

African academics say parameters favour European higher institutions of learning

Dons split over university ranking

By Jeff Andrew Lule

Dons from several universities across Africa have questioned the authenticity of international university rankings, arguing that African higher institutions of learning are always underrated. In a public forum on higher education at Makerere University, last week, the academicians said the methodologies and indicators used in the rankings only favour universities in the developed world.

The forum that attracted professors from universities in Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, among others, dwelt on the topic: "Ranking and internalising in higher education-new developments and implications for African Universities."

Are rankings important?

Rankings have become significant in putting universities in the spotlight. University rankings help parents, local and international students to identify higher institutions of learning that are suitable for them globally.

Experts say that these rankings are so important in shaping the opinions of current and potential students, parents, employers and government about the quality of education in higher institutions of learning.

Major rankers

Webometrics rankings and Times Higher Education are the major ranking agencies.

The Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, also known as Ranking Web of Universities, is a ranking system based on a composite indicator that takes into account both the volume of the Web contents (number of web pages and files) and the visibility and impact of the web publications, according to the number of external inlinks (site citations) they received.

The ranking, according to their site, is published by the Cybermetrics Lab, a research group of the Spanish National Research Council in Madrid.

They argue that they rank the universities to improve the presence of the academic and research institutions on the web and to promote the open access publication of scientific results. The ranking started in 2004 and is updated every January and July.

Currently, it provides web indicators for more than 12,000 universities worldwide.

There is also the Times Higher Education ranking. Their argument for rankings is that, "It brings great insights into the strengths and shifting fortunes of individual research-led universities."

Their editor, Phil Baty, in a statement, notes that, "We assess universities' performance with the most comprehensive and balanced ranking in the world, using 13 performance indicators covering their entire key missions (teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook)."

Do the parameters disadvantage African universities, really?

The agencies responsible for ranking



Achanaga (left) talking to the director of quality assurance at Makerere University Dr Vincent Ssembatya during the public forum on higher education on Wednesday last week. Photo by Mary Kansiime

We can have our own parameters and rankings right from national, regional to continental level, but we should also stay within the international rankings.

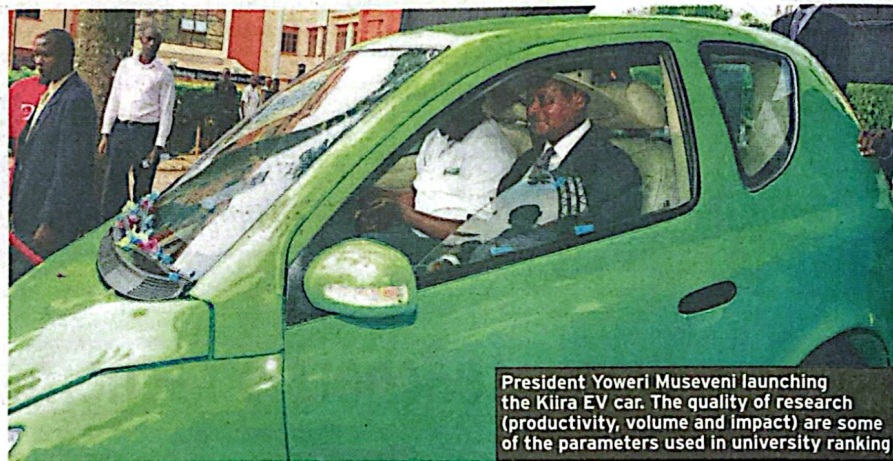
the universities consider several factors. These include: the quality of research (productivity, volume and impact), reputation of the university (through opinion gathering from alumni, field experts and employers), teaching and learning environment (number of doctorate ratio and awarded doctorates), knowledge transfer and international image.

However, several dons at the meeting called for a review of the methodology used arguing that the methodologies favour the universities in the West.

African dons debate rankings

Prof. Betty Ezati, the dean School of Education at Makerere University, noted that the rankings have both negative and positive impacts on the universities.

On the positive side, she says, "These rankings are important in



President Yoweri Museveni launching the Kiira EV car. The quality of research (productivity, volume and impact) are some of the parameters used in university ranking

influencing policy makers in the specific countries, increases the collaborations and networks for universities, change in management levels and fuel research excellence, among others."

Some dons also agree with her, that the rankings are good. Prof. Gratien Atindogbe from the University of Bura in Cameroon noted that international rankings are important to know how all universities perform irrespective of how it is done to allow competition.

"We can have our own parameters and rankings right from national, regional and continental level, but we should also stay within the international rankings. Standards are standards; if we try to run away then we will never develop because this is global world of knowledge and we cannot stand on our own," he added.

Melesse Abera from Hawassa University in Ethiopia, also notes that, we should not just ignore the rankings, but have Africa set

her own parameters to define her indexes alongside the international parameters.

The deputy principal of College of Education and External Studies at Makerere University, Dr Paul Muyinda, also asks all African universities to create their own methodologies to influence the entire world.

"Let us work on our challenges which are blocking us from accessing the international arena. We can do better for the world to know who we are without quitting," he noted.

Disagreements on rankings

Ezati, however, expressed her reservations on the rankings that they can also mislead the world, especially scholars and undergraduates while making choices.

"We do not know the methodology they use and what comparisons they make and the choice of indicators used. They even do not consider the missions of these universities."

EXPERT VIEW

Ritesh Prof. Dr Frank Ziegele, the executive director of Centre for Higher Education, argues that there is no such thing as the best university in world because the missions and indicators are always different.

"These rankings should look at the improvement in teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, knowledge engagement, international orientation, regional orientation and national among others. You can't tell me that one university can beat all others in everything. That is why we started this ranking system."

