

Editorial:

Our own worst enemies – the chase for global rankings

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Next year will be the 20th anniversary of the *African Journal of Business Ethics*. As a journal, our focus is, and always has been, publishing scholarly research about business ethics *in Africa*. In this regard, unlike many of our so-called ‘international’ counterparts, we will never reject a manuscript which presents findings from some part of Africa with the line: ‘Unfortunately, your results lack global relevance’. As Eccles (2021:7) put it:

...we will be a journal that absolutely celebrates stories from Africa, about Africa, and about Africa in relation to the rest of the world. We will do this for no other reason than that we are infinitely curious about the richness of experience inherent in the diversity of our continent and her people.

In this regard, we have taken the conscious decision to politely refuse the pressures of internationalisation which often compel journals in “selecting manuscripts oriented to debates of interest to the academic communities of Europe and the USA” (Collyer, 2018:63). In spite of this, the Journal is listed on the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS). And to add benefits onto benefits, we are an open access journal which doesn’t really charge any significant page fees. We are able to avoid the author-pays *and* the reader-pays traps because the journal owner, the Business Ethics Network of Africa, has to date covered the publication fees for the journal. However, despite all of these virtues, as we approach our 20th anniversary, we find ourselves facing a challenge. We are struggling to get enough high-quality manuscripts. Really struggling! In fact, over the past year, we received just 65 submissions and we had an 88% rejection rate. The arithmetic of this is not good.

1. Article quality?

But why is this? Well, we could zoom in on the low quality of manuscripts submitted. This would, technically, not be incorrect. We do indeed face all of the usual quality issues. For instance, it is a relatively common occurrence to receive manuscripts from authors who simply do not bother to check the journal scope before submitting. We are really never going to publish general surgery manuscripts or manuscripts considering general HR or marketing strategies in the USA or Bangladesh. There is also the latest scourge: manuscripts generated by artificial intelligence (AI). Up until this year, we had been going along minding our own business, blissfully ignorant of this looming crisis in human evolution (or regression). Then, all at once, we were ‘bombed’ with six papers from a single author. All of the paragraphs in all of the papers were the same length. There were no typos. They all, more or less, regurgitated “common sense” (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021:1). So, of course, it was inevitable that when we pushed them through an AI detection app, they came back as almost completely AI generated.

Once we move into the terrain of ‘legitimate’ submissions (in terms of scope and authenticity), the biggest chunk of submissions that we receive tend to be, what we refer to internally, as the mini-dissertation papers. These papers have all of the hallmarks of mini-dissertations from coursework, master’s degrees, or possibly even honours research projects. How can we tell? Well, the biggest clue lies in the introductory parts of the manuscripts preceding the methods. Now, the norm in many academic fields is that the introductory section in a paper will comprise a single reasonably compact ‘Introduction’, which really includes just enough coverage of the literature to justify the study and to outline any theoretical frameworks upon which the study rests. In some instances, there might be a tendency to split this into sections, namely an introduction and a section on the theoretical grounding of the paper. In contrast, mini-dissertations tend to have two whole introductory chapters, an ‘Introduction’ and a ‘Literature Review’. In turn, each of these tend to be divided into a series of sub-sections.

So, when we receive a manuscript which has an Introduction, Background, Problem Statement, Aims, Objectives, Research Questions, Hypotheses, Limitations, Literature Review, and Theoretical Review, and where these sections take up 25 pages of a 30-page manuscript, we have a mini dissertation manuscript. And 97 times out of 100, the quality of these manuscripts and the underlying work mirrors the fact that the authors have simply not read enough academic literature to know the difference between a mini-dissertation and an academic article.

Of course, we never just reject these mini-dissertation manuscripts outright. Where there is any glimmer, whatsoever, of a potentially interesting paper in these, we will as editors always dedicate a significant amount of time to provide detailed guidance to the authors and invite them to revise and resubmit. This is our developmental contribution. Unfortunately, our 88% rejection rate is in spite of these developmental efforts. In short, it is really a very rare pleasure that we read a manuscript and think, “Wow! Getting this one into a volume is going to be a walk in the park”. With all of this being said, we have come to realise that focusing on these manuscript quality issues is actually focusing on

symptoms rather than structural causes. The question we need to ask ourselves is why the *African Journal of Business Ethics*, which, as already discussed, has so much going for it, receives so few manuscripts? Particularly, why do so few of the manuscripts we receive come from experienced emerging scholars, established scholars, or the rock-star scholars of this continent?

