

The Illusion of Metrics Global University Rankings, Denoetization, and the Reception History of Australian Higher Education

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Abstract

The Times Higher Education (THE) Supplement world rankings have just been released. The results are uninteresting to serious and senior higher education researchers. We have been through this so many times before. What do the rankings prove? Nothing substantial and is only good for university office gossip. This year The University of Queensland is ranked overall 71.2 but what does that number mean when the ranking for teaching is 53.6. It is meaningless for potential students, existing students, graduates, since the numbers are so cut and re-

¹ Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) has been fairly used in the production of this work. The tool used is Google NotebookLM (recently rebranded as Gemini Notebook). It is an AI-powered virtual research assistant and thinking partner designed to help a person interact deeply with their own documents. Unlike general chatbots, it is source-grounded, meaning it only generates answers based on the specific PDFs, documents, or links uploaded. The A.I. process in the production of this work has been limited to the attached (prompts) on each of the questions in turn. This ensures an accurate reading of each source. The author then rearranged and re-edited the answers the A.I. provided. The human author publishes this work. A.I. is never an author when used properly. This assistance is not qualitatively different from a human research assistant when that assistance is deemed to have no authorial status but is acknowledged.

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amalgamated not to make any common sense or say anything that the university is doing to resolve the problems in Australian higher education.

Introduction: The Annual Ritual of Ranking Gossip and Institutional Vanity

Every year, the release of global higher education league tables most prominently the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Index triggers a predictable flurry of institutional press releases, executive congratulations, and campus office gossip (Buch 2026a: 1; Labaree 1997: 53). University marketing divisions scramble to highlight minor upward ticks in composite scores, while Vice-Chancellors deploy these figures to justify exorbitant executive remuneration and validate strategic corporate plans (Buch 2026b: 1). Yet, for serious and senior researchers of higher education policy, sociology, and historiography, these annual announcements represent an uninteresting, profoundly flawed, and intellectually bankrupt ritual (Buch 2026a: 1; Buch 2026b: 1).

The fundamental absurdity of global rankings lies in their mathematical and conceptual mechanics (Buch 2025: 10; Buch 2026b: 2). As illustrated by the latest THE numbers, the University of Queensland (UQ) receives an impressive-sounding overall score of 71.2, placing it ostensibly among the world's elite institutions (Buch 2026b: 1). However, a forensic inspection of the disaggregated data reveals a gaping disconnect: UQ's specific metric for teaching stands at a mediocre 53.6 (Buch 2026b: 1). What does an amalgamated overall index of 71.2 actually signify to a student sitting in an overcrowded lecture theatre, a casualised tutor facing precarious employment, or an employer evaluating a graduate's actual critical capabilities? The answer is: nothing substantial (Buch 2026a: 2; Labaree 1997: 67).

These composite numbers are so severely cut, weighted, and re-amalgamated across disparate indicators ranging from subjective peer reputation surveys and industry income to volume-heavy scientific citation counts that they strip away all meaningful context (Labaree 1997: 53; Buch 2026b: 2). They offer zero diagnostic insight into whether a university is resolving the structural crises of Australian higher education, such as chronic underfunding of the humanities, excessive reliance on international student fees, widespread workforce casualisation, or the erosion of pedagogical rigor (Buch 2025: 2; Buch 2026a: 2). Grounded in the critical sociological frameworks of the Management Institute for Contributory Economy (MICE), this essay provides a

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historiographical and theoretical review of university rankings, demonstrating how the “rankings obsession” represents a manifestation of denoetization the mechanical liquidation of human judgment and exploring how Australian universities can move beyond marketing gossip toward genuine educational flourishing (Labaree 1997: 52; Stiegler 1998: 10; Buch 2026a: 1; Buch 2026c: 11).

I. Historiography and Reception History: The Dawkins Legacy and the Rise of “Retail Governance”

To understand why sandstone institutions like the University of Queensland, Griffith University, and the University of Melbourne have become captive to ranking metrics, one must examine the reception history of higher education policy over the past four decades (Buch 2026b: 21; Buch 2026c: 41). The turning point in Australian academic history was the “Dawkins Revolution” of 1988 under the Hawke Labor Government (Buch 2026c: 21). Unified National System reforms forcibly merged colleges of advanced education with universities, introduced market competition, and replaced traditional collegial governance with corporate “economic rationalism” (Buch 2026c: 21, 45).

