THE TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR RANKING UNIVERSITY QUALITY

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Introduction

In the rapidly changing world of higher education, where increasing emphasis is being placed on the assessment of research and teaching quality as indicators of University Quality, the key issues that need to be considered have been debated widely in both the private and public sectors. The UK and New Zealand have undertaken rigorous research performance exercises over an extended period, while Australia is presently entering a similar phase of assessing research quality. However, ranking University Quality is more general than assessing and ranking research quality alone. To date, the various stakeholders do not seem to have reached agreement on the most important indicators that need to be addressed in assessing and ranking University Quality.

The Ten Commandments for ranking University Quality address some of the key issues in the ongoing discussions. Starting with the original set of Ten Commandments, most commandments seem to have been routinely ignored, at least in part, by all but the most conscientious and religious individuals. For this reason, the current set should perhaps be seen as guidelines rather than regulations.

Commandment 1: Know Yourself

All Universities have publicly stated goals, as expressed in their mission statements. However, it is not clear that all Universities fully comprehend their own mission statements. Publicity should not be confused with reality. Universities should decide which factors are important in determining University Quality and particularly where their comparative advantage might lie. International standards regarding quality should be used, but relevant domestic standards and requirements should not be ignored.

Commandment 2: Appoint and Retain High-Quality Staff

Members of University appointments committees should pay particular attention to this self-evident warning. Just as nothing will increase the quality of a
University more certainly or quickly than hiring high-quality academic staff, it is also a fact that nothing will affect the quality of an institution in the wrong direction as quickly as appointing staff of low quality. While appointing excellent staff is a necessary condition for achieving high University Quality, retaining them is also essential. Excellent replacements should be sought for high fliers who leave the University for greener pastures and for dead wood academics who do not. Substantive information on the quality of staff should be made publicly available and be distributed widely, including the quality and quantity of publications, research grants, elected Fellowships of learned academic societies, official international rankings and competitive teaching awards.

**Commandment 3: Accept that Size Does Matter**

Contrary to the common misconception, size really does matter. The quality of Universities should be ranked according to both total and per capita performance measures. Rankings can be significantly different when the size of a University is accommodated in ranking research output as an indicator of University Quality. [Macri and Sinha (forthcoming)] provide an excellent illustration of this Commandment by comparing the total and per capita research rankings of Departments of Economics in Australia and New Zealand.] Size does make a difference.

**Commandment 4: Strike a Sensible Balance Between Research and Teaching**

Not all Universities are willing and able to appoint outstanding researchers, but any self-respecting University will show obvious pride in the quality of their teaching staff. Although both research and teaching performance indicators clearly affect University Quality, international comparisons are more routinely used to evaluate research performance. In responding to the needs of their stakeholders, Universities must strike a sensible balance between the roles of research and teaching in their mission statements, and hence the use of appropriate research and teaching quality indicators in assessing University Quality.

**Commandment 5: Determine the Importance of Research Centres and Research Staff**

Although invaluable in terms of research output and quality, research centres and research-only staff are typically expensive and may rely on externally generated funds, unlike their teaching counterparts, who are typically funded by University recurrent grants. Therefore, research centres and research-only staff should be
scrutinized to determine sensible weights for full-time researchers versus teaching and research academics in evaluating University Quality.

**Commandment 6: Rank Research Output and Quality Using Objective Criteria**

Quality-based measures will always have international appeal; hence, research output and quality should be assessed using publicly available and objective criteria. Where international benchmarks exist for evaluating the quality of research output across disciplines, the research output should be assessed by experts. Resist the temptation of assessing the quality of a paper based on the journal rather than the published content. As not every academic is a good researcher, do not succumb to the temptation of ranking all research output as being above average. For disciplines where objective criteria do not exist, they should be established using international benchmarking exercises. Public relations exercises regarding research quality are misplaced and should be avoided under any circumstances.

**Commandment 7: Develop Objective Indicators of Teaching and Supervisory Quality**

Teaching and supervisory quality and output should be evaluated using publicly available and objective international benchmarks. Where objective indicators do not exist, they should be developed using international benchmarking exercises. While it is acknowledged that objective criteria may be more difficult to determine in evaluating teaching and supervisory output and quality than in assessing their research counterparts, this makes it all the more important to establish objective indicators than to use subjective criteria. As not all academics are good teachers or supervisors, resist the temptation to rank all teaching and supervisory staff as excellent. Public relations exercises regarding the quality of teaching and supervisory staff that are devoid of objective measures should be avoided like the plague.

**Commandment 8: Incorporate the Quality of Undergraduate and Graduate Students**

The best undergraduate and graduate students are attracted to the leading Universities. Information on the quality of undergraduate and graduate students should be made publicly available and disseminated widely, including the quality of incoming undergraduate students, graduate placement of graduating students, completion rates of PhD students and placement of Masters and PhD graduates. While all of these measures are objective indicators, they should be used sensibly.
Commandment 9: Evaluate the Quality of Overseas Students

Great Universities attract the highest quality domestic and international students. Any ranking of University Quality should accommodate the number and proportion of foreign students in the student population and take account of whether or not they are paying differential fees from domestic students. Assessing the quality of the student experience is essential for incoming students, both domestic and international. Such information should be widely disseminated.

Commandment 10: Avoid Ridicule

When all else fails, clearly stated subjective criteria may be used in the absence of publicly available objective criteria. However, an important distinction between the acting and academic professions should never be forgotten: “No publicity is bad publicity” may be the adage for actors, but it does not apply in ranking University Quality. The effects of public ridicule remain long after the underlying cause has been forgotten. Highly contentious subjective criteria, including misguided public relations exercises that may expose your institution to ridicule, must be avoided. Respect your stakeholders.

Epilogue

Rules are typically broken, if not ignored. Commandments are like rules and are treated accordingly.

As virtually all of The Ten Commandments for organizing a conference (McAleer, 1997), The Ten Commandments for attending a conference (McAleer and Oxley, 2001), The Ten Commandments for presenting a conference paper (McAleer and Oxley, 2001) and The Ten Commandments for academics (McAleer and Oxley, in press) have been routinely ignored, there is no expectation that The Ten Commandments for ranking University Quality will experience a different fate. The primary purpose of these guidelines is to assist the various stakeholders in both the private and public sectors, domestically and internationally, to reach an agreement on the most important factors that need to be addressed in assessing and ranking University Quality.

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References


