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The sustainable development goals as criteria for the global ranking of universities

Abstract

The aim of this article is to survey and interrogate the university sector of the world ranked by international rankings critically as to the sector's pursuit of the sustainable development goals. Universities have a unique and indispensable role to play in the pursuit of the lofty objective of the sustainable development goals. However, when dealing with the global impact rankings, three provisos should be kept in mind, namely that academic autonomy is a prerequisite for a university and cannot be sacrificed, the sustainable development goals do not capture the entire round of challenges facing humanity and social metrics should be treated with circumspection, as these too have their shortcomings. Most universities, with the possible exception of a few very top-tier universities, seem not to be geared to make their contribution to the realisation of the sustainable development goals. However, pockets of excellence exist, also in the Global South, and in terms of internationalisation and comparative international studies, these should be capitalised on.

Keywords: *comparative and international education, internationalisation of higher education, social metrics, sustainable development goals, universities, twenty-first century.*

1. Introduction

The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) are the lodestar of the global community for its path to 2030. One of these goals (Goal 4) deals with education: equitable, lifelong, inclusive quality education being the goal. This goal differs from all the others in that it is not only a goal in itself, as all the other goals, but is seen as instrumental towards the attainment of all other 16 goals. Hence, Goal 4 is of special significance.

The university is not only part of the education project of every nation, but also constitutes the pinnacle of a national education system and of the global education project as well. Hence, in view of the significance accorded to education to attain the SDGs, the university sector is by implication a key sector or instrument in society's scheme for achieving the SDGs. In recent decades, the global ranking of universities has emerged as an important industry. From zero, 30 years ago, a myriad of global ranking of universities schemes are

in currency at present. One of these, the Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings, ranks universities according to how universities support the 17 SDGs.

This article aims to survey and interrogate the university sector of the world ranked by international rankings critically as to the sector's pursuit of the SDGs. The article commences with the place of the university in society. Then an overview of the rise of the university ranking industry over the past 30 years will be given, whereafter the focus will narrow down to the impact rankings – the history of this ranking system, its methodology and current patterns in the world as to how universities register on this ranking system.

2. The university in society

A university can be defined as "a relatively autonomous education institution for the advancement of various branches of higher learning" (Wolhuter, 2021: 368). It is a moot question as to where and when the first university in the world was established (see Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2016: 1022). Western historians usually put it at the University of Paris, 1080, not without merit. On the other hand, extra-Western historians, and especially Islamic and African historians, give the honour to the University of Karouine in Fez, Morocco, founded in 859; and their case too is not without merit. Much depends on how a scholar defines a university and how well institutions, in the view of the scholar, conform to that definition. In any case, for much of its history, the university stood at the fringes of society, cut off from public discourse or from the frontiers of technological, political, economic and social development. Many of the leading thinkers of the eighteenth century, such as Montesquie, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke and James Watt, were not attached to any university and did not even ever attend a university. While the founding of the Humboldt University in Berlin in 1810, the transplantation of that model to the United States of America with the establishment of Johns Hopkins University in 1876 and the institutions established in carrying out the 1862 Land Grant Act were all milestones in the expansion of universities and in the consolidation of the nature of the modern university, by 1900, the global total higher education enrolments came to but 100 000 (or a gross enrolment ratio of 1%). An acceleration took place in the first half of the twentieth century, to reach 6,3 million (5%) in 1950, followed by another acceleration during the decades after the Second World War, but the real global higher education revolution took off in 1990 (by that year the global enrolment was 88,6 million and the global gross higher education enrolment ratio 14%) (UNESCO, 2020).

The global higher education revolution, which took off around 1990 and is still continuing, with ever-increasing momentum, can be ascribed to at least nine interrelated causal factors or societal antecedents. These are the population explosion and youth bulge in the Global South; increasing affluence, which is making higher education affordable to more families; the rise of knowledge economies, where the driving axis of national economies becomes the production and consumption of new knowledge, i.e. making education even more valuable than in earlier times in history; the neoliberal economic revolution, which has brought about principles of efficiency, the profit motive, performativity and managerialism into higher education; the information and communication technology revolution, which not only has facilitated teaching and learning but, especially through distance education, has also made higher education accessible to growing numbers of people, the rise of multicultural societies, democratisation, individualisation, and the rise of the creed of human rights. The last four trends have made themselves manifest in higher education in calls for multicultural and intercultural education and giving students a bigger say in the running of universities (Wolhuter & Langa, 2021).