2. ‘Top’ journals (Collyer, 2018:59)

The first layer of the answer to this is quite simple, really. Experienced emerging scholars, established scholars, and rock-star scholars from Africa writing about business ethics will, for the most part, first try their luck publishing their work in ‘renowned’ journals with high impact factors. So, journals such as the *Journal of Business Ethics*, with its ‘impressive’ impact factor of 5.9 and an even more ‘impressive’ five-year impact factor of 8.0, tends to be the first port of call for many.

If their manuscripts are rejected by these, they will systematically move down through the journal citation ranks, focusing on so-called ‘international journals’ until they eventually reach the *African Journal of Business Ethics*. That is if they reach us at all. Many will simply cut their losses on manuscripts rejected by ‘renowned’ journals and move on to the next manuscript in the pipeline which promises some prospect of getting into one of the ‘renowned’ journals. How do we know this? For starters, we have played this very game ourselves in the past. But besides this, the phenomenon has been documented. For example, Zell (2024:1) has noted that African journals, and generally journals in the developing world, “face many challenges in becoming known and respected in the international research landscape”. Or as Collyer (2018:59) put it, academic progress “requires publishing in the ‘top’ journals”.

Of course, publishing in these ‘international’ journals has implications in terms of the type of research that gets done by African scholars. One needs to look no further than the countries in which the editors-in-chief and section editors of the *Journal of Business Ethics* reside (Table 1) to appreciate which ‘international’ curiosities are likely to prevail. At the time that this editorial was published, only six out of 76 editors came from the Global South. Not a single one came from Africa. In the 115-member editorial board, there were just two Africans, both from South Africa.

Table 1: Country of origin of editors-in-chief and section editors for the *Journal of Business Ethics*

Country	Editors
Canada	12
UK	12
USA	11
Australia*	7
France	7
Netherlands	6
Spain	4

Country	Editors
India	3
China	2
Denmark	2
Germany	2
Switzerland	2
Austria	1
Iran	1
Lebanon	1
Norway	1
Singapore	1
Sweden	1
Total Global North	70
Total Global South	6
* We have labelled Australia as part of the Global North based on its developmental status despite its geographic location.	

3. Chasing fame?

But there are more layers of ‘why?’ to this problem. The next layer is concerned with why it is that African scholars will prefer to run the gauntlet of the Global North curiosity, and often suffer the indignity of having their work branded as parochial or not ‘globally relevant’ when there are African journals that *want to* publish African scholarly work. This is, in part, no doubt driven precisely by the ‘impressive’ impact factors of the so-called ‘international’ journals and the ambitions of academics themselves to achieve scholarly fame that is, largely, accomplished through the accrual of citations. Under the positivist obsession with measuring everything, this fame is quantified in all sorts of indices – h-index, i10-index, etc.

This does introduce a bit of a vicious, or positive feedback, cycle. To pander to the curiosities of the Global North in pursuit of fame, African scholars will inevitably tend to read the so-called ‘international’ journals in search of scholarly (or is it hegemonic?) guidance. From this, it follows that they will then tend to cite papers from these so-called ‘international’ journals. Which means that the journal impact factors of these journals will become even more ‘impressive’ through a subsidy from African scholars and Global South scholars. Collyer (2018) also noted this citation bias.

4. Our own worst enemies – university rankings

But still, there is more to this story than the individual pursuit of personal scholarly fame. Firstly, fame is a socially constructed state. Secondly, fame’s twin is fortune, and fortune is granted through institutional arrangements of incentives. This really brings us to the main axe that we want to grind in this little editorial – our intense dislike of

university rankings. These were not mentioned in Collyer’s (2018) study of north/south publishing patterns. But in our experience, their influence cannot be overlooked.

Here is how this plays out. Under the neo-liberal competitive impulse which has engulfed the world, African universities have been swept up in a university ranking and rating frenzy. Certainly, in the universities which we have contact with, seldom will a university council or senate meeting or university news update go by without the university celebrating improving by two places here or bemoaning deteriorating by five places there in some or other ‘global’ ranking system (Figure 1). This wild ranking frenzy is complete with all manner of manipulations and misrepresentations. One will commonly hear universities shouting that they have been “RANKED 2ND IN XYZ RANKING” with a tiny subtext “second in Africa”. If the subtext appears at all.