As Dr. Neville Buch documents in his forty-year historical review of higher education models drawing from his executive experience as a Research Officer for Vice-Chancellors across Melbourne, UQ, and QUT the post-Dawkins era marked a systemic transition from a “community of scholars” to a technocratic industry driven by “retail governance” (Buch 2026a: 1; Buch 2026c: 21). During the 1990s and 2000s, university management increasingly adopted corporate strategic planning tools such as the “Melbourne Agenda” and UQ's “Growing Esteem” initiatives (Buch 2026c: 23). In this corporate environment, the historical purpose of the public university cultivating critical citizenship, preserving regional-local history, and fostering open intellectual debate was subordinated to brand building, capital accumulation, and global market positioning (Labaree 1997: 42; Buch 2025: 3; Buch 2026a: 1).

The institutional reception of THE rankings within Australian universities vividly illustrates this corporate shift (Buch 2026b: 1). Rather than treating rankings as flawed external marketing proxies, Vice-Chancellors and university senates integrated THE indicators directly into internal performance reviews, faculty funding allocations, and academic promotion criteria (Buch 2026a:

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2; Buch 2026c: 21). This generated a self-fulfilling cycle of “institutional vanity”: universities reallocated precious public resources away from face-to-face undergraduate teaching and local humanities research into high-yielding STEM citation factories and international recruitment hubs designed explicitly to “gaming” the ranking algorithms (Labaree 1997: 53; Buch 2026b: 1).

A stark case study of this systemic failure is documented in Buch’s (2026b) analysis of the THE Subject Rankings for Arts and Humanities at the University of Queensland and Griffith University from 2005 to 2025:

Research Environment: In 2005, UQ’s research environment score in Arts and Humanities was recorded at 32.0%; by 2025, after two decades of intense marketisation, it had crawled to a mere 35.2% (Buch 2026b: 1). Griffith University fared even worse, moving from 18.0% in 2005 to 21.2% in 2025 (Buch 2026b: 1).

Teaching Score: In 2005, UQ’s teaching score in Arts and Humanities stood at 32.0%, reaching only 40.8% twenty years later (Buch 2026b: 1). Griffith University recorded an almost flatlined trajectory, moving from 22.4% in 2005 to 23.7% in 2025 a marginal growth of just 1.3% over two decades (Buch 2026b: 1).

These dismal longitudinal numbers expose the stark reality behind the headline marketing figures: while corporate management celebrates overall top-100 placements, the core humanistic research environments and pedagogical foundations of Australian universities have suffered two decades of profound stagnation (Buch 2025: 2; Buch 2026a: 1; Buch 2026b: 1).

II. Sociological and Philosophical Critique: Credential Inflation, Social Mobility, and Denoetization

Why do university leaders, students, and the public remain trapped in this ranking illusion despite its demonstrable vacuity? The answer can be found by synthesizing David F. Labaree’s educational sociology, Randall Collins’s credentialism theory, and Bernard Stiegler’s philosophy of technics (Labaree 1997: 39; Collins 2019: 12; Stiegler 1998: 10; Buch 2026a: 1).

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1. Labaree's Tripartite Model: The Hegemony of Social Mobility

In his seminal study *Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals*, David F. Labaree identifies three competing goals that shape modern education (Labaree 1997: 42):

1. *Democratic Equality*: Education as a purely public good designed to prepare competent, critical citizens for political participation (Labaree 1997: 42).
2. *Social Efficiency*: Education as a public good in service to the market, designed to train productive workers and enhance economic human capital (Labaree 1997: 42).
3. *Social Mobility*: Education as a private commodity, designed to provide individual consumers with competitive credentials to gain positional advantage in the social hierarchy (Labaree 1997: 42).

