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# Towards an Ethically Situated Perspective on University Rankings

**Abstract**

This piece of *Briefly Speaking* critically examines university rankings in the context of South African higher education drawing on democratic praxis, global citizenship education, and a living African philosophy of higher education. The analysis demonstrates that dominant ranking systems overwhelmingly entrench hierarchical competition. Because their indicators are closely tied to material advantage such as research infrastructure, funding, English-language publishing, and international visibility, rankings reward historically well-resourced universities while seemingly marginalising institutions oriented towards access, redress, regional development, and undergraduate teaching excellence. It also reveals that the ranking metrics are structurally misaligned with South Africa's constitutional and policy commitments to equity, access, justice, and redress. They remain largely indifferent to racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic inclusion, and they do not recognise the public-good labour required to support first-generation and working-class students. Instead, rankings incentivise institutions to prioritise reputation, research income, and international visibility, thereby distorting institutional behaviour and reinforcing a stratified higher education system. The *Briefly Speaking* further contends that rankings tend to erode academic freedom and the public good by legitimising managerialism, performativity, and audit cultures. Academic judgement is displaced by metrics, intellectual risk-taking is discouraged, and socially responsive teaching-learning and research are marginalised. As a result, the university's democratic vocation to cultivate critically conscious citizens capable of public reasoning and ethical responsibility is weakened. On the other hand, it acknowledges that rankings may offer conditional benefits, including international visibility, strategic focus, and access to funding or partnerships. However, these benefits accrue disproportionately to elite institutions unless rankings are carefully mediated by context-sensitive and justice-oriented frameworks. The *Briefly Speaking* also proposes and advances a 'third way' of university evaluation: an ethical developmental approach to evaluation grounded in democratic engagement, *Ubuntu*, public accountability, and long-term sustainability. This framework proposes that universities be evaluated not by competitive global standing, but by their ethical and developmental contribution to society, namely, how they advance social justice, expand meaningful participation, sustain epistemic diversity, and contribute to democratic life and sustainable futures.

**Keywords:** Developmental, ethical, philosophy, third way, *Ubuntu*, university rankings

## Introduction

South African higher education finds itself at a critical juncture. Higher education institutions are called upon simultaneously to widen access, redress historical injustices, transform curricula and knowledge systems, and respond to pressing global challenges such as democratic erosion, economic precarity, ecological crisis, and rising social fragmentation. These demands resonate strongly with the aims of global citizenship education, which emphasises critical agency, relational responsibility, deliberation across difference, and commitment to the public good (Bosio and Waghid, 2023). Yet these educational aims increasingly sit uneasily alongside global pressures toward competition, performativity, and market-oriented governance.

Within this context, university rankings have become a powerful global indicator shaping institutional identity, strategic direction, and resource mobilisation. Rankings promise international visibility and comparative benchmarking, and they are often justified as mechanisms for improving quality and accountability. However, when viewed through the lens of global citizenship education, a fundamental tension emerges. Rankings tend to prioritise measurable outputs such as research volume, citation impact, and international reputation over pedagogical practices that cultivate critical global awareness, ethical responsibility, and democratic engagement. As a result, what counts as institutional success is often disconnected from what it means to educate graduates capable of thinking critically about injustice, inequality, and shared global futures.

Accordingly, this piece of *Briefly Speaking* seeks to examine university rankings in relation to the ethical and pedagogical demands of global citizenship education. It articulates arguments both in defence of and against rankings, recognising that they may offer conditional benefits such as visibility, strategic focus, and international collaboration. At the same time, it interrogates whether rankings support or undermine the cultivation of democratic and globally responsible citizens. It expresses concern about how rankings influence the kind of citizens that the South African universities seek to cultivate in an interconnected yet persistently unequal world. The *Briefly Speaking* also advances an alternative '*third way*': an ethical developmental approach to evaluation grounded in democratic participation, *Ubuntu*, public accountability, and sustainable futures. Such an approach seeks to realign institutional evaluation with the core educational task of universities in South Africa, namely, to educate critically conscious citizens capable of contributing to a more just, democratic, and globally responsible society.

