English is excellence

Are university rankings like an iron cage that leaves no option but to submit to its logic?

“Using English is the sign of a great mind. Discuss.” Sounds like an absurdly bigoted essay topic? While I’ve made up the topic and while most readers will baulk at such an explicit association of English with academic excellence, most of us have come to accept precisely this equation, even if implicitly. I’m talking about global university rankings.

Over the past decade, university rankings have become incredibly influential. Inside and outside the academy, university rankings undergird policy frameworks and funding allocations. Even if people disagree about this or that form of measurement, the idea that university performance should be measured and ranked is now firmly entrenched. The result is universalized academic competition and the belief that university rankings are meaningful and should guide educational, social and economic policies.

English has become one of the central terrains where competition plays out. Rankings quantify academic performance on the basis of four criteria, which are differently measured and weighted in different rankings: research and publications; learning environment; reputation; and internationalization. As Piller and Cho (2013) demonstrate, except for learning environment, each of these criteria serves to promote English in covert ways despite the fact that each criterion is ostensibly language-neutral.

Research and publications usually privileges English because English-language journals and publishers are more highly ranked, more prestigious and “more international.” Accepting that achieving global impact is the most meaningful form of knowledge production means publishing in English.

Reputation is the most controversial criterion and measured in different ways but obviously linked to all kinds of assumptions. If it is measured, as in one Korean ranking, by asking the HR departments of multinational corporations from which Korean universities they would like to hire graduates, the link with English is not particularly subtle. Graduates who are planning to pursue careers in local or national organizations are not even considered as potential bearers of “reputation.”

Finally, the internationalization criterion strongly favours universities where English is the medium of instruction. It puts pressure on non-English-speaking universities to switch to English as a medium of instruction in order to improve their standing in the rankings. Furthermore, other indices of internationalization such as the percentage of international faculty or international students all act as drivers towards increasing the number of classes taught through the medium of English.

In sum, it is obvious that university rankings operate in a way that privileges English and – implicitly – creates a connection between English and excellence. To accept university rankings as drivers of policy is to accept that English means excellence.

University rankings are often touted as a means to hold universities accountable to the public: an institution’s standing in the rankings is a clear indicator of what they are doing with their funding and how they are
contributing to the common good, or so the reasoning goes. By contrast, the purveyors of rankings are not accountable to anyone and no consensus as to whether English should be considered as a measurement of academic excellence has ever been sought or emerged. In fact, the equation continues to be hidden precisely because no such consensus exists and is unlikely to emerge.

Instead, university rankings institutionalize the equation between English and excellence de facto.

Max Weber (cited in Erkkiä, 2013) compares modern institutional practices of book-keeping, accounting and performance statistics – of which university rankings are a prime example – to an “iron cage,” which leaves no option but to submit to its logic. Submission limits the realms of democracy and ethics and makes alternatives disappear.

How long before we cannot even imagine an alternative to the incipient fact that English is excellence?


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