CESAER

The strong and united voice of universities
of science and technology in Europe

Times Higher Education
Mr Phil Baty
26 Red Lion Square
LONDON WC1R 4HQ
UNITED KINGDOM

CONCERNS: Input from universities of S&T on THE World University Ranking 3.0

DATE: 8th May 2020

Dear Mr Baty

With this letter, the leading universities of science and technology united within CESAER welcome the new development of the THE World University Ranking (WUR) 3.0. Herewith, I provide you and your colleagues at THE with input from our network, intended to help ensure that the ranking approach of THE evolves with a focus on fairness and transparency. I confirm the continued commitment of our Members and association to supporting you in the development of this ranking.

Through our Task Force Benchmark - with which THE has been collaborating for some years notably via Duncan Ross - we are also willing to act as test pilots for any questions you might have. The experts from our Task Force Benchmark, representing a wide range of institutions, have discussed the WUR in some detail and prepared feedback and recommendations on some specific areas for your consideration in refining plans for WUR 3.0, as follows:

Citations

We support previously stated proposals to separate this indicator into two, or three indicators. Reasonably reliable potential indicators include 'share of publications that are among the top 10% most cited articles in the subject field`, and FWCI. However, if using FWCI, the credibility of results is critically dependent on the adoption of an appropriate methodology. The current approach is not robust and this is significantly impacting the reputation of the current overall ranking; we would therefore strongly suggest that this is reviewed as part of developing WUR 3.0.

THE's current approach to 'country normalisation' is not transparent and produces strange and highly questionable results. We encourage the adoption of a 'pure' FWCI indicator, without any country normalisation, in combination with other complementary citation measures.

To further ensure fairness and integrity of the results, the approach taken should create as few incentives as possible to try to manipulate any metrics. In this context, we consider it critical to use data without author self-citations. With increased emphasis on rankings within institutions, governments and other agencies including those which fund universities, the way THE chooses to construct the ranking and measure performance can affect the behaviour of researchers and universities, and it is essential to avoid influencing behaviour in a negative way. Moreover, an even more important argument against author self-citations is that skilled bibliometricians are clear that including self-citations in a citation index favours universities with dominance of certain research fields over universities with certain other compositions of research fields. We would suggest, in line with advice of bibliometric experts, that the fairest way to calculate citations, when it comes to comparing universities of all kinds, is to use fractional counting of data without author self-citations. Overall, we strongly suggest consultation with professional bibliometricians in the design of changes to the citations section of the ranking.

Surveys

There are a number of challenges with surveys, as acknowledged by THE and other ranking compilers who depend on data gathered through this mechanism. To give just one example, the response frequency is low, notably now impacted by data protection legislation affecting respondent's willingness to complete surveys, alongside other drivers of reduced participation in data provision. In addition, the number of answers varies over time between countries and between subject areas. We acknowledge the use of normalisations; however normalising small values raises questions about reliability: for most universities the number of actual votes is small - too small to be statistically reliable. For universities with very small numbers of votes, our view is that this indicator should not be used.

If there is an ongoing wish to include results from a survey as part of the WUR, we suggest reducing the percentage of the survey to as low as possible. We also encourage THE to continue to work on the phrasing and construction of the questions, to ensure respondents give full consideration and use broad judgement and knowledge of an institution prior to nominating, rather than relying on overall institutional reputation and standing which tends to reinforce preconceptions. It is only with informed knowledge that respondents can make a meaningful judgement as to whether a particular institution is a leading university in a certain field.

Furthermore, and continuing the theme of ensuring fairness, we strongly recommend that the survey is adapted to prevent the possibility for respondents to vote for the university to which they are affiliated at present, noting the principle that peer-review is, by definition, never of one's own university. This would also remove any incentive for staff to be encouraged to always vote for their own university and for a few others, which has been reported to occur and may have been detected by THE.

Finally, we would question whether it makes sense to have both a teaching and a research part in the reputation survey? It is extremely difficult for anyone to have a clear picture of the teaching quality of another university unless they have been recently active at that university.

In summary, if a qualitative survey-based element to the ranking is retained, we suggest that just one survey parameter is used: 'university reputation', with self-nominations prevented, and with a reduced weighting.

Subject normalisation

The current method of subject normalisation for the overall ranking would benefit from review with a view to also making the subject ranking more reliable. Today, THE compares the number of publications in a subject (based on the journal in which the research is published) with the number of staff reported by the university in the same subject. However, most universities report academic staff based on their internal organisation, but researchers do not choose journals based on where they sit in the university organisation and they can publish in many subjects. Furthermore, universities that do not cover all different subjects' risk that some publications are not counted if they publish many in subjects they do not have in their organisation. This is an issue for a number of universities of science and technology. To ensure fairness, we would advise that all publications from a university should be counted in a metric such as ´number of publications per academic staff´. We would suggest that THE considers ways to normalise ´by subject´ in a way that provides more evidence about real achievements in a subject.

Industry collaboration

Our Members collaborate intensely with business and industry. Yet, we herewith flag some concerns with the current income-focused indicator. For example, the interpretations around the income which should be counted and that which should not could be questioned. If a university gets partial public funding for a collaboration project, provided an industrial partner gives the same amount of money to the university, is it clear how much of the total should then be considered as relating to the industrial collaboration? In addition, there are always issues with fairly comparing income across different countries, even with public-private partnership.

An alternative could be to use ´share of total publications that are co-published with industry´ to get a fairly good metric for ´industry collaboration´ and this approach could be extended through the use of FWCI for the co-published outputs, if THE wishes to further rank the impact of the research.

It would be ideal if THE could find a way also to measure the collaboration with other non-academic partners as well, to better describe the full picture of collaboration patterns of universities.

Supportiveness and openness

Since THE advocates that universities should use its rankings and data to analyse their own performance, the ranking analysts must be able to trust that any change in a metric genuinely depends on how the university performs, and is not simply the result of unannounced changes in methodology or a new way of scoring, or something else. Several of our Members have reported a current lack of communication about ´minor´ changes and we do encourage THE to be open and transparent whenever there is a change to methodology.

We suggest a separate methodology web page for experts, where we can find a methodology description in detail, where all changes in methodology are revealed yearly, including ´minor´ changes and where the complete ranking tables with the results in all indicators (presented on the web) are free to download in Excel format. This would save much work for the universities participating in the THE rankings. Along this line we also encourage THE to explore possibilities to reduce the burden associated with data submission, e.g. by enabling api provision of data.

WUR 3.0 provides an excellent opportunity for THE to demonstrate how serious, open and supportive it is to the universities that are ranked and whose data underpins not just the rankings but also some of THE's products.

If you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact my Secretary General David Bohmert at david.bohmert@cesaer.org.

Awaiting your notification on our considerations presented in this letter, we look forward to continuing our cooperation with THE and to improve the WUR 3.0. We offer to provide detailed expert reflections on any parts of your new ranking.

Sincerely

Rik Van de Walle
President of CESAER