## University Rankings in Context

University rankings have emerged as an increasingly influential feature of the global higher education landscape, shaping institutional reputation, policy priorities, and strategic planning. In South Africa, public universities are increasingly (re)positioned and evaluated through global

ranking systems, most notably the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, the QS World University Rankings, the Centre for World University Rankings (CWUR), and the Scrimmage Institutions Rankings. While these systems differ in methodology and emphasis, collectively they play a significant role in framing how South African institutions are perceived both nationally and internationally. According to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, universities are assessed across five broad dimensions, namely, teaching, research environment, research quality (including citation impact), international outlook, and industry income (THE, 2024).

In the South African context, this methodology strongly favours historically research-intensive institutions with substantial postgraduate enrolments, established publication records, and international research networks. As a result, research-intensive universities consistently outperform other public universities in THE rankings. It is worth recognising that, within the THE ranking system, judgements about teaching quality are derived largely from reputational surveys and research-related indicators, rather than from any substantive engagement with pedagogical practices or the lived learning experiences of students, and the lived teaching experiences of academics (THE, 2024). In such a context, what is most visible is research productivity, not necessarily the cultivation of thoughtful, caring, and responsive teaching. Accordingly, universities whose missions are anchored in teaching and the development of students as reflective and responsible human beings may find that their strengths are not fully acknowledged. Their contributions to the public good of education risk being obscured by a system that privileges research visibility over pedagogical excellence.

Similarly, the QS World University Rankings place considerable emphasis on academic and employer reputation, which together account for nearly half of the total score (QS, 2024). These reputational indicators are derived from large-scale global surveys and tend to reinforce existing hierarchies within higher education. For South African universities, this means that long-established, urban, and internationally visible institutions continue to dominate rankings, while newer or more regionally oriented universities struggle to gain recognition despite their social and educational contributions. QS also incorporates measures of internationalisation, such as international staff and student ratios, which further disadvantage institutions operating within predominantly local or national mandates.

The CWUR positions itself as a more objective ranking system by excluding reputation surveys altogether. Instead, CWUR relies on indicators such as alumni success, faculty awards, and research output and impact (CWUR, 2024). While this approach appears methodologically neutral, it nonetheless embeds global inequalities, particularly for universities in the Global South. South African institutions are disadvantaged by limited representation of alumni in elite global awards, and constrained access to international labour markets. As a result, even the country's well-resourced universities tend to appear significantly lower in CWUR than in QS or THE rankings.

The SCImago Institutions Rankings adopt a different orientation by focusing primarily on

bibliometric indicators derived from the Scopus database, alongside measures of innovation and web visibility (SCImago, 2024). In this system, universities with high publication volumes and strong citation performance tend to fare well, sometimes outperforming their positions in reputation-based rankings. For South African universities, this has enabled institutions such as the University of Johannesburg and the University of Pretoria to improve their international standing. However, SCImago, like other global rankings, largely excludes teaching quality, curriculum relevance, and social engagement from its evaluative framework.

A discernible pattern emerges across the global university ranking systems, and this pattern is that South African public universities that most closely approximate the dominant global research-intensive model tend to perform well, whereas those whose missions emphasise widening access, teaching excellence, community engagement, or regional development, are relegated to the margins. Rankings, therefore, do not operate as neutral or comprehensive measures of institutional quality; rather, they reflect value commitments that privilege research productivity, international visibility, and global prestige over the democratic and developmental purposes of higher education (Hazelkorn, 2015). Such a structural privileging of the global research-university model carries profound implications for South African higher education. Rankings obscure the historical and structural inequalities that continue to shape institutional capacity, including disparities in funding, infrastructure, and academic staffing, and they fail to recognise national policy imperatives such as redress, transformation, democratic governance, and responsiveness to local and continental needs. An uncritical reliance on global rankings thus risks narrowing the purpose of the university to what is measurable within Euro-American knowledge economies, rather than what is socially and democratically necessary in post-apartheid South Africa (Marginson, 2016; Waghid, 2014). For these reasons, rankings are better regarded as context-specific diagnostic tools than as definitive indicators of excellence. While they may offer insights into research visibility and opportunities for international benchmarking, they should neither displace nationally grounded quality assurance processes such as those of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), nor define institutional identity or purpose. In the South African context, what is required is a critical and reflexive engagement with rankings: one that recognises their strategic utility while resisting their tendency to reproduce global hierarchies and marginalise locally meaningful forms of educational value. The latter refers to locally meaningful contributions of higher education to democratic life in South Africa such as widening access, advancing social justice, nurturing responsible and caring graduates, and sustaining community-engaged knowledge practices, many of which fall outside the narrow research-visibility indicators privileged by global rankings.