The single most salient feature of the global higher education revolution has been massification. In the short space of less than 30 years, higher education enrolments and gross higher education enrolment ratios have increased almost threefold from 88,6 million and 14% in 1990 to 223,7 million and 38,04% in 2018, respectively (UNESCO, 2020). Other features of the global higher education revolution include a shift from Mode I knowledge (traditional, discipline-bound produced and taught knowledge) to Mode II knowledge (interdisciplinary, applied produced and taught knowledge). Furthermore, the principles of the neoliberal economic revolution were carried into the higher education sector, resulting in the principles of profit motive, efficiency, performativity and managerialism commencing to guide universities, and the state and industry gaining a stronger say in the running of universities. In the more democratised global environment, students have become more empowered too, and within this new context, the power or authority of the professoriate has been reduced as the professoriate now finds itself sandwiched between the demands of students on the one side, and, on the other side, the dual force of national and institutional governance.

Before the global higher education revolution is assessed, clarity first needs to be gained on the unique functions or purposes of the university. Based on the definition of a university as "an advanced autonomous educational institution for the promotion (teaching and research) of various branches of science" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2020), Wolhuter and Langa (2021) deduced six roles or functions of the university. First, the university is an institution of teaching and learning of various fields of learning, at the highest level. The second function of a university is research. The idea is that teaching-learning and research activities at the university exist in symbiosis. The service delivery function is the third role of the university – an opaque function, but it includes, *inter alia*, activities whereby universities place their expertise to the benefit of different external stakeholders. The fourth function of the university is to act as the conscience of society, meaning to critique society. A precondition for the university to fulfil this role is that it is an autonomous institution. The university also has a role with respect to the maintenance, preservation and development of culture. The final function of the university is to be a location of innovation.

When held up against these functions of the university as a yardstick, the global higher education revolution has brought to higher education its set of achievements as well as its quota of concerns or new challenges. While the massification of universities has opened the doors of the university to ever larger numbers of people and people from more social strata, the rising level of graduate unemployment is a problem to factor into the balance sheet. An unresolved question is who should carry the costs of the global higher education project. The way the global higher education revolution is playing out (closely tied to the principles and dictates of the neoliberal economic revolution) is sacrificing the quest for excellence and for truth, the principle of autonomy, the place of basic research, the role of the university in serving as the conscience of society and the role of the university with regard to the preservation, transmittance and development of the cultural wealth of humanity.

3. The sustainable development goals

From the above, a close relationship between the university and society is evident, autonomy being one of the defining features of a university, notwithstanding. This does not only refer to the roles of the university in serving as the conscience of society, in cultural preservation and maintenance and in service delivery, but also in the teaching-learning and research functions of the university. Teaching-learning has always been of a dual nature. Besides the general

intellectual moulding and character formation, training for the professions in society has been a central part of the teaching-learning activity of the university right from medieval times. Besides basic research, the motivation of which is to push back the frontiers of knowledge, ever since research made its appearance at the university with the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, research too had a pragmatic function. The imperative for vocationally orientated teaching-learning and for applied research has become stronger during the global higher education revolution of the past three decades. The nascent knowledge economy (where the production and consumption of new knowledge have become the driving axis of the economy) and the fourth industrial revolution (where the blending of the physical, biological and digital worlds is asking for an ethical discourse) have attached new value to the university in society. It is, therefore, understandable that when the global community formulated the SDGs as its vision for the world of 2030, a specific place was given to the university in this scheme of things (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2015).

