

THE RANKING INFLUENCERS

How academics and employers determine the best universities

Report 1

Executive Summary

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The World 100 Reputation Network

MANAGING THE REPUTATIONS OF THE WORLD'S LEADING UNIVERSITIES

www.theworld100.com

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BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Academics and universities know that data matters when it comes to world university rankings.

As a result, tremendous effort goes into getting research in the right journals and maximizing citations. However, what is sometimes forgotten is that the biggest indicator of ranking is reputation, i.e. the opinion of published scholars and employers.

This actually forms a third of the final THE score and half of the QS score.

Thousands of academics and employers from across the globe determine which universities are the best in their fields. How do they make their choices?

OBJECTIVES

We set out to explore the following questions:

- ✦ What influences academics, professional staff and employers to consider their nominated universities to be the absolute best of a world-class elite group?
- ✦ How readily could their perceptions be altered year to year?
- ✦ And ultimately, what can those in charge of universities' reputation management do to put their institutions in the spotlight for these audiences?

METHODOLOGY

We employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods as follows:

GLOBAL ONLINE SURVEY OF ACADEMIC FACULTY AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF WORKING AT TOP UNIVERSITIES

Although academic faculty were the main audience of interest for this project, we opened our online survey up to professional staff – those with and without an academic background – as we learned from some ranking publishers (QS and USNWR/Clarivate) that these staff are invited to complete reputation surveys that contribute to global rankings.

W100 member universities, and other top ranked institutions, were encouraged to disseminate and promote the survey internally. We also enlisted the support of Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science database to further reach a global sample of academics in top universities.

We would like to thank the 103 universities, and their faculty/staff, across 30 countries that contributed to this research by way of facilitation, interview or survey completion. A full list of participating institutions can be found in the Detailed Research Findings report.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS WITH ACADEMIC FACULTY AT GLOBAL UNIVERSITIES

Our survey was complemented by one-to-one depth interviews with faculty working at leading institutions across the world. This allowed us to explore in more detail some of the issues covered by the survey and expand the scope of the research beyond the limitations of survey data.

Interviews were primarily undertaken in-person on campus, with a small number conducted by telephone. 12 institutions in North America, the UK, Europe, Asia and Australasia were host to our researchers or facilitated telephone interviews:

University of Helsinki, Finland
Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland
University of Alberta, Canada
University of Michigan, USA
University of Manchester, England
St Andrews University, Scotland
University of Navarra, Spain
University of Mannheim, Germany
University of Bayreuth, Germany
University of Vienna, Austria
University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
University of Sydney, Australia

GLOBAL ONLINE SURVEY OF EMPLOYERS

Using an international panel provider, we were able to reach a large number of employers. Survey respondents were representatives of organisations that routinely recruit to positions that require a university education and with personal involvement in the hiring or management of these staff or in a role which involves other engagement with universities.

The sample was targeted to broadly reflect the countries and geographical regions represented by the world's top 200 universities.

PROJECT REPORTING

- ❖ **Report 1 – Executive Summary**
- ❖ Report 2 – Detailed Research Findings (access restricted to W100 Research Members)

The above reports are stored in the Research Library within the Members' Area of the W100 website.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

We surveyed more than 800 faculty and professional staff of 69 different nationalities, working in 95 universities across 31 different countries as part of this report, and 486 global employers. We also interviewed 62 academic faculty working at 12 leading universities on a one-to-one basis, to get a more in-depth picture of what influences academics.

Academic attitudes to rankings and ranking survey

While many academics see the rankings as fundamentally flawed and some were suspicious that universities may be gaming the rankings, the rankings are the first place most go to get a feel for a university's reputation or see how their own institution is performing.

How academics vote for other universities

Academics nominate around 15 universities for QS and THE surveys; and six for Clarivate, which manages the reputation survey for the US News & World Report ranking. Employers nominate slightly fewer for each survey. Academics in interviews explained that they can easily nominate five universities who they know well and then tend to name big brands, often looking back at last year's ranking for the final 10 or so they are allowed to vote for. Their nominations are largely based on research not teaching. Both groups have little understanding of who is teaching students well.

Main influence factors

We heard repeatedly about how important personal connections are for establishing the reputation of the university, and academics cited collaborative research projects, visiting universities, attending conferences and receiving visiting academics from other universities.

Corporate influence

Academics do not see themselves as having responsibility for promoting their university at institutional level, despite the fact that they nominate universities in rankings based on the academics they meet. They do believe their job is to promote their research, however, and they do this very well.

The paradox of media influence

Academics claim to be largely uninfluenced by the media, but many cited news and online media as how they had heard of universities that had impressed them. As well as being very aware of research breakthroughs in the media, institutional policies, practices and developments in the media about universities also caught their attention.

Social media: the generational divide

Employers think social media is more important than academics do. Most interviewed academics declared themselves as non-social media users. However, many could see how social media *could* be very influential as a way of learning about what is going on at other institutions. Younger faculty were more likely to have embraced social media but this was not a primary resource for keeping up with trends and developments in their fields.

Academic engagement and co-ordinated influence

The majority of academics we interviewed thought their organisation should have a strategy for rising in the rankings, but only a handful knew or believed their organisation had one.

MORE INFORMATION

FULL RESEARCH ACCESS

2016/17 Research Members of the World 100 Reputation Network have full access to all the findings from this research (and projects for any year with Research level membership). Visit the [Members' Area](#) to download the files or email research@theworld100.com.

If you are not yet a member of the Network, or you have 2016/17 Discover Membership, but are interested in reading more of the detailed findings for this project you can purchase full access to this research – contact research@theworld100.com for more information.

The full report covers the following:

- ✦ Detailed findings including conclusions and recommendations
- ✦ Understanding the ranking surveys
- ✦ How much does reputation matter?
- ✦ Hallmarks of strong university reputations
- ✦ The importance of individuals
- ✦ The best universities
- ✦ Use of world rankings
- ✦ Reputation surveys in world rankings
- ✦ Catching attention
- ✦ Who influences the influencers?
- ✦ Ranking influence and gaming
- ✦ Current practice

Please contact research@theworld100.com for more information.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE NETWORK AND OUR ANNUAL RESEARCH

The World 100 Reputation Network is a group of the world's most prestigious universities undertaking research that enhances reputation management, international relations and strategy.

The Network connects senior directors responsible for reputation in world-class institutions. It is the only professional network for directors of communications, marketing and international. Although global in outlook the Network offers members the opportunity to become part of 'local' community existing to share good practice, transfer knowledge and overcome common challenges.

Each year the Network undertakes at least one major topical piece of research. The annual research project for 2017/18 is *Brand Snapshot: Measuring online brand strength in world-class universities*.

Full details of the Network, membership rates and benefits, research projects, events and more can be found at www.theworld100.com or by contacting Sarah Thomas (sarah.thomas@theworld100.com)

Other research by the World 100 Reputation Network

- ✦ Website best practice for world-class universities
- ✦ Structures, strategies and resources for reputational advancement
- ✦ Rise and Fall: Managing reputation associated with significant world ranking change
 - ✦ Internal communications and staff engagement in world-class universities
- ✦ How international PhD students choose top universities and interpret reputation and rankings
 - ✦ Choice factors in international Academic job change
 - ✦ The R-Word: Communicating research at world-class universities
- ✦ The Ranking Influencers: How academics and employers determine the best universities