## A Democratic and Pedagogical Critique of University Rankings

The democratic and pedagogical critique of university rankings goes beyond a utilitarian assessment of university rankings. It rather includes an interrogation of university rankings as a practice of power within knowledge systems. It applies

principles of democratic praxis to consider whether university rankings promote inclusive participation in knowledge production or entrench hierarchical competition; how university ranking metrics correspond or fail to correspond to South African imperatives of equity, access, justice, and redress; and whether university rankings enhance public good and academic freedom or consolidate managerialism and performativity at the expense of intellectual integrity. From this vantage point, university rankings are not neutral but politically and epistemically consequential, requiring careful scrutiny. They entrench hierarchical competition; distract attention from the South African imperatives of equity, access, justice, and redress; and consolidate managerialism and performativity. These three effects are discussed in the ensuing subsections.

***Entrenching hierarchical competition***

University rankings overwhelmingly intensify hierarchical competition because they are built on performance indicators that correlate directly with institutional material advantage in which organisations, people, or institutions are ranked in a vertical order — from 'best' to 'worst' — and then compete to climb higher within that hierarchy. As Hazelkorn (2015) argues, the very architecture of university rankings privileges institutions with the financial and infrastructural capacity to generate large volumes of research outputs, secure high-impact publications, and internationalise aggressively. This produces a self-reinforcing loop: the universities that already possess strong research cultures, doctoral throughputs, and grant-funded units are the ones most capable of producing the publication and citation metrics against which global performance is evaluated (Hazelkorn, 2018). Rather than functioning as neutral evaluative tools, rankings operate as reputational technologies that privilege institutions already situated within global citation networks, particularly Anglophone universities whose academic labour circulates through commercially indexed journals (Stack, 2021). When transposed into the South African context, this privileging effect reproduces older hierarchies: the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2024) notes that universities historically advantaged under apartheid are better positioned to meet ranking metrics because they retain greater staff capacity, postgraduate depth, and international connectivity. By contrast, universities focused on expanding local access, redress, regional development, or undergraduate teaching excellence gain little symbolic benefit because such equity-oriented 'epistemological labour', seems largely invisible to ranking methodologies. In effect, rankings do not just reflect inequality, but worsen it because they treat access to funds, staff, and research infrastructure as proof of excellence. That is, they turn existing privilege into a measure of institutional success.

In addition, instead of widening participation, rankings discipline knowledge production through narrow epistemic norms. Their preferred measures of 'excellence' hinge on publication in Euro-American journals, English-language citation databases, and internationally visible research networks, which collectively define what counts as legitimate scholarship (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2014). As Stack (2021) notes, this creates a global politics of visibility in which scholars and institutions must orient their work toward market-recognised

outlets rather than local intellectual needs. The effect is to reward research systems capable of scale such as high publication volume, extensive citation circulation, and international partnerships, while rendering context-specific, community-engaged, or socially redistributive scholarship effectively invisible (Santos, 2014; Teichler, 2011). Evidence from African publishing circuits confirms that such metrics systematically disadvantage research in African languages or epistemic traditions and limit the academic standing of locally grounded work (Collyer, 2016). In this way, rankings act less as instruments of inclusion than as technologies of epistemic convergence, narrowing the range of knowledges that universities are encouraged or permitted to pursue.

