

The odious subject of ranking

by Don Aitkin

To my Friends in China

You asked me to say something about universities in Australia, how they stand one to another, and how they stand in comparison to those in the USA and the UK. You agreed that it is pretty silly to try to rank universities, in China or in Australia, but you say that people want to know.

Ultimately, what we are talking about is choice or selection. People want to know how universities stand one with another because their son or daughter is going to enrol in one of them, and they want to choose the right one. Also, Australian universities, like British and American ones, are far away, so people can't go and make some on-the-spot comparisons. Some kind of ordering or grouping helps, though a single rank order of universities is ultimately about 'prestige', and it is not clear what 'prestige' is.

OK, I'll do my best. I think I would get pretty wide agreement inside Australian universities about some of it, but it is nonetheless a personal view, based on almost fifty years in higher education, and a wide knowledge of universities in other countries, not just my own. There are three parts to my essay: the first is about what goes into ranking, the second is about measuring the standing of universities, and the third is a guess at rankings across countries.

How universities get ranked

Australia is a relatively young society, although we have had a settled democratic political order for 150 years. It follows that we are more than normally prone to venerate old establishments. Just as Harvard and Oxford have great prestige in their countries because of their age, if nothing else, so in Australia do the oldest universities of Sydney and Melbourne, each around 150 years old. Other things being equal, the older an Australian university is, the more prestigious it is.

There are straightforward reasons for age having such a value. More people will have heard of the university; it is likely to have more graduates than younger ones; and those graduates are likely to have achieved prominence in more areas over a longer time. From this comes the comforting, though erroneous, feeling that if we go to an old university we too will achieve prominence. The old universities once had a monopoly or a near-monopoly of entry to the professions. They no longer do so, and there are a lot of very able people going to other universities. They too will become prominent.

The second variable that is important in ranking Australian universities, like those everywhere, is money or wealth. Here too the older universities have a head start. Most of them have large campuses near the centre of the city (though of course originally their campuses lay outside the city!), and they have benefited

from more years of government funding and more years of gifts and bequests. They have more money to dispose of, and that usually means larger libraries and better equipment.

But age and wealth come with a handicap. The older the buildings the more money that is needed to maintain them. Sydney University, certainly Australia's oldest, and arguably its best-known, has some wonderful 19th century buildings which absorb a lot of money in repair and enhancement. The older universities tend also to have confined campuses surrounded by expensive and built-up city land. It is costly for them to expand.

The third important variable in determining the prestige of an Australian university is research. The second half of the 20th century saw a huge increase in research, not only in universities but certainly in them. Indeed, research has changed the character of universities virtually everywhere. And the older and wealthier universities have engaged in research longer than their newer counterparts.

As you know, research is something about which people outside universities have some scepticism, even suspicion. First of all, they do not understand what is going on when university people do research. Second, they usually cannot see any benefit to themselves. Third, they are aware that the money that pays for research tends to come from the public purse, or, if they are industries sponsoring research, from their own purse.

Those who know universities well will also have their concerns about the dominance of research. In the Western world academics who are deeply involved in research are rarely also deeply interested in teaching. Moreover, the importance of research has distorted appointment and promotion systems, which favour distinction in research and diminish the importance of excellent teaching. Most undergraduate students are relatively uninterested in research, but are deeply interested in encountering university teachers who know what they are doing, value teaching and are available to students.

So research, to me at least, needs to be heavily qualified as a component of university prestige.

Measuring it all

Australian universities are intended to be similar, not different. The principal reasons are cultural. Australia is a political federation, and one of the ethical principles built into the Federation a century ago was the principle that all parts of the new society would have approximately similar standards of public services. The Australian university system has always been a public one: that is to say, its universities are set up by acts of parliament and are supported by public funding. Since the 1970s the public funding has been from the national government, and its funding principles are well known, and do not favour one university over another.

The older universities have argued that they should be better funded, but the national government has not agreed. Of course, the older universities tend to have the older and more expensive faculties, like medicine and engineering and dentistry. These are also, in most societies, the more prestigious of the professions. But this does not make the older universities 'better', just older.

The national government is most interested in the quality of the system in helps to fund, and it has undertaken 'quality' surveys of the universities. The outcomes of these surveys, several years ago, did not show that the older universities were unambiguously better than the newer. Nor did they, or could they, deal with the problem that research excellence does not translate into excellence in education, which is surely the central purpose of all universities.

The system has a guidebook, which has no official status, though it is usually a national government Minister who announces the guidebook's 'University of the Year' award. This is the *Good Universities Guide*, published annually. It purports to be authoritative, but isn't, and couldn't be. Its two editors use official statistics where they are available, and their own judgments where they are not. Given that the system has nearly 40 universities on more than 120 campuses containing 700,000 students, it is simply impossible for two people to provide accurate data and guidance without an army of assistants, which they do not possess. To visit all the campuses regularly is similarly impossible.