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it became clear that humanity was facing an ecological crisis. Rising population numbers, growing technological prowess and more affluence have placed the finite resources and the finite capability of the earth to replenish resources under increasing pressure. Aspects of this environmental degradation include atmospheric pollution and global warming, freshwater and marine pollution, the destruction of wetlands, soil depletion and soil erosion, deforestation, moving the natural geographical location of species and the destruction of biodiversity. The extent of environmental degradation is serious, to the point of putting the survival of the human species and even that of the planet at stake (Ord, 2020). Even if the planet and the human species can be saved, the ecological destruction has enormous and serious geopolitical implications, threatening global peace and stability, if not stopped and reversed in the near future. This was pointed out recently in a statement by Frans Timmermans, first Vice-President of the European Union, and Josip Borell of the European Union's Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Section (Timmermans & Borell, 2021). Dominique Moïsi (2020), attached to the Institute of International Affairs in France and professor at Harvard University, United States of America, calculated that an average increase of half a degree of the temperature of the planet would result in a 10–20% increase in the risk of deadly conflict around the world.

In response to this ecological threat, the global community has formulated the SDGs as its vision for the world in 2030. On 25 September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted Resolution 70/1, that is, "Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development", listing the following 17 SDGs: ending poverty in all its forms everywhere:

- ending hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture;

- ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages;

- ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all;

- achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls;

- ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;

- ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all;

- promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all;

- building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and fostering innovation;

- reducing inequality within and among countries;

- making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns;

- taking urgent action to combat climate change and the impact thereof;

- conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;

- protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably managing forests, combating desertification, halting and reversing land degradation and halting biodiversity loss;

- promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and

- strengthening the means of implementation and revitalising the global partnership for sustainable development (UN, 2015).

Based on a meeting convened by UNESCO in Incheon, South Korea, from 19 to 21 May 2015, the Incheon Declaration was drawn up by the over 1 600 participants from 160 countries, including over 120 ministers who attended the meeting. The Incheon Declaration unpacked Goal 4, which is the vision of the global community for education by the year 2030 (UNESCO, 2015). From the United Nations document spelling out the 17 SDGs, and especially from the Incheon Declaration, it is clear that Goal 4 differs from the others in that it (education) is seen not only as an SDG in itself, but also as a means to and precondition for the realisation of each of the other SDGs. As the pinnacle in national education systems (as explained above), this means that universities are accorded a pivotal place in the pursuit of the SDGs. Indeed, the term 'universities' is mentioned 16 times in the Incheon Declaration (see UNESCO, 2015). Soon after the adoption of the SDGs and the Incheon Declaration, publications on the role of universities in the realisation of the SDGs started to roll in, such as the book by University of London scholar of comparative and international education, Tristan McCowan (2019).

4. The global rankings of universities

One powerful global societal trend since 1990 has been the neoliberal economic revolution. In the 1980s, conservative governments in leading Western states, especially the United Kingdom (Margaret Thatcher), Germany (Helmuth Kohl) and the United States of America (Ronald Reagan), took the lead and cut down on expenditure and limit the scope of activities of the state, giving the forces of the market and the private sector freedom of reign. This neoliberal economic revolution spilt over to the East Bloc after its implosion since 9 November 1989, and with the conclusion of the Cold War, and nations in the Global South no longer had the trump card to play off the superpowers of the West against the East Bloc for aid and grants. These countries now had to turn to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for bail-outs, pressuring the nations of the Global South into the neoliberal economic revolution. The principles of neoliberal economics have been carried into sectors outside the confines of the economy, including education, higher education in particular. Indeed, as was explained earlier, the principles of neoliberal economies have been one of the hallmarks of the

global higher education revolution since 1990. These principles include cut-throat competition, performativity and performance measurement and appraisal. In the merciless competition and performance measurement between single universities, and between national university sectors, the global university rankings industry — which appeared after 1990 — is standing central (Liu & Cheng, 2011).

