In this context, it is recommended that quality assurance, accreditation, and recognition organizations, in respect to:

- a) **Institutional evaluation:** refrain from using rankings as the only or the most decisive basis for assessing academic quality at the institutional, faculty, departmental, and program level.
- b) **Information and collaboration:** support mutual exchange of information relevant to the quality of higher education institutions with ranking organizations in order to improve methodologies and practices of quality assurance.
- c) **Communication and positioning:** make clear to institutions, decision-makers and the public that rankings are not the main part of the evaluation and that they have no role in the evaluation of individual researchers and teachers.

Guidelines FOR PUBLISHERS AND OTHER DISPLAYERS OF RANKINGS

Rankings are accessible through the media. Publishers and other displayers of rankings often collaborate with ranking organizations. They play an important role in making information about higher education more transparent and readily available to the public through their communications with stakeholders.

In this context it is recommended that publishers and other displayers of rankings, in respect to:

- a) **Informing the public:** make an effort to inform the general public about the complexity as well as the constraints of academic rankings and do not publish rankings as if they are the only proxy for university quality. Publications ranking results should be supported by transparent information about their methodology.
- b) **Stimulating public discussion:** encourage discussion around critical issues affecting academic rankings as a way to train the public to understand the complexity of higher education institutions and to improve the performance and quality of higher education.

Final Observations

These Guidelines should be seen in the context of a dialogue about the best way for stakeholders to understand and use academic rankings. It is one of the fundamental missions of the IREG Observatory to act as a repository of information about rankings and to keep track of the constantly evolving and diverse world of rankings. The ever-expanding group of rankings experts whom we serve cannot effectively do their job of refining and improving rankings if they do not have ongoing conversations with the constituencies they serve. Consequently, it is our expectation that this document will also encourage dialogue about improving ways that the vast audience for academic rankings can be served.

Brussels, December 2023

IREG Initiatives

■ IREG Guidelines for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings

The Guidelines give users of rankings a trustworthy tool and provide recommendations for interpretation, use and application of rankings by interested parties such as students, parents, universities, media, employers and policy makers.

■ IREG Inventory on International Rankings

International and regional university rankings serve as an important guide for international students. These rankings also measure competitive strength of higher education in various countries.

■ IREG Inventory of National Rankings

National university rankings play a role of a barometer of quality of higher education institutions and help students make their best educational choices.

■ IREG Seal of Approval

IREG Observatory has developed the IREG Seal of Approval Process enabling a ranking organization to apply to IREG Observatory for an independent review. Ranking organizations found to be meeting the detailed IREG Observatory criteria for ranking organizations are awarded the IREG Seal of Approval "IREG Approved".



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