

Impact Rankings: Measuring What Matters

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Keywords: education assessment, UNSDGs, data, teaching, research, outreach, stewardship, sustainable future

Abstract

The global movement of universities committing to being measured and assessed on their contribution to delivering the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is growing and gaining pace. The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings and related benchmarking data dashboards provide the leading global performance framework assessing universities against all 17 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals through their teaching, research, outreach, and stewardship. The rankings shine a light on best practices, give visibility to the many ways universities make a difference in society, provide data-driven insights to support new collaborations around the delivery of the goals and promote a sustainable future for all.

Introduction

The Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings provide a unique framework to recognise, celebrate, and benchmark universities' contributions to changemaking. Over 2,000 participants in the voluntary assessment system represent a powerful global movement of universities ready to harness their teaching, research, and community outreach to help deliver the SDGs. The rankings provide a tool for benchmarking and improvement, as well as a platform for showcasing unique strengths to students and partners, and provide unprecedented data to support global collaboration between universities, governments, and businesses.

“Rankings are important and I hate them,” said Nobel laureate Brian Schmidt, Vice Chancellor of the Australian National University. Speaking at a conference¹ in November 2020, just weeks after his institution had suffered a modest drop to be overtaken by the University of Sydney in the latest edition of the THE World University Rankings, Schmidt did not hide his frustration: “I live with rankings every day,” he said. “They are important because they literally drive decisions... My government says, ‘Oh we don’t care about rankings’ as long as I continue to go up. Let me tell you they let you know every time you go backwards.”

The big problem for Schmidt, he explained, was the “distortionary” nature of the performance metrics typically used in global university rankings, combined with a global research careers culture that obsesses over the prestige of the title where research is published rather than the research itself. Schmidt thinks that “the rankings are so foundationally flawed that I’m betting they are going to have to fix them and I don’t want to have screwed up my university chasing what is quite frankly this little mirage, which is important—it is important, absolutely—but I think they’re so distortionary.”

Many educational leaders and policymakers would agree with Schmidt's exasperated assessment. There is no doubt that global rankings, in under two decades since their first appearance on the world stage, have become extraordinarily influential: a simple and popular barometer of excellence in global higher education, viewed by many, many millions, that not only influence student decision-making in a competitive and for many a highly lucrative market for international students but which have also captured the imagination of academic faculty in choosing career options, institutional leaders in setting strategy and national policymakers in shaping national higher education and research policy.

When the THE published its most recent edition of the THE World University Rankings in October 2023, it was something of a global event. The rankings were launched to a live, online audience of hundreds of senior university leaders from across the world at the THE World Academic Summit, while hundreds of thousands more people visited the THE's website. Almost 2,000 newspapers and media organisations around the world reported on the results, with a combined cumulative potential audience reach, measured by media monitoring service Meltwater, into the barely believable billions.

The rankings are not just attention-grabbing at their launch. They are firmly embedded in many institutions' strategy and benchmarking activities and have wider resonance in policymaking and external accountability.

Writing about her research (*Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence* (Palgrave <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137446664> 2015)) in *Times Higher Education* magazine in October 2014, Hazelkorn said: "Although students remain the primary audience for the rankings, university leaders believe their importance for government and public opinion is rising. Even Moody's and Standard & Poor's use rankings to validate university creditworthiness.... Rankings are used, *inter alia*, to inform strategic decisions, set targets or shape priorities; revise policies and resource allocation; prioritise research areas; change recruitment, promotional or student entry criteria; create, close or merge departments or programmes; and/or merge with other institutions or research institutes."

So powerful, indeed, have the global university rankings become. So how did we get here? How did just a few organisations that produce global rankings find themselves wielding so much power over so many aspects of global higher education? The THE's World University Rankings have always been conceived to a large extent as a strategic decision-making tool for university leaders and policymakers, not primarily as a tool for student consumers. In December 2003, Richard Lambertⁱⁱ published an overview of cooperation between industry and universities for the UK Treasury. Containing a little-noticed recommendation that would unleash a global ranking on the world. His recommendation focused on the global market instead of the focus at the time on national competition between universities.

De Graaf of the European Commission made it clear in a panel discussionⁱⁱⁱ that "Rankings help to change behavior. They encourage self-criticism, looking at what you can change to do better. They push people and organisations in a different direction." In September 2018, the creation of the THE Impact Rankings was confirmed. The use of the 17 separate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations^{iv} as the evaluation framework allowed the most comprehensive and the most compelling view of impact, endorsed right across the world and with a clearly defined set of targets and indicators already agreed globally. The 17

SDGs cover a vast array of activity, including those aspects demanded back at the Maimi panel consultation by de Graaf – decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and industry, innovation, and infrastructure (SDG 9). Beyond such measures of economic impact, the SDGs, of course, include the world’s most pressing grand challenges, such as climate action (SDG 13) and good health and wellbeing (SDG 3), particularly pertinent after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike the research-focused world university rankings, the new impact rankings are open to any accredited institution in the world – regardless of their mission or focus. Metrics are grouped into four key areas, covering each institution’s stewardship of its own affairs (for example, in managing resources and staff), its “outreach” in society, its research activities (based on key search terms for research publications indexed in Scopus), and its teaching.