Instead of supporting African intellectual plurality, rankings work to homogenise scholarship around a narrow set of market-approved standards. As Hazelkorn (2015) and Marginson (2016) show, the dominant indicators used in rankings assume that the highest academic value lies in globally competitive research output, citation visibility, and international branding, that is, criteria that pressure universities to emulate Euro-American institutional models. Stack (2021) demonstrates that this market rationality pushes academic work toward forms that generate reputational capital rather than social responsiveness, discouraging scholarship rooted in place, history, or community need. These pressures have particularly damaging effects in African contexts. Santos (2014) argues that global academic standards enact 'epistemicide', displacing Southern modes of knowledge with Northern validation systems. Nyamnjoh (2016) and Mbembe (2016) illustrate how African universities are drawn into a cycle of mimicry, where Euro-American norms of theory, method, and language become the only viable currency of academic legitimacy. As Bamgbose (2011) shows, this includes the marginalisation of African languages as recognised vehicles of scholarly communication thus undermining linguistic diversity and excluding publics for whom universities are purported to serve. The result is a narrowing of the African continent's intellectual horizons: research that is community-embedded, locally relevant, multilingual, or grounded in indigenous epistemologies, is routinely discounted, while conformity to external performance criteria is rewarded. In this way, rankings displace African plurality with a template of globally marketable scholarship.

In sum, university rankings do not expand participation in knowledge production, but rather, entrench hierarchy. Because their indicators are tied to funding, research infrastructure, English-language publishing, and international visibility, rankings reward institutions already positioned within well-resourced global knowledge economies. This turns historical advantage into academic 'excellence' while disadvantaging universities oriented towards access, equity, regional development, or community-centred scholarship. Rather than opening space for epistemic diversity, rankings impose narrow Euro-American norms of publication and citation, marginalising African languages, local research priorities, and indigenous epistemologies. The outcome is a system in which reputational capital substitutes for social responsibility, and African intellectual plurality is displaced by a homogenised, market-driven approach of

scholarly legitimacy. For example, a university may reward academics for publishing in commercially indexed, English-language journals to accumulate reputational capital, while locally responsive research grounded in African epistemologies receives little recognition.

***Distracting attention from the imperatives of access, equity, justice and redress***

University ranking systems are structurally misaligned with South Africa's constitutional and policy commitments to equity and redress. For instance, a university that deliberately invests in the educational flourishing of first-generation and historically marginalised students may receive little recognition in global rankings, because the metrics privilege market-oriented research visibility over the ethical work of equity, redress, and social justice. As Hazelkorn (2015) observes, global rankings are largely indifferent to issues of social inclusion as they do not measure the racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic opening of universities, nor do they recognise the public-good labour required to support first-generation or working-class students. Marginson (2014) similarly notes that ranking metrics are 'blind to inequality', because they focus on outputs rather than the social conditions under which such outputs are produced. Instead of valuing access or linguistic diversity, rankings valorise research income, international visibility, and doctoral throughput. These are indicators that disproportionately benefit historically advantaged universities with established research infrastructures and postgraduate capacity (Hazelkorn, 2018; CHE, 2024). In the South African setting, the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2024) warns that such measures risk reproducing apartheid-era privilege: institutions that inherited strong academic staffing, laboratories, and international partnerships continue to climb the rankings ladder, while universities mandated to widen participation or service rural provinces are penalised for focusing on equity rather than prestige. As Jansen (2017) and Motala, Oketch, Wangenge-Ouma and Nasutha (2023) argue, this dynamic actively distorts institutional behaviour. Rankings incentivise universities to chase elite international students, high-performing academics, and citation-rich fields rather than improving undergraduate teaching or expanding places for marginalised communities. In practice, this encourages universities to recruit socially advantaged cohorts who will bolster measurable outputs, rather than opening their doors to the students redress policies were designed to serve. The result is a contradictory system: while South African higher education policy seeks equity, access, and justice, rankings reward institutions for protecting reputation, securing research capital, and amplifying global visibility. In this way, rankings do not merely fail to advance transformation but actually risk consolidating a two-tier sector in which privilege is mistaken for excellence and democratic redress is rendered institutionally irrational.

***Consolidating managerialism and performativity***

University rankings tend to erode academic freedom by converting the university into a measurable performance machine. For example, when a university ties academic promotion and resource allocation almost exclusively to outputs that improve ranking metrics such as publication

counts in high-impact journals, academics begin to design their research around what is measurable and ranked, rather than what is intellectually or socially meaningful, thereby narrowing the space for genuine academic freedom. Recent analyses show that ranking-driven governance redefines academic activity around quantifiable outputs such as publication counts, grant income, doctoral throughput, and employability metrics, at the expense of intellectual risk-taking and critical inquiry (Stack, 2021; Espeland and Sauder, 2022). In this audit environment, academic judgement is replaced by performance indicators, and research agendas narrow toward what can be counted, cited, and monetised. This shift legitimises managerialist governance. As McCann, Granter, Hyde and Aroles (2020) demonstrate in the European context, executives increasingly deploy rankings to justify intensified monitoring, performance management, and surveillance of staff, recasting academic labour as a competitive productivity race. Marginson (2026) similarly notes that rankings provide senior managers with an external rationale for restructuring, enforcing targets, and directing resources toward prestige-generating research fields rather than socially necessary work.

