

# Varsities have a local-global balancing act

South Africa has higher-education priorities that international rating systems don't always reflect

COMMENT  
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I was reading Sean Muller's *Mail & Guardian* article on rankings in higher education ("University rankings a flawed tool", January 4), when I caught a glimpse of a television insert in which one person was juggling balls and another was balancing high up on a tightrope.

The connections between juggling and tightrope, walking on the one hand, and global rankings, on the other, struck me because of my own experiences at the University KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN).

We have maintained a research output that has contributed to making us the third most productive South African university in these terms for the past few years and also placed us among the top 400 universities globally in the 2012-2013 *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings, but we have had to ensure that our engagement with rankings does not come at the expense of what is broadly termed a transformation agenda.

Getting this balance right certainly requires juggling — a challenge similar, though not identical, for the universities of Cape Town, Stellenbosch and the Witwatersrand, which also feature in the *Times Higher Education* rankings, though UKZN

is the only merged university among the four. The agenda universities have to deliver on includes increasing student access; supporting young academics to complete PhDs and so building the next generation of academics; funding and creating incentives for mid-career and established academics' research; and teaching initiatives.

Muller suggested that some institutions, although supporting publication outputs, could "game" the system to increase their rewards from the state's publication incentives funds. He made the point that young academics in South African universities have not necessarily been the beneficiaries of this state support and have often been "discarded" and "used primarily for teaching".

Taxpayers' money, he pointed out, has been channelled to research and, by implication, researchers whose work has "no substantive local connection".

He suggested that this abuse is a consequence of the role that research plays in the various flawed ranking systems, ones that force universities to emphasise and support the research endeavour in often quite unacceptable ways.

But there are numerous exceptions to Muller's argument that young academics are not supported and that research has little local relevance or



Graphic: JOHN McCANN

connection. UKZN, for example, has research focus areas linked to key national and global grand societal challenges.

In addition, research money supports a directorate of capacity development that drives initiatives such as writing and mentoring workshops, supervision skills training, and funding for new PhD graduates to conduct postdoctoral work. Young scholars also benefit from the fee remission granted when they register for full-time master's and doctoral study.

The problems with rankings that Muller pointed out are well documented in academic literature and they are ones that we at UKZN are well aware of in our engagement with rankings. He is also correct in pointing out that universities would — or I believe could possibly — engage in unethical behaviour in order to feature positively in the rankings.

The *New York Times* reported in January last year that many colleges

had admitted to submitting incorrect information for years — or, to put it bluntly, lying — to get better ratings. Clearly we have to rely on the principles and practices of good governance, as is the case with all projects.

However, any decision to engage with rankings is nuanced and complicated. We cannot take the position that doing so is "anti-transformation" — that is, not in keeping with the public visions, missions and strategies of South African universities.

As a young activist in the anti-apartheid struggle, one of the early lessons I learnt was to understand a context and then differentiate between tactics, strategy and principles in deciding on the way forward. Thinking about rankings reminds me of my early political training. It would be extremely short-sighted of South African institutions of higher learning to be merely principled rather than also strategic in their engagements with global rankings.

Nostalgic, backward-looking criticism of modern developments in relation to rankings is not helpful. Yes, they should be looked at critically, but not with undifferentiated hostility. In the South African context, and globally, they are not going to disappear, whatever the criticism.

The question that should concern South African universities is how to operate effectively in this environment. Understanding it will make it possible to take decisions that allow for ratings without being dominated by them. Such an understanding must take teaching and social service into account more than an overwhelming obsession with ratings would seem to allow.

Like many developing countries, South Africa arguably has higher-education priorities that are not fully reflected in most, if not all, rating systems. A huge and urgent priority is the large population of academically poorly prepared young students