University rankings have a long history. The rankings of the *US News & World Report*, which date back to 1983, are usually regarded as the beginning of global university rankings (Liu & Cheng, 2011: 145; Wildavsky, 2010: 101), although exercises in the ranking of American universities go back to 1895 (Wildavsky, 2010: 101). Since 1983, but especially since the dawn of the new millennium, the number of global rankings of universities in circulation has increased, so much so that by 2011, when Shin, Toutkoushian and Teichler (2011) published the first book on global university rankings, there were already 33 such rankings on the internet (Shin, Toutkoushian & Teichler, 2011). In 2003, the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (carried out by the Institute of Higher Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University), also known as the Academic Ranking of World Universities, was followed by the Times Higher Education Supplement rankings a year later. In 2010, the QS World University Rankings, done by Quacquarelli Symonds, commenced. These are the three most-viewed university rankings, according to Alexa Browsing Extension (2021); the Times Higher Education Supplement Rankings, the QS Rankings and the Academic Ranking of World Universities rankings attract 10 734, 4 484 and 85 518 views, respectively per day.

Besides the three most commonly cited rankings, there is a growing kaleidoscope of global rankings of universities in circulation. World-class universities typically boast their placement on these rankings up-front on their websites, as in the age of globalisation, with its cut-throat competition and race towards competitiveness, including global competitiveness, and in times of neoliberalism, with its predilection for performance measurement, these rankings are used as an index of the standing of a university. These rankings are usually done annually and use composite indices in calculating the standing of a university. These indices typically include research output and research impact, internet pages of a university, peer ratings, evaluation of teaching activities, internationalisation effort, number of patents registered and number of Nobel laureates among alumni. Besides rankings in the aggregate pool of the world (with its some 25 0000 universities), many of the ranking systems also break down rankings as per world region. Furthermore, rankings of individual faculties are done too. Rankings of emerging or younger (than 50 years old) universities also exist. Higher education scholar Philip Altbach (2012: 27) writes that in their relatively short history, the rankings of universities have attained "iconic status". These rankings are keenly followed by university managers who use them for decision-making and benchmarking; governments use them as an index for national power, the media, funding agencies and prospective students, faculty and scholars looking for research collaborators.

Yet the global ranking of universities has not escaped criticism, and many abuses and caveats of this ranking exercise have been pointed out, right up to the pages of the top scholarly journal *Nature* (see Gadd, 2020; see also Maxwell, 2018). Criticism about methodological issues abounds, for example, the use of the number of Nobel laureates as a proxy for quality teaching and learning. Functions of the university, such as character building by means of teaching and learning, or the role of the university in exercising social critique (i.e. serving as the conscience of society), or the role of the university in cultural preservation and development (see Wolhuter & Langa, 2021), are not easily quantifiable. In the context of

high-stakes ranking, there is always the danger that universities will concentrate on what is measured (to the detriment of a host of issues that are pivotal to quality university education) and the danger of excessive competition undermining the collegiate ethos of universities. The undergraduate experience is seldomly probed and there is also the problem of treating an institution as a single entity.

University rankings are also criticised for relying on reputation (what others think of a university, i.e. 50% of the weight in the QS rankings comprise opinion surveys) — hardly an objective measure (Bekhradnia, 2019). What comes to mind here is Campbell's Law, formulated by American sociologist and research methodologist, Donald Campbell, namely that once a metric has been identified as a primary indicator for success, its ability to measure success accurately tends to be compromised (see Campbell, 1979). For example, when police departments are subjected to performance measurement and performance appraisal as measured by the numbers of arrests made for specific crimes, they may quickly concentrate on those crimes and aim for the highest number of arrests, regardless of how many of those arrests will end or stand a chance of ending in a successful prosecution. Performance measurement is very time consuming for educators or academics and can distract attention and drain energy and resources from teaching and learning and research. Tellingly, in the introduction of his edited volume on the building of world-class universities in developing countries, Altbach (2011) cautions about university administrations doing administrative work just to satisfy the requirements of performance appraisal, easily creating a false impression of the quality of education taking place at a university.

Global rankings of universities are just one of many instances of the use of metrics in education. The use of large data sets (especially results of international test series, e.g. the IEA, the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement and PISA, the International Programme for Student Assessment) and the growth of technology (to make available and analyse such results), within the context of the neoliberal economic revolution and its forceful impact on education, have contributed to the growth of the use of metrics in education, resulting in a heavy backlash within the scholarly community of comparative and international education. Examples of such criticism, which chimes in with that of Donald Campbell, include Klees (2016), Komatsu and Rappleye (2018) and Auld, Rappleye and Morris (2019).