The consequences for South Africa are profound. The Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2024) warns that ranking-based incentives displace the public good and intellectual freedom, encouraging universities to prioritise global visibility rather than local social responsibility or democratic transformation. Research linked to community engagement, curriculum reform, teacher development, linguistic diversity, or epistemic justice, seldom scores in ranking algorithms and is therefore increasingly marginalised (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016). The result is a culture of performativity whereby universities pursue reputational capital and global brand value rather than cultivating democratic reason, dissent, and critical thought. As Heleta (2023) implicitly argues, rankings commodify knowledge by treating scholarship as a tradable asset within a global prestige economy, narrowing academic purpose to international competition rather than national responsibility. In African universities, this reinforces dependence on Northern validation systems and weakens intellectual autonomy (Nyamnjoh, 2020). Thus, the evidence suggests that rankings do not support academic freedom. Instead, rankings instrumentalise the university, replace judgement with metrics, and erode the democratic values that public higher education is meant to serve.

## Arguments in Favour of University Rankings

When productively drawn into praxis, university rankings can offer a range of potential benefits for institutions and higher education systems. However, these benefits are often conditional and depend on careful, contextually sensitive engagement. Firstly, university rankings may possibly enhance international visibility and competitiveness. Participation in university rankings compels institutions to benchmark their performance against global peers, which help them to continuously improve on their performance, and to signal quality to prospective students, faculty, and partners (European University Association, 2023). By participating in recognised international lists, universities can

strengthen their global reputation, attract talent, and expand international research collaborations (Stack, 2021). Such visibility can be particularly valuable for universities seeking to increase cross-border partnerships or establish joint programmes.

Secondly, participation in university rankings enables institutions to identify key strategic priorities and focus their efforts pursuing those priorities. The process of collecting and analysing data for ranking exercises often prompts universities to examine performance systematically, identify strengths and weaknesses, and refine strategic priorities (European University Association, 2023). Some studies find that striving to improve ranking performance encourages institutions to modernise curricula, expand interdisciplinary research, and invest in areas such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines that tend to score well on key indicators (Edu, 2025). In contexts where national frameworks or institutional missions overlap with global indicators, rankings can help focus institutional strategy and foster innovation.

Thirdly, participation in university rankings may provide motivation for institutional improvement where indicators are contextually adapted. It can motivate universities to improve data quality and internal performance tracking, which supports better institutional decision-making. Adapted ranking metrics or supplemental measures that capture mission-specific goals can encourage growth in areas such as digital presence, research quality, transparency, and community engagement when institutions use rankings as one input among many in broader quality assurance systems (Gasmalla, Almamoun and Elsiddig, 2025). This more nuanced usage of ranking data can support institutional teaching-learning rather than uncritical competition.

Fourthly, participation in university ranking may enhance chances of attracting funding or partnership opportunities. Ranking positions are often used by funders, governments, and philanthropic organisations as proxies for institutional quality or capacity, influencing decisions on research grants, cooperative agreements, and international investment. Improved rankings can thus indirectly unlock access to financial and collaborative opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable or harder to secure, especially in global research networks (Stack, 2021). However, such benefits are often conditional: most traditional ranking systems privilege established research outputs and international visibility, meaning that elite, historically advantaged institutions are more likely to reap the rewards unless rankings are adapted or supplemented with contextually relevant indicators that reflect local missions, equity aims, and public service contributions (European University Association, 2023; Edu, 2025). Without such adaptation, rankings may reinforce global competitive hierarchies instead of supporting genuinely inclusive institutional development.

