INTERCHANGE

Canadian University Rankings: 
Buyer Beware Once Again

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ABSTRACT: We present a data-based perspective concerning recent (e.g., 2008) Maclean’s magazine rankings of Canadian universities, including cluster analysis of the 2008 data. Canadian universities empirically resemble and relate to each other in a manner different from their formal classification and final rank ordering in the Maclean’s system. Several pitfalls in ranking procedures, related to invalid and unreliable relationships among indices underlying the final ranks, are outlined, along with relevant findings from previous studies. In their present format, although they have become increasingly publicized and promoted, data based on the Maclean’s system can seemingly be of only limited practical use to students. Perhaps more important, in our opinion, ranking exercises have unintended though potentially serious consequences for the intellectual and personal well-being of students.

Maclean’s magazine, in November, 2008, published its 17th annual rankings of Canadian universities. Indeed, the ranking of universities has become a popular exercise with which to assess and promote higher education in North America (Bruneau & Savage, 2001; Page & Cramer, 2003, 2007; Cramer & Page, 2005, 2007; Page, Cramer, & Page, 2008; Provan & Abercrombie, 2000). The ranking approach is similar to that used by publications such as Consumer Reports, in which goods or services are assigned scores, and then assigned relative rank standings.
Ranking Procedures

For this exercise, Maclean’s classifies universities (N=47) into three types: medical/doctoral universities (N=15), which contain medical schools and have large graduate departments; comprehensive universities (N=11), which have no formal medical schools but have graduate programs; and primarily undergraduate universities (N=21).

Because most Canadian schools have now withdrawn their active cooperation with Maclean’s, the data which contribute to the magazine’s annual rankings are now drawn largely from publicly available sources, including Statistics Canada. Six main measures are used, that is, student body (including indices of student ability); classes (including indices of class size and percentage of classes taught by tenured faculty); faculty (indices of faculty members’ academic characteristics; finances (indices of budget parameters and student services; library (indices assessing holdings); and reputation (indices based on alumni support and a reputational survey). Over the six measures, Maclean’s has typically used a total of 24 indices for medical/doctoral universities, 23 for comprehensive universities, and 22 for primarily undergraduate universities. For 2007 and 2008, however, rankings have been reduced to 14, 13, and 13 indices respectively, with these still grouped within the above six measures. The annual ranking data and all relevant details are, of course, explicitly placed within the public domain, and thus may be perused or examined in whatever fashion, by interested readers.

Maclean’s compiles preliminary data for each index separately, computes a weighted sum of points for each university, then constructs an overall rank for each one, with standings reported separately within each university type. In the 2008 data, McGill ranked highest in the medical/doctoral category. For comprehensive schools, University of Victoria and Simon Fraser University were tied for highest. For undergraduate schools, Mount Allison was highest.

In previous studies, as with the results reported below, we have examined the Maclean’s ranking parameters and published data, including the extent to which the indices were intercorrelated and related to the overall final rankings assigned. We also have examined the degree to which higher-ranking universities were reliably different from those of lower rank. We have found consistently that the Maclean’s main measures and component indices are internally inconsistent and not reliably related either to each other or to final ranks. As an update from the perspective of Canadian universities, the present study examined the 2008 ranking data with these issues in mind, but also