5. The Times Higher Education impact rankings of universities: Using the sustainable development goals as a yardstick for the ranking of universities

Given the pivotal place universities assume in modern society, the rise of the global ranking of universities industry and the importance of the SDGs as the vision of humanity for 2030, it is only natural that the SDGs would be taken as a yardstick for the global ranking of universities. The Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings assess universities against the SDGs. Carefully calibrated indicators are used to provide a comparison across four broad areas – research, stewardship, outreach and teaching. These impact rankings commenced in 2018/19, and three annual rounds have been done to date. The aim of this new ranking is to capture the impact of universities on society based on the success of the institution in delivering the United Nations 17 SDGs. The aim of the impact rankings is, per the THE (2021), "to provide a showcase for the work being delivered by universities in our communities, and

it is an opportunity to shine a light on institutional activities and efforts not covered in other rankings". Thus, it allows the THE to demonstrate the differences a university makes to the world in which we live (THE, 2021).

Any higher education institution in the world may apply to the THE for participation in the impact-rankings exercise. In the latest round (2021), 1 118 higher education institutions in 98 countries or regions participated. The overall score is generated from the score for SDG 17 (Partnership for Goals) (worth up to 22% of the overall score), plus the three strongest of the other SDGs for which they provided data (each worth up to 26% of the overall score). For each SDG, a list of metrics has been developed for measuring a university. For example, SDG Goal 1 (no poverty), has been put in the list of the SDGs, because some 10% of the global population live in poverty. Universities need to be able to demonstrate how they are helping to address this problem through their work. The metrics used to measure the performance of a university with respect to this goal include the following (THE, 2021):

• the number of research papers on poverty published

• the number of papers co-authored with authors from low-income countries

• the citation impact of research papers on poverty

• the proportion of students receiving financial aid to attend university because of poverty

• university anti-poverty programmes

• community anti-poverty programmes

Further to the caveats of the global ranking of universities, as pointed out earlier, two points should be mentioned. A university has many functions in society and cannot be reduced to becoming the "supermarket for society", i.e. instantaneously supplying everything society asks (see McCowan, 2018). Secondly, the SDGs are by far not a full inventory of the most serious and urgent challenges or crises facing humanity. In a well-researched recent publication, King and Jones (2021) of the Global Sustainability Institute at Anglia-Ruskin University list a number of scenarios of a global collapse, and the factors giving rise to such a collapse. Some of the scenarios and factors do not figure in the SDGs, such as unchecked population growth, a financial crisis and a pandemic such as – or even worse than – Covid-19.

When the impact rankings are then considered, the problems involved in reducing complex institutions and events to metrics, all the roles of the university in society and the shortcomings of the SDGs in capturing all challenges facing humanity should be borne in mind. As explained earlier, a university has a set of unique roles in society and cannot be subjected to the dictates of society. Furthermore, a university, in the execution of its unique role in society, needs a certain measure of autonomy and cannot be dictated by the needs of society (see McCowan, 2018).

6. Global impact rankings of universities: Outcome and patterns

The top 20 universities, according to the 2021 cycle of global impact rankings, and their national location and overall score are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Top twenty universities according to the 2021 cycle of impact rankings

Rank	University	Country	Overall score
1	University of Manchester	United Kingdom	98,8
2	University of Sydney	Australia	97,9
3	RMIT University	Australia	97,8
4	La Trobe University	Australia	97,8
5	Queens University	Canada	97,0
6	Aalborg University	Denmark	96,1
7	Wollongong University	Australia	96,1
8	University College of York	United Kingdom	96,0
9	Arizona State University (Tempe)	United States of America	95,8
10	University of Auckland	New Zealand	95,8
11	Kings College, London	United Kingdom	95,8
12	University of Newcastle	Australia	95,2
13	University of British Columbia	Canada	95,1
14	McMaster University	Australia	94,9
15	University of Newcastle	United Kingdom	94,8
16	University of Leeds	United Kingdom	94,7
17	Western Sydney University	Australia	94,3
18	Monash University	Australia	94,0
19	University of Leicester	United Kingdom	93,8
20	University of Bologna	Italy	92,8

Source of data: THE (2021).