Collectively, these arguments suggest that rankings, when oriented towards constructive praxis, need not simply function as instruments of global competition or institutional vanity. Rather, if approached critically and interpreted alongside other measures of educational value, they can serve as one of several mechanisms through which universities reflect on their practices, strengthen

strategic coherence, and widen their global engagements. Crucially, the extent to which rankings contribute to meaningful institutional development depends on whether they are adapted to local histories, social purposes, and equity commitments, and whether universities resist the temptation to collapse educational worth into narrow performance indicators. When used judiciously and context-sensitively, rankings can thus become part of a broader repertoire of practices aimed at enhancing quality, responsibility, and responsiveness within higher education systems, instead of merely perpetuating competitive hierarchies.

## Arguments Against Rankings

Despite observations that university rankings can support institutional development, their dominant effects remain deeply problematic for higher education systems committed to democracy, inclusion, and epistemic justice. University rankings risk reinforcing a form of neo-colonial benchmarking, in which African universities are judged against standards derived largely from Euro-American histories, epistemologies, and institutional trajectories (Hazelkorn, 2015; Stack, 2021). Such benchmarking does not merely compare institutions but implicitly establishes whose knowledge counts, whose methods matter, and which languages are deemed legitimate. In doing so, rankings seem to marginalise African intellectual traditions and reduce epistemic plurality to conformity with external validation regimes (Santos, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2016).

Moreover, rankings increasingly reorient university agendas toward market-oriented metrics, privileging visibility, reputation, and competitiveness over social responsiveness. As Marginson (2016) and McCann *et al.*, (2020) observe, the logic that underpins ranking aligns seamlessly with managerialism, encouraging universities to prioritise what is measurable, auditable, and globally recognisable rather than what is pedagogically and socially necessary. This shift risks subverting a university's democratic mission, as intellectual labour becomes instrumentalised for reputational gain rather than public deliberation or ethical responsibility (Waghid, 2014; Stack, 2021). Moreover, rankings tend to privilege research output over transformative pedagogy and community engagement. Teaching practices aimed at cultivating critical citizenship, dialogical learning, or democratic engagement are largely invisible within ranking frameworks, as are forms of scholarship grounded in community partnerships, social justice, and local problem-solving (Teichler, 2011; Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2016). From a democratic education perspective, this represents a profound distortion of academic purpose as universities are incentivised to produce knowledge about society rather than to think with society (Waghid, 2025).

University rankings also seem to exacerbate inequality between institutions, particularly in historically stratified systems such as South Africa's. By rewarding research intensity, international networks, and resource concentration, rankings disproportionately advantage historically well-resourced universities while further marginalising institutions tasked with widening access, serving

rural or working-class communities, or addressing systemic disadvantage (CHE, 2024; Motala *et al*., 2023). Far from levelling the field, rankings may consolidate a two-tier system in which privileged institutions continue to benefit, even as this is framed as a mark of excellence.

In developmental and ethical terms, rankings risk diverting universities from their most fundamental responsibility: the cultivation of critically conscious, relationally attuned citizens capable of contributing to sustainable social advancement. From a democratic education perspective, the purpose of the university is not merely to produce competitive knowledge outputs, but to foster public reasoning, ethical judgement, and responsibility towards others (Waghid, 2014; Waghid, 2025). When rankings become dominant, this civic and pedagogical mission is displaced by an instrumental logic that values positional advantage over democratic formation.

Drawing on a notion of *Ubuntu*, education is understood as a relational practice that affirms mutual recognition, deliberative engagement, and responsibility for the collective good (Waghid and Davids, 2013; Letseka, 2012). Ranking regimes, however, privilege competition over relationality, comparison over cooperation, and individualised performance over shared flourishing. In doing so, they undermine the conditions for deliberative democratic education, which depends on openness to dissent, attentiveness to marginal voices, and the ethical formation of students as participants in a common world (Waghid, 2014; Benhabib, 1996). Furthermore, by narrowing institutional success to global competitiveness, rankings weaken a university's capacity to act as a site of democratic struggle and social imagination. As Mbembe (2016) argues, African universities carry a historical responsibility to address colonial legacies, inequality, and epistemic injustice. Yet rankings encourage institutions to look outward for validation rather than inward towards the social conditions and democratic deficits they are meant to address. This creates a misalignment between national developmental needs and institutional incentives, where universities are rewarded for reputational ascent rather than for contributing to social repair and sustainability (CHE, 2024).