What damns the *GUG* for most critics is its use of rank ordering: its top universities in this category or that category have five stars, the next four, then three and so on. Every statistics student is urged to avoid rank ordering wherever possible, because the ranks have no intrinsic value. Why five? Why not six? How far away from rank five is rank four? And so on. The data themselves are often rubbery, and grouping them into quintiles adds a specious precision to them.

The editors use 'prestige' as a criterion, but do not explain how their judgments are arrived at. If 'difficulty of entry' is part of the judgment, then it has to be said that some of the older universities are quite easy to get into and some of the newer universities rather more difficult. Moreover, apparent entrance levels into universities can disguise what actually happens. Altogether, the *Good Universities Guide* is much better at description (does University X teach physiotherapy?) than it is at measuring (how well is physiotherapy taught there?). It is useful, but not reliable.

In my own judgment Australian universities are remarkably similar in their appearance, their quality and what they offer. They do, after all, send their own graduates to each other for postgraduate study, hire one another's graduates as academic staff, receive much the same funding for what they do, and aspire to the same goals. You can be confident that you will receive a good education in any of them.

How do Australian universities compare with those in the USA and the UK?

I have lived and worked in both the USA and the UK, and visit universities in both countries regularly. The first thing to be said is that each system is built first and foremost on the need to educate students of its own country, and on an understanding of the preparation those students will have received in secondary school. UK universities have been able to rely for a long time on relatively high-quality preparation of students intending to enter university, while US universities have to deal with students who will have had a great variety in the quality of their secondary education. Australia lies between the two.

The best Australian graduates enter postgraduate education in either the UK or the USA with ease and emerge with distinction. The Australian professions are the intended career of the great majority of Australian graduates. So far as it is possible to make these generalisations, the quality of Australian teachers, designers, doctors, architects, nurses, teachers, accountants, and so on, seems to be at least comparable to the quality of these professionals anywhere else in the world. Since universities and university education are the source of these professionals, it follows that they must be doing a decent job.

American universities appear to have more money than those in either the UK or Australia, but two things need to be said about that sort of difference. The first is that money differences of this kind do not reflect straightforward differences in quality; if it were so, then Swiss universities would be better than American ones. The second is that costs of living and patterns of expenditures are different in all societies. American universities spend what would seem to Australian or British universities very large amounts on sport. And American universities often have large police forces, which have no counterparts in Britain or Australia.

What you will find in the universities of all societies at this time (and I have heard the same plaint in Harvard and other well-funded private universities in the USA) is that there just isn't enough money available to allow people to do the things that they would really like to do. Technological change, the rapid shift in the demands on the university systems of all countries and the lowered status of academics in the West as university education becomes something attainable by all — all these factors have led to concerns within the universities of the world.

At the undergraduate level Australian universities offer much the same kind of education, in terms of quality and aspiration, that you would get in an American state university or one of the modern British universities. None of them is like Oxford or Harvard. They are much more self-consciously democratic and egalitarian. At the postgraduate level, the key question is what sort of research field the intending student wishes to enter. I say something about that at the end.

Australian universities are excellent value for money at the moment because of the relative cheapness of the Australian dollar. But it is worth remembering that they would offer great value whatever the cost of the dollar. Our country has had a high-quality university system, in world terms, since the 1950s, and its graduates have helped to build a progressive, civilised, tolerant society that is a good example of what is achievable by human beings.

A Quick Guide to Choice

What follows is an attempt to make things easy for those who need help in making a choice. Let's start with those at the undergraduate level. Most students from overseas want to graduate with skills in business, information technology and related fields. Since there are no bad Australian universities (*The Good Universities Guide* is indeed a guide to good universities!), choose the city in which you would wish to live, and then within the city choose an appropriate university. All have courses in these fields. Tuition costs are not very different from one university to another.

Find out about accommodation, the availability of part-time work, access to help with study skills and to help with English. All universities will have information about these areas. Use your own networks, and those of friends and teachers, to learn whatever you can about the universities you are considering as options.

For those wanting to undertake postgraduate courses in the fields of business and information technology the advice is much the same. I would suggest that intending students who wish to study first at the undergraduate level and then at the postgraduate level should go to different universities, in order to get the benefits that come from study in different universities.

For those wanting to undertake a PhD the simplest advice is that if your field of study is one of the traditional fields (physics, history) then the older universities are probably better, since they have larger research undertakings and more equipment and staff. If your field is one of the newer ones (ecology, mass media) you will probably find that one of the newer universities will be your home.

In either case, find the nearest Australian Education Office (a government body) or branch of the IDP (an organisation established and owned by the universities themselves) and set out what you would like to do. Their job is to give you good advice.

And enjoy our universities and our country. We value you not just because our business is education but because in the long run an educated world is a safer and more civilised world. Let us build it together.