Labaree demonstrates that over the last half-century, the goal of Social Mobility has established total hegemony over Democratic Equality and Social Efficiency (Labaree 1997: 51). When education is viewed strictly as a private consumer good, learning value is decoupled from use-value (substantive knowledge, critical wisdom, civic virtue) and converted entirely into exchange-value (grades, degrees, and reputational tickets) (Labaree 1997: 55).

In this status-conscious consumer market, institutional reputation becomes the single paramount variable (Labaree 1997: 53). As Labaree notes, “the quality of students, the faculty and staff an institution attracts; the volume of research grants and contracts, as well as private gifts; the degree of political support all these and more hinge on reputation” (Labaree 1997: 53). Global league tables like the THE rankings function as the primary currency of this reputational market (Labaree 1997: 53; Buch 2026a: 2). High tuition fees and elite ranking positions operate not as indicators of superior teaching quality, but as advertisements of exclusivity and positional scarcity (Labaree 1997: 53).

2. Collins's Credential Society and “Over-Credentialing”

This consumer arms-race generates what Randall Collins (2019) terms the Credential Society a state of chronic credential inflation where degrees expand faster than structural job opportunities (Collins 2019: 12; Labaree 1997: 69; Buch 2026a: 43). In a credentialist economy,

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students are forced to seek higher-ranked university degrees not to acquire useful skills, but to maintain their relative position in Thurow's "labour queue" (Labaree 1997: 55; Collins 2019: 12).

Rankings reify these formal markers, producing an educational culture where students and managers make individually rational choices that are collectively irrational (Labaree 1997: 73; Buch 2026c: 44). Students ask, "Will this be on the test?" while university executives ask, "Will this improve our THE ranking score?" a shared bargain-basement attitude that excludes substantive learning in favour of formal compliance (Labaree 1997: 68; Buch 2026a: 43).

3. Denoetization, "Technocratic Reductionism," and Symbolic Misery

In Dr. Neville Buch's MICE framework, the reduction of university quality to a single ranking digit (e.g., UQ's 71.2) represents a catastrophic manifestation of denoetization a term adapted from philosopher Bernard Stiegler to describe the mechanical liquidation of human judgment under the weight of automated technical, bureaucratic, and algorithmic systems (Stiegler 1998: 10; Buch 2026a: 1; Buch 2026c: 11).

When university management evaluates scholars and teaching programs through "cold calculation" and ranking metrics, they commit what Theodor Adorno diagnosed as the sin of quantitative positivism: equating rationality with mere quantifiability and transforming human beings into "saleable commodities" (Adorno 1973: 12; Buch 2026b: 3). Edmund Husserl similarly identified this as the "crisis of European sciences," where specialized university cliques lose the unifying humanistic ideal of truth (Husserl 1970: 24; Buch 2026b: 3).

By treating academics and students as mere "bearers" (Tranger) of metric data sets rather than historical persons, modern university management inflicts symbolic misery a state of professional humiliation and powerlessness where researchers are stripped of individual agency and forced to serve the administrative machine (Stiegler 2014: 15; Buch 2026a: 2).

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III. The Dynamic of Cognition (DoC) Matrix: From Ranking Captivity to Human Authorship

To diagnose and overcome the pathology of university rankings, the MICE framework applies the Dynamic of Cognition (DoC) a diagnostic tool that maps the developmental transition from unreflective institutional captivity to mature social accountability (Buch & Peach 2024: 1; Buch 2026a: 2; Buch 2026b: 4).

As the DoC matrix demonstrates, remaining captive to ranking metrics traps higher education in Technical Administration and Purposive-Rational Action, where university management relies on “institutional bullshit” and “loaded messaging” to hide structural decline (Buch 2026a: 2; Buch 2026b: 4).

The pathway toward recovery requires a humanistic ascent through the MICE POLICE model (Philosophically Ontology Logic Intersect Compatibility Education) (Buch & Peach 2024: 1). By replacing cold calculation with *penser* the reinvention of thinking (*penser*) as caring (*panser*, tending to social wounds) universities can restore Human Authorship, ensuring that the human person remains the proactive master of technical and academic systems (Buch 2026a: 3; Buch 2026c: 11).