In this sense, rankings do not simply mismeasure educational value; they recalibrate the university's ethical orientation. Rather than cultivating democratic agency, solidarity, and practices of public reasoning, they risk producing compliant subjects trained to perform within competitive systems. Read through an *Ubuntu*-informed democratic lens, such an outcome signals a deeper moral failure: higher education abandons its civic responsibility to nurture humane, relational, and socially responsive forms of life (Waghid, 2025; Nyamnjoh, 2016).

## A Proposed 'Third Way' Towards Ethical Developmental Evaluation

Having discussed the arguments in favour of, and against university rankings, this *Briefly Speaking* proposes a 'third way' of evaluation of South African higher education, which moves beyond the binary of uncritical adoption or outright rejection of global ranking systems. This alternative framework would be grounded in democratic

engagement, public accountability, and sustainable futures, and would evaluate universities not according to competitive global standing, but according to their ethical and developmental contribution to society. Such an approach aligns more closely with South Africa's constitutional commitments to dignity, equality, and social justice, as well as with a democratic conception of education as a public good (Waghid, 2014; CHE, 2024).

At the core of this framework is the recognition that academic work is fundamentally relational. Universities do not exist apart from society. Rather, they are constituted through their engagements with students, communities, publics, and institutions. An ethical developmental evaluation would therefore recognise and value community-based scholarship, dialogical research practices, and forms of knowledge production that emerge from reciprocal engagement, rather than privileging only internationally visible outputs (Waghid and Davids, 2013; Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2016). Such recognition affirms that scholarly worth cannot be reduced to citation indices alone, but must be understood in terms of contribution, responsibility, and responsiveness.

Moreover, this approach would evaluate universities by their contribution to social justice, rather than by their success in accumulating reputational capital. From a democratic education perspective, higher education ought to cultivate critical agency, expand access to meaningful participation, and address historical and structural injustices (Waghid, 2025; Santos, 2014). An ethical developmental framework would therefore ask not how globally competitive an institution is, but how it advances equity, supports marginalised students, strengthens public reasoning, and contributes to social repair. These are concerns that remain largely invisible within ranking methodologies (Marginson, 2016; CHE, 2024). Central to this proposal is the ethical orientation of *Ubuntu*, understood not as a slogan but as a normative principle of relationality, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility (Letseka, 2012; Waghid, 2014). Evaluation, in this sense, becomes a participatory practice rather than a technocratic exercise: universities are assessed through processes of dialogue, reflection, and accountability to the communities they serve. Such participation foregrounds responsiveness to societal challenges such as poverty, inequality, ecological crisis, democratic erosion, rather than conformity to external benchmarks (Mbembe, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2016).

Finally, an ethical developmental evaluation would prioritise long-term institutional sustainability over short-term performance metrics. Rankings tend to reward rapid output and positional gains, often at the expense of academic well-being, pedagogical depth, and institutional resilience (Espeland and Sauder, 2022; McCann *et al*., 2020). By contrast, a developmental framework would value practices that sustain universities as democratic institutions over time: thoughtful curriculum renewal, staff development, collegial governance, epistemic diversity, and socially responsive research agendas (Waghid, 2025; Marginson, 2026).

In sum, this proposed third way does not seek to replace measurement with abstraction, but to reframe evaluation as an ethical, democratic, and

developmental practice. It invites the CHE to consider how universities might be assessed not by how well they compete globally, but by how responsibly they serve society, cultivate democratic life, and contribute to sustainable futures.

## The Philosophical Underpinning of the Proposed 'Third Way'

The proposed 'third way' of evaluation of South African higher education is underpinned by a living African philosophy of higher education which rejects static, technocratic, and externally imposed measures of value in favour of education as an ongoing ethical, democratic, and relational practice; and responds to historical injustice, social vulnerability, and democratic possibility through practices of deliberation, responsibility, and mutual recognition (Waghid, 2025). This is demonstrated in five main ways as discussed below.

First, the 'third way' aligns with insistence that higher education must be understood as normatively oriented toward democratic life, rather than competitively oriented toward global prestige (Waghid, 2025). In a living African philosophy, universities are not judged by how successfully they mimic Euro-American approaches of excellence, but by how they contribute to the cultivation of democratic agency, public reasoning, and ethical judgement in fragile and unequal societies. The proposed framework echoes this orientation by shifting evaluative emphasis away from a global ranking position towards an ethical and developmental contribution, thereby affirming higher education as a public good rather than a market commodity.

