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International Measures and Rankings Affecting Public Administration: Is It Possible to Trick the System?

Laila El Baradei

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International Measures and Rankings Affecting Public Administration: Is It Possible to Trick the System?

Recently I met with family friends and their daughter who was studying computer science and complaining about the enforced competition in classes and how she hates it. She likes playing computer games for the sake of mastering the skill of gaming, and teaching others tips and tricks to improve their performance. Her opinion and attitude struck me as an exception to the norm. We are all so deeply immersed in competitive behavior, between colleagues at work, between universities and even between nations. Rarely do we take a moment to ponder the utility of this excessive race we are in, and the stress we are subjecting ourselves to.

On the positive side, measuring and reporting on performance and trying to achieve agreed upon targets is a good thing. We all know the saying in management that goes: “If we cannot measure it, we cannot manage it.” In public administration, we have adopted the principles of “New Public Management”, which places emphasis on having measures for everything we do. The trend is constantly escalating, burdensome and occasionally lacking in objectivity.

At the micro level in academia, we are also in the game of trying to catch up with the numerous measures of performance that would make us look good. It has become an obsession for some. Google Scholar is being used to check the number of research citations for faculty. We wake up every morning to check if someone out there has cited our published research and whether google scholar has taken note. It is important because it affects decisions related to promotion and tenure. Every faculty gets to be partially evaluated based on the number of citations recorded on their Google Scholar account compared to others in their department, and globally in their scientific discipline. There is also Scopus, ORCID, research gate and academia, in addition to many other platforms that track the number of downloads and reads for published research.

For universities, there are multiple ranking systems institutions aspire to be a part of. There is the QS ranking, the Shanghai ranking, the Times Higher Education ranking, etc. Each ranking system has its own set of criteria and measures that universities study and analyze. The rankings affect the universities’ ability to recruit students and attract external funding.

If you are researching government performance, you enter into yet another pool of international indicators of performance. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have agreed-to indicators. Governance gets measured by a plethora of indicators including: the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) and the Mo Ibrahim Governance Indicators for African countries. The Open Budget Index looks into the degree of transparency of national budgets. The Human Development Report checks each country’s Human Development Index. Amnesty International checks for violations of human rights. The Global Competitiveness Report looks into all aspects that mark a nation’s ability to compete. Additionally, there are the World Justice Project and Human Freedom indicators, among many others.

The problem is, other than those measures sometimes being too burdensome to try to follow up with, there are a number of loopholes in their application, with reporting at different levels—whether by individual faculty trying to increase the number of citations, by universities trying to polish their reputation or by nations failing to report appropriately on the implementation of the SDGs, or trying to deny the objectivity of the many indicators out there used for measuring their performance.

- ***At the Individual Level***, in trying to improve the number of citations on Google Scholar, faculty are getting ethically creative. Publishing with a team of co-authors from various countries;

sometimes thirty or more authors, earns you more citations. You have to think carefully about the title of your research and key words, to ensure a high search frequency. Choose a topic that is not too specialized, or else you will be addressing a limited audience, and likely receive less citations. Faculty have to market their research and keep track of the likes, views and shares of their posts on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. For the “cool” faculty, you can also add TikTok, Snapchat and Clubhouse to that list.

- ***At the University level***, especially for rankings based on reputation, attempts are made to better market university services and reach out to different stakeholders in academia by way of the Reputation Survey which then informs rankings. At wealthy universities, one short-cut to improve ranking is to hire faculty with a proven research record, and take credit for the research they produce.
- ***At the National level***, reporting on the SDGs is only voluntarily, and oftentimes selective and politicized. In some situations, when the international rankings are not favorable, governments have been known to either ignore the international rankings completely, or claim the measures are subjective. In more peculiar situations, national governments try to develop their own measures of performance to white wash their ill-doings and lack of achievement, and thus pick and choose which dimensions to report on and which dimensions to ignore.

International measures are useful, but we should try to be less obsessive and more objective in our assessment, reporting and analysis.