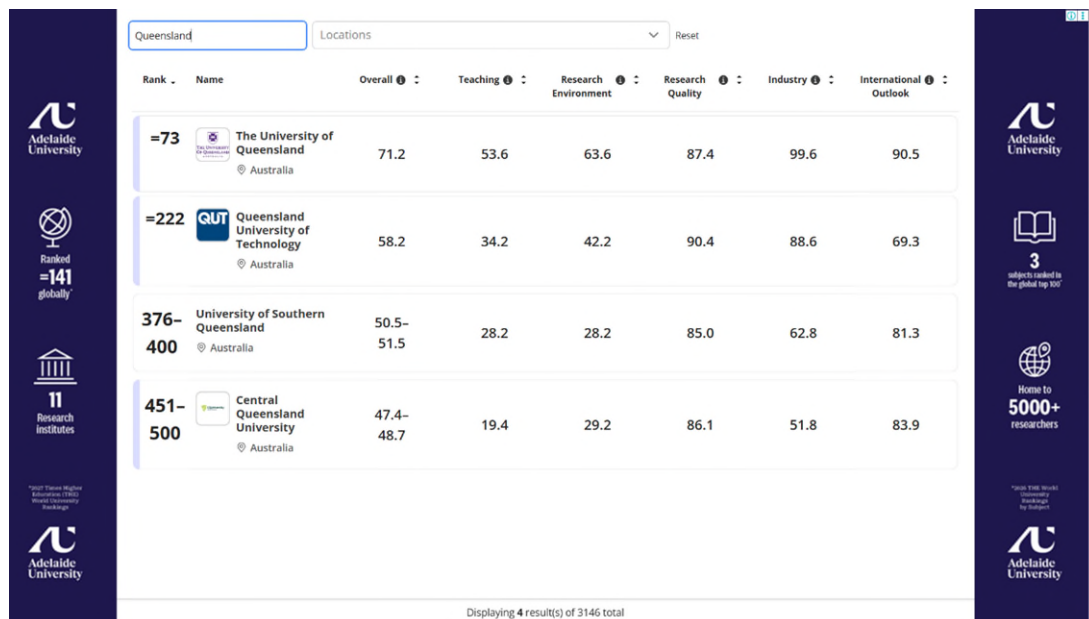
Conclusion: Beyond Office Gossip Toward Genuine Educational Reform

The annual release of Times Higher Education world rankings will continue to provide fodder for university office gossip and marketing brochures, but it will never offer a blueprint for educational excellence (Buch 2026a: 1; Buch 2026b: 1). An amalgamated overall ranking score of 71.2 masks a reality of stagnant research environments, depressed teaching scores (53.6), casualised academic labour, and pervasive student dissatisfaction (Buch 2026a: 2; Buch 2026b: 1).

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If Australian Vice-Chancellors and higher education policymakers genuinely wish to resolve the crisis of scholarship, they must abandon their “anthropological slumber” and reject the “techné mindset” of credential marketization (Labaree 1997: 73; Buch 2026b: 3; Buch 2026c: 21). Following David Labaree and Ivan Illich, Australia must reclaim higher education as a democratic public sphere dedicated to universal access, critical citizenship, and regional-local intellectual engagement (Labaree 1997: 74; Illich 1973: 10; Buch 2026a: 43).

True academic prestige is not measured by an arbitrary number generated by an overseas media company; it is forged when an institution fosters an environment where historical persons can think deeply, care genuinely, and author a just, rational, and flourishing society (Arendt 1977: 193; Labaree 1997: 74; Buch 2026a: 3; Buch 2026b: 8).



Rank	Name	Overall	Teaching	Research Environment	Research Quality	Industry	International Outlook
=73	 The University of Queensland Australia	71.2	53.6	63.6	87.4	99.6	90.5
=222	 Queensland University of Technology Australia	58.2	34.2	42.2	90.4	88.6	69.3
376–400	 University of Southern Queensland Australia	50.5–51.5	28.2	28.2	85.0	62.8	81.3
451–500	 Central Queensland University Australia	47.4–48.7	19.4	29.2	86.1	51.8	83.9

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