Second, a living African philosophy foregrounds relationality as constitutive of educational practice. Knowledge, in this view, does not arise from isolated institutional performance but from dialogical engagement among students, academics, communities, and publics (Waghid, 2025). The 'third way's insistence on recognising community-based scholarship, dialogical research, and reciprocal engagement directly, reflects this relational ontology. Evaluation becomes a way of asking how universities live with others, rather than how they outperform others. This stands in stark contrast to ranking systems that abstract institutions from their social worlds and reduce educational value to comparative metrics.

Third, the emphasis on social justice and redress within an ethical developmental framework resonates strongly with the claim that an African philosophy of higher education must remain attentive to historical and structural injustice (Waghid, 2025). The living African philosophy does not treat inequality as an external problem to be managed, but as a moral condition that demands an educational response. By evaluating universities according to how they expand participation, support marginalised students, and contribute to social repair, the 'third way' gives institutional form to the argument that democratic education is inseparable from a justice-oriented praxis.

Fourth, the centrality of *Ubuntu* within the proposed framework seems to be commensurate

with an understanding of the living African philosophy as ethically grounded in relational responsibility rather than individual achievement. *Ubuntu*, as it is consistently argued, is not reducible to communitarian sentiment. Rather, it is a normative demand that education cultivate attentiveness to others, openness to dialogue, and shared responsibility for the common good (Waghid, 2014; Waghid, 2025). A participatory, dialogical approach to evaluation, where institutions are assessed with their communities rather than *over* them, embodies this ethical stance and affirms evaluation itself as a democratic educational practice.

Fifth, the 'third way's prioritisation of long-term institutional sustainability accords with an insistence that a living African philosophy must be future-oriented without being abstractly utopian. Sustainability, in this sense, is not about institutional survival within competitive markets, but about sustaining universities as democratic, epistemically plural, and socially responsive institutions over time (Waghid, 2025). In valuing pedagogical depth, collegial governance, epistemic diversity, and academic well-being, the proposed framework resists the short-term pressures of rankings and treats education as an ethical project that unfolds over generations.

In sum, the proposed 'third way' does not merely align with a living African philosophy of higher education, but operationalises it institutionally. It translates philosophical commitments to democracy, relationality, justice, and responsibility into an evaluative orientation capable of guiding policy and practice. In doing so, it affirms that the measure of a university's worth lies not in its global rank, but in how ethically, democratically, and responsively it participates in the making of a shared future.

## Conclusion

This piece of *Briefly Speaking* has argued that university rankings are not innocent instruments of comparison, but value-laden practices that shape how universities come to understand themselves, their purposes, and their responsibilities. In a society marked by deep historical injustice and persistent inequality, the uncritical uptake of global ranking regimes risks displacing the democratic and transformative aims that ought to guide higher education. The analysis has shown that dominant university ranking metrics privilege competition over cooperation, output over responsibility, and global visibility over social responsiveness. In doing so, university rankings tend to entrench hierarchical differentiation within the system, reproduce apartheid-era advantage, and marginalise forms of academic labour directed towards access, redress, pedagogy, and community engagement. More disconcertingly, ranking-driven governance reorients academic life towards performativity and managerial control, thereby narrowing the space for intellectual risk-taking, critical dissent, and democratic deliberation.

The *Briefly Speaking* does not argue that comparison, evaluation, or accountability assessment of universities should be abandoned. It has simply expressed concern that when evaluation is reduced to competitive measurement, the university risks losing its

orientation towards the public good and its responsibility to cultivate critically conscious citizens capable of contributing to social and democratic renewal. It is in this spirit that this *Briefly Speaking* piece proposes a 'third way': an ethical developmental approach to evaluation grounded in democratic engagement, *Ubuntu*, and long-term institutional sustainability. Such an approach understands evaluation not as a mechanism of surveillance or discipline, but as a relational practice that summons universities into ongoing dialogue about how they serve society, respond to injustice, and sustain democratic life.

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Comments should be addressed to research@che.ac.za.