What is striking from Table 1 is that the top 20 slots are all occupied by universities from the Global North. Furthermore, within the Global North, the pattern is also lopsided; all but two are in Anglophone countries, and within the Anglophone countries, there is only one university from the United States of America. For the size of its university sector, Australia (with eight universities in the top 20) is doing exceptionally well. Secondly, the ranking scores are very high – 98,8 to 92,8 out of a possible 100. However, these drop to 47,6 to 56,5 in the rank order 601 to 800 group, and to 9,2 to 36,4 in the 1001 and lower rank order group.

For the further interpretation of patterns, firstly, the results of the four South African universities that took part in the impact rankings are given in Table 2. These are followed by a presentation of the results of three other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa) countries in the Global South and a selection of other countries in both the Global South and Global North in Table 3.

Table 2: South African universities registering on the impact rankings

University	Rank order	Overall score
University of Cape Town	101-200	85,2
University of Pretoria	201-300	77,4
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	301-400	70,9
University of the Western Cape	501-600	66,2

Table 3:   Registration of a selection of countries on impact rankings

Country	Total number of universities in impact rankings	Ranking of university with highest score
Brazil	38	48
United Kingdom	50	1
United States of America	45	9
China	13	94
India	49	81
Nigeria	5	401-500
Egypt	31	95
Germany	6	101-200
France	18	101-200

While the Global North dominates the top slots, the Global South is by no means absent or even poorly present, in many cases outperforming the Global North. For example, 38 universities of Brazil register on the rankings, against only six from Germany and 18 from France. Within the Global North, the number of universities on the rankings is very uneven. For example, the United States of America has fewer than the United Kingdom, and Germany and France each has much fewer than the United Kingdom. Within the Global South, patterns are as uneven as in the Global North. For example, the five universities of Nigeria and 12 of China pale in comparison to the 31 of Egypt and the 49 of India.

7.   Conclusion

Within the context of the SDGs as humanity's vision for itself and for the world of 2030, and within the context of the global university ranking industry, the impact rankings, ranking universities according to their performance in pursuit of the SDGs, were a logical development. Universities surely have a unique and indispensable role to play in the pursuit of the lofty goal of the SDGs. However, when dealing with the global impact rankings, the following provisos should be kept in mind:

- In order to be a university, academic autonomy is a prerequisite and cannot be sacrificed.

- The SDGs do not capture the entire round of challenges facing humanity.

- Social metrics should be treated with circumspection, as these too have shortcomings.

- Only a tiny minority, 1 118 out of some 25 000 universities globally, participate in the impact rankings.

Having stated the above provisos, most universities, with the possible exception of a few very top-tier universities, seem not to be geared to make a contribution to the realisation of the SDGs. In the Global South, a few exemplary universities exist. In the present era of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has wreaked havoc on the internationalisation programmes of universities but, at the same time, has created an opportunity to rethink and redesign the international dimensions of universities, the SDGs and the scattered presence of model universities present a new opportunity for universities to collaborate and to learn from one another. At a scholarly level, this also presents the scholarly field of international studies in education with an opportunity in terms of international comparative studies. From the vantage point of the Global South, there has been long-standing criticism that the way internationalisation has hitherto been promoted at universities worldwide serves the hegemony of the Global

North and is, in fact, an agent of neo-colonialism, but does not benefit the Global South (see Oleksiyenko *et al.*, 2020: 11-12). While critical studies in the internationalisation of higher education have developed, spearheaded by Sharon Stein (2019), the problem is that these critical perspectives remain exactly what the name suggests, namely 'criticisms' (of historically bequeathed hegemonic structures), whereas at the same time, in the Global South in particular, evidence exists of more satisfying cultures having been created (see e.g. Musengi & Wolhuter, 2021), and the evidence of this chapter once again points to such potential. That may well prove to be the most valuable contribution of the impact rankings of universities to stimulate international comparative studies on the pursuit of universities of the SDGs and to guide collaboration among universities in pursuing these goals.

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