

Are Global University Ranking Tables Still Valued in China?

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Recently, the withdrawal of Lanzhou University, Nanjing University, and Renmin University in China from major global ranking tables has attracted great attention at home and abroad. One cannot help but wonder whether these withdrawals will be part of a wider trend leading to a chain reaction among Chinese universities. Many university administrators, researchers, and policy makers wonder what this might suggest—if withdrawing from university rankings and the ranking industry in its existing state reflects a government strategy to redefine the concepts of world-class university and world-class discipline and increase the global influence of Chinese universities. They also wonder if this move could be a basis for setting new indicators to assess which Chinese universities and disciplines should be listed in the next round of the Double World-Class University and World-Class Academic Discipline Project (China's latest excellence initiative that aims to transform over 40 elite Chinese universities into first-rate global universities and more than 100 academic disciplines into first-rate global ones by 2050).

Reasons for the Withdrawal

There are good reasons for Chinese universities to leave the current global rankings. First, the rules for ranking the quality of universities and disciplines were developed without considering China's reality and national conditions. On an April 2022 visit to Renmin University, President Xi Jinping made it clear that constructing Chinese world-class universities cannot simply employ foreign universities as the standard. Rather, the way to build world-class universities should take account of how they take root in China.

Second, the extreme volatility across different university rankings is often criticized by university heads and members of the academy. This unexplained volatility has created doubt about the scientific objectivity, as well as the credibility, of peer rankings. For example, Nanjing University is ranked #135 in U.S. News & World Report's Ranking, #105 in *Times Higher Education* Ranking, and #131 in QS in 2022. This is similar to the other universities that opted out of the rankings.

Third, unlike other leading Chinese universities like Fudan, Peking, Shanghai Jiaotong, Tsinghua, and Zhejiang, the progress made by Lanzhou, Nanjing, and Renmin over the past two decades did not elevate them in the rankings. For these three universities, a withdrawal from the rankings may very well be the best way to avoid unjust weight on staff morale and to see their institutional reputation tarnished in the eyes of their students' families. Finally, the status quo rankings detract from the academic prestige that these three universities enjoy within the national system, where their real strength and global prestige is reflected.

For example, Renmin University is the first university built directly by the Communist Party during the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Modeled on its USSR counterparts during the Sino-Soviet partnership in the 1950s, it continues to be one of China's leading universities. Its reputation and the entrance examination scores of its undergraduate students are viewed as inferior only to Tsinghua University and Peking University. Its ranking in the top 500 makes little sense. But due to its focus on the humanities and social sciences, it scores lower on indicators of overseas students and scholars and international journal publications. Similarly, Lanzhou University has been one of China's leading universities since the 1990s, but gets a paltry rank of 559 in U.S. News & World Report's ranking and between 751 and 800 in QS in 2022. Lanzhou University's location in the economically underdeveloped northwest region puts a limit on its number of inbound overseas students and faculty, hence on its international visibility and influence, which lowers its performance in related ranking indicators. It is not

Abstract

The suitability of global university rankings for China's national conditions and the institutional character of its universities is currently being reconsidered. Three leading universities have opted out of the rankings. However, there is no clear evidence to show that this is part of a wider trend. Western rankings are still valued and used as a means to attract high-level talent and bestow a world-class brand on more Chinese universities and disciplines.

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surprising that these universities see little benefit in providing data to ranking companies, when it only brings them a negative impact.

It is worth noting that none of China's universities has said that they would refuse to be ranked by the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) based in Shanghai. ARWU is known to use the most objective indicators, obtained from third-party data, not directly from the universities themselves. That makes them less subject to peer reviewers who might, consciously or unconsciously, have personal whims about China's universities. Equal in status with QS and *Times Higher Education*, ARWU was created and established by Chinese researchers in 1998, soon after President Jiang Zemin announced that China would build world-class universities. Further, according to China's own Best Chinese Universities Ranking, Nanjing, Renmin, and Lanzhou are listed as #5, #18, and #40 respectively in 2022. This contrasts with their positions in Western rankings.

The Value of Rankings in Practice

It is difficult to predict if other Chinese universities will take the same approach by the time this article appears. Except for a recent news report indicating that the president of Henan University of Science and Technology, a provincial level public university, would not provide data to global university ranking companies, no other Chinese universities have followed suit so far. Rather, in practice, global rankings are still used as an important indicator for Chinese universities.

High rankings can have a positive effect on the recruitment of high-level talent, including postdoctoral researchers and young academics with doctorates from overseas countries. Graduates of prestigiously ranked universities have better employability and opportunities for advanced study. This is not only true for top-tier national universities like Fudan, Peking, Tsinghua, and Zhejiang. Top-tier provincial universities increasingly emphasize that applicants for postdoctoral posts and assistant professorships should earn their doctoral degrees from top-ranked universities at home and abroad. For instance, the recruitment announcement for young academics in the College of Education of Guangzhou University states that only those who received their doctoral degrees from the top 200 foreign universities can apply for special support programs and specially designated funding schemes. The city of Shanghai is offering permanent residence and social insurance for study abroad personnel, but only to graduates from the world's top 500 universities in rankings of U.S. News & World Report, *Times Higher Education*, QS, and ARWU.

In summary, the rise in the global rankings of China's leading universities at a pivotal time in China's international positioning is accompanied by a growing dissatisfaction over the negative effects produced by ranking agencies. This has led to a questioning of the usefulness of rankings and their lack of grounding in China's circumstances. There is increasing debate about the rules of university rankings, the fundamental difference between Western and Chinese higher education, and how to capitalize on the increasing global impact of China and its universities. However, until there is a better alternative to the status quo Western rankings, their value remains beneficial in attracting high-level talent, not only from foreign universities, but also domestic institutions of higher learning. One thing is certain: While remaining a useful reference and helping China to build great universities and disciplines, in the coming years, the rankings will not enjoy the same attention there as in the past. ▲

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