As institutions can submit to as many specific SDGs as they deem appropriate, depending on their own focus and priorities, the rankings can shine a spotlight on niche areas of strength and focus, recognising excellence in universities in the Global South and North, and in the East and West. Universities such as Harvard and Stanford, Oxford, and Cambridge are rightly praised for their centuries of scientific breakthroughs, their accumulation of Nobel Prizes and Fields medals, and their outstanding educational programs and famous alumni. But there are many, many other, often far less celebrated universities that quietly go ahead with a gloriously diverse range of activities that also make the world a better place in less obvious and less celebrated ways.

Participation in the THE Impact ranking is entirely free of charge, and all participating universities receive performance insights and international benchmarks and a profile page on the rankings website for free, in exchange for their active participation. The ranking system has been carefully designed to take account of the inequalities of resources available to universities and to support equity. To avoid penalising those institutions with fewer resources for institutional data collection and data reporting, the system allows universities to submit data to as many or as few of the individual SDGs as they want, depending on their mission, strategic focus, or institutional data resources. As long as a university has submitted to at least four SDGs (including SDG17 – partnerships for the goal), they will receive an overall ranking position based on their scores for their top four SDGs alongside rankings for each individual goal. The THE’s teams also offer a wide range of free data masterclass sessions to help and support universities’ submission to the process. In addition to the free insights and profiles, a range of paid-for tools are available, from subscription-based deep data dashboards to consultancy to support best practices and institutional transformation.


The first edition of the THE Impact Rankings, published in April 2019, included 450 institutions from 76 countries. By the 2021 edition, this had exploded to 1,117 universities from 94 countries/regions – representing nothing short of a global movement to help re-define what excellence in global higher education looks like and to recognise the rich, complex diversity of the contributions universities make to making the world a better place. A record 2,152 universities from 125 countries/regions volunteered for assessment for 2024, a 26% increase from last year.

In the 2024 edition, Arizona State University has been named the world’s number one university for SDG14 (Life Below Water), thanks in part to innovative degree programs and research in its School of Ocean Futures, as well as a pioneering coral reef restoration nursery

in Hawaii. The University of Manchester has taken the world top spot for SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), while Afe Babalola is the number one in the world for SDG7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), with a great deal of credit going to its international policy leadership on energy driven partly by its Hydrogen Research Institute. Universitas Airlangga earned the top ranking for SDG1 (Zero Poverty), which includes an assessment of research on the eradication of poverty as well as real-world support for its own students and community, while Kyungpook National University leads the world for SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The quintet is among a truly diverse group of 24 individual top-ranked universities for the 17 SDGs (with several tied in shared top positions) from 12 countries across five continents.



The overall world number one, for the third year in a row, is Western Sydney University in Australia, followed by the University of Manchester and Australia's Tasmania University in joint second place, and Denmark's Aalborg University in fourth. Overall, the top 10 includes five countries across three continents. Arizona State University also makes the world's top 10 in the overall Impact Ranking, which is based on universities' performance across their three top-performing SDGs and their compulsory submission to SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals).^v Submission of evidence on partnerships is mandatory for an overall ranking position in a conscious move to help turn this unique ranking into a tool collaboration as much as for healthy competition.



**Times Higher Education
Impact Rankings 2024**

Top 10 Overall
**Partnerships for the goals
+ top 3 SDGs**

2024 rank	Institution	Country/ region	Score
1	Western Sydney University	Australia	99.7
=2	University of Manchester	United Kingdom	98.5
=2	University of Tasmania	Australia	98.5
4	Aalborg University	Denmark	98.0
5	RMIT University	Australia	97.7
6	University of Alberta	Canada	97.4
7	UNSW Sydney	Australia	97.2
8	Queen's University	Canada	97.1
9	Arizona State University (Tempe)	United States	96.4
10	University of Exeter	United Kingdom	96.1

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“In a world of exponential change, unparalleled technological advancement, and persistent inequality, institutions dedicated to knowledge creation have a critical responsibility to help forge a better future,” Arizona State University President Michael M. Crow^{vi} has said. “ASU’s design and priorities demonstrate our determination to master global challenges, and the Impact Rankings serve as an important gauge of our progress – and a fuel for our aspirations.”

Universities around the world are embracing the Impact Rankings as a vital framework to recognise, measure, benchmark, and incentivize the work they do as a welcome alternative view of excellence. The impact rankings capture universities' existing impact – helping to give that proper recognition and reward. They highlight good practices to be shared for others to learn from. They provide a new, entirely unique global database—a new evidence base—to inform policymakers and to help ensure universities work to change our world for the better is properly supported. Moreover, the ranking induces self-criticism – hold universities accountable and put pressure on those not making a commitment to do better.

As well as providing data for individual universities and offering guidance for prospective students, the rankings and the data behind them are providing an innovative international framework to understand the role of universities in the drive to meet the Sustainable Development Goals and a unique tool to guide policy, investment, and international collaboration decisions to support university impact. Added to the traditional metrics in the world university rankings, their creation represents a major step forward in measuring what matters.

References

ⁱ <https://youtu.be/YfR3Hv7dnJ0>

ⁱⁱ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/16532/1/Lambert%20Review%20of%20Business-University%20Collaboration.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TixEAnkpmPw&t=255s>

^{iv} <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/developing-ranking-based-sustainable-development-goals>

^v <https://globalgoals.org/goals/17-partnerships-for-the-goals/>

^{vi} <https://news.asu.edu/20230601-university-news-asu-retains-no-1-us-and-top-10-globally-times-higher-ed-impact-ranking-work>