

A local-global balancing act

From Page 1

for whom it is essential to provide intensive and expert teaching.

Nevertheless, there is consensus that research is also vital in South Africa. Without it, reducing poverty and hunger, alleviating unemployment and fostering an active and critical civil society are unlikely to be possible. Though South Africa has a higher research output than any other African country, there is no prospect of developing a major research university on the lines of Oxford or Harvard.

American education professor Philip Altbach has written that most countries can support at least one university of sufficient quality to participate in international discussions of science and scholarship and can also undertake research in one or more fields relevant to national development. South Africa does better and supports a small number of institutions with a robust research capability.

The reality is that research and research publication are likely to remain pre-eminent in generating ratings. South African universities should exploit this common ground to the maximum. There are many reasons other than rankings for encouraging research, but for this

reason alone — that ratings are now a permanent part of the environment — it makes sense within any South African university's broader priorities to stress research as much as possible. Supporting research for a development agenda in turn feeds into what is required for ranking indexes.

Recognising the crucial contribution of research, and acting on this recognition, is not only rational in itself but it is also the most effective way of improving teaching and learning, even at the undergraduate level. Research can be the engine that pulls forward the university as a whole. It exposes students to academics who are at the forefront of their disciplines and creates norms of achievement that permeate not just postgraduate studies but also the entire institution.

I am perfectly aware that rankings present South African universities with a dilemma. An obvious problem is that globally provided information about institutions that operate within specific local environments can be misleading. Higher education leaders who understand the phenomenon and who operate without illusions about rankings have a clear-sighted focus not so much on rankings, but on how



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they can be made to serve existing institutional goals — not least in the area of research excellence and productivity — without distorting the long-term aims of their institutions. This is the way that UKZN has approached its stepping into the ranking environment.

There is no doubt that when parents, students and prospective employees explore where to register or invest their resources, they are increasingly turning to the ranked status of a university. It is common to hear parents and students say “but I read the university is on the top 200/400 list”. Global rankings are a tool in recruiting students and

they also assist graduates seeking employment.

I support the idea that rankings systems need to pay added attention to rating single subjects or discipline areas and to group the excellence of these disciplines. Additional attention should also be given to how teaching can be integrated with research.

Increasing student numbers and recruiting faculty and students from around the world are unarguably beneficial to the agendas of South African universities. So too is the increased visibility of our universities internationally — hopefully with improved attention from funding

agencies locally and abroad.

Although universities on the continent are competitors when it comes to rankings, in the final analysis the success of any African university is beneficial to us all. It sends the message that we can compete globally, make valuable contributions to global agendas that positively affect both South Africa's and the continent's knowledge production and dissemination, as well as, essentially, on our development too.

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