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## The Chair – Andrew Norton

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*Research is important but ranking teacher effectiveness could help university students, writes  
**Andrew Norton.***

In the less than 10 years since global university rankings began they have had a significant influence on university behaviour, in ways that go well beyond the marketing exercises that followed the release last week of the Times Higher Education tables.

Some universities aim to improve their ranking, at least in sub-categories such as particular disciplines. Even where no targets are set, university strategic plans acknowledge that rankings influence staff and student choices.

Vice-chancellors recognise the flaws of ranking systems. Complex institutions cannot be easily compared as a whole or summed up in a single number. Yet rankings inevitably encourage a focus on the indicators that they measure. The most prestigious ranking, the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities, is based purely on research. The Times Higher Education rankings include a "learning environment" component, but are mostly about research performance.

The research bias reflects a lack of internationally comparable teaching indicators, not a decision that research is more important than teaching. The practical effect, however, is to further raise the importance of research.

Universities typically argue that teaching and research are complementary rather than rival activities. Research-active academics are well-placed to offer the latest thinking in their courses. They may, on average, have attributes that help make them good teachers, such as enthusiasm for their subject. Students may be inspired by prominent research academics the ANU students of Professor Brian Schmidt, who won the Nobel prize for physics, certainly seemed impressed.

But there are limited hours in the day. Time spent on research is not spent on teaching-related tasks. While research topics and course content often overlap, the skills needed to discover knowledge are not identical to the skills needed to impart that knowledge to others.

In the US, many studies have investigated the relationship between teaching and research. The results are mixed, but on average find a small but positive relationship between indicators such as academic papers published and student evaluations.

In Australia, the limited studies also show mixed results, but tend to find more negative associations between teaching and research than in the USA study using data collected in the late 1980s compared teaching oriented colleges of advanced education (which were subsequently merged with or converted to universities) with research-oriented universities. The colleges scored more highly than the universities for teaching, but overall there was a negative or near-zero relationship between teaching ratings and research activity.

The most recent Australian study compared research quality assessments made by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise with various student-related indicators. It found that students from universities with high ERA scores had better employment outcomes. But the higher the ERA score, the less satisfied students were with the teaching.

In Australia, teaching and research seem more likely to be rivals than in the US. One possible reason is that Australian academics tend to prefer research over teaching. The international Changing Academic Profession survey found Australian academics had a weaker preference for teaching than academics in all but four of the 18 countries surveyed.

The American experience suggests that there is no inherently negative or positive relationship between teaching and research. With the right policies, incentives and culture, the same institution can do both well. But while Australian student satisfaction with teaching has improved over the past 15 years, our academic culture still favours research. Research rankings promote this bias.

Though teaching rankings would be as problematic as research rankings, high-profile reporting of teaching success and failure could be useful. The planned My University website, which will include data on student satisfaction and graduate outcomes, could fuel media coverage about which universities are delivering the most for their students. My University could help make teaching and research more equal priorities.

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