

Why mission will always matter more than rankings at ACU

University rankings can offer valuable insights, but they only tell part of the story, writes ACU Vice-Chancellor and President, Professor Zlatko Skrbis.

No vice-chancellor delights in sermonising about university rankings. The reasons are well understood: rankings fluctuate, methodologies change, and the metrics employed often reflect shifting priorities rather than enduring truths. To dwell on them too deeply risks conferring a permanence they do not merit.

Yet I feel compelled to address this topic – not to elevate the importance of global ranking systems, but to question our collective fixation on them as arbiters of institutional excellence.

I am by no means the first vice-chancellor to grapple with these questions. A few years ago, the eminently wise Professor Brian Schmidt, formerly of Australian National University, voiced his concern that rankings had begun to influence universities' choices. [He noted](#) that the companies behind global rankings arbitrarily choose to reward science and engineering, while overlooking other important metrics like teaching quality and humanities research.

“I think most vice-chancellors, certainly around the world that I know, agree with me,” said Schmidt, an astrophysicist and Nobel laureate. “They really do worry about the distortionary effect on our missions and the choices we make.”

These observations resonate with our experience at ACU. As an institution guided by Catholic tradition, it's no secret we have an unrelenting focus on mission. We are arguably the most mission-focused university in the country.

In recent years we have sought to fully realise the values embodied in that mission through a sharpened focus on our research priorities of education, health, theology and philosophy – an approach aimed at expanding the reach and impact of our research agenda.

The resulting rankings performance in these priority areas is undeniably impressive.

In the latest QS World University Rankings by Subject, we are first in Australia and 22nd in the world for theology, divinity and religious studies – a significant milestone for our academic excellence and global impact in these key disciplines.

Our reputation as a research leader in the care economy is also backed by the numbers. In health and education, the Shanghai Global Ranking of Academic Subjects has placed us in the top 50 universities worldwide for three years running. In the latest *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings, we are first in the world for research quality in psychology, and 12th in the world for education, also earning the title of first in Australia and 24th globally for overall research quality.

Today's release of the latest QS World University Rankings further reinforces our upward trajectory, with major improvements across all ranking metrics, including academic reputation and employer reputation, and the highest overall score in our university's 34-year history.

These are all positive news stories, and we should not be shy about sharing them when the opportunity arises. They reflect our good work, underscoring our growing recognition among peers and industry leaders, and demonstrating the continued strength of our academic standing.

Yet problems can arise when we start to take rankings too seriously. The single-minded pursuit of numerical validation can cause us to lose sight of the ineffable qualities that universities like ours bring to the higher education landscape.

ACU is Australia's largest supplier of graduate teachers and nurses, helping to fill the nation's schools and hospitals with skilled and dedicated professionals who form the backbone of our most essential services. We were one of the first Australian universities to receive the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, acknowledging our commitment to addressing real-world challenges in partnership with our communities.

We take pride in these contributions, yet they go largely unrecognised in global rankings systems – as does our focus on graduate employability, our high levels of student satisfaction, and our commitment to providing marginalised Australians with pathways to higher education.

These are all measures that matter, even if they resist easy quantification.

Rankings may provide us with useful benchmarks, but they will never define us. Our performance in these metrics may rise and fall as methodologies change, but our focus on mission remains constant.

Our true value lies in the lives we transform, the communities we serve and strengthen, and the values we champion. It lies in our commitment to educating the whole person and our enduring vision for human flourishing.

To invoke the timeless wisdom of St Cardinal John Henry Newman, Catholic universities offer “direct preparation for this world”, preparing students not merely for a career, but for lives of profound engagement and lasting fulfillment.

This is the deeper story that no rankings system can fully capture – and it is the story that ultimately matters most.

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