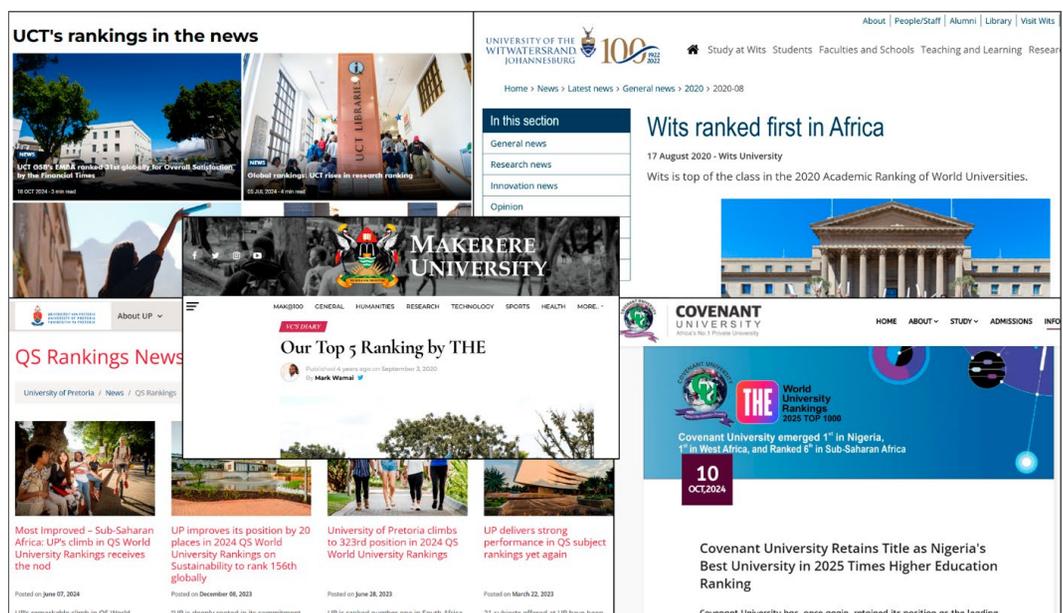


Figure 1: Collage of university ranking news flashes from a few African universities

It seems that the minds of otherwise brilliant and critical people who lead and manage Africa’s universities are absolutely defenceless in the face of the stupid ‘rationality’ that these rankings are based on. Yes, we said it. This really is stupidity. And here is why. Just look at Tables 2 and 3 below. Table 2 shows the top 10 universities in the 2025 Times Higher Education (THE) ranking together with a selection of some of the more famous sub-Saharan African universities. To this, we added the latest reported annual expenditures that we could find for each of these universities for a little perspective.

Table 2: Times Higher Education (THE) top ten universities plus a few notable sub-Saharan African universities

THE rank	Name	Operating expenses (USD billion)*	No. of FTE students	THE estimated overall score**	Score per dollar
1	University of Oxford	3.35	22 095	98.5	29.4
2	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	4.09	11 836	98.0	24.0
3	Harvard University	5.91	22 584	97.9	16.6
4	Princeton University	2.50	8 378	97.5	39.0
5	University of Cambridge	2.99	20 980	97.5	32.6
6	Stanford University	16.05***	16 963	97.2	6.1
7	California Institute of Technology	3.30	2 397	96.2	29.2
8	University of California, Berkeley	3.80	42 423	94.5	24.9
9	Imperial College London	3.80	21 000	94.5	24.9
10	Yale University	5.42	14 401	94.3	17.4
180	University of Cape Town	0.47	21 021	59.1	125.8
301-350	University of the Witwatersrand	0.60	27 765	51.9	86.4
601-800	University of Pretoria	0.45	41 583	42.4	94.2
801-1000	Covenant University	0.04	8 362	34.6	961.6
1201-1500	Makerere University	0.10	33 788	27.3	272.8
1501+	Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences	0.03	4 157	22.4	748.3

* Operating expenses were extracted from the latest available financial statements for the respective universities. For the most part, these were 2023 figures.

** The THE scores were estimated based on the weightings of Teaching 30 : Research environment 30 : Research quality 30 : Industry 2.5 : International outlook 7.5. This was done because the overall scores were not available from most of the African universities. Only slight variations existed between actual scores where these existed and estimated scores.

*** The operating expenses for Stanford University seemed unusually high. However, this was double-checked.

In Table 3, we re-ranked the universities from Table 2 using the THE score adjusted to compensate for differences in annual expenditure. In effect, we suppose that this is an economic efficiency measure. What we see here is a complete inversion of the ranking. And not surprisingly so. Looking at this from a different perspective, South Africa, which at the time of writing was once again the largest economy in Africa, had a state higher education budget of ZAR137.5 billion or about US\$7.8 billion in 2024 (Republic of South Africa, 2024). This national higher education budget supports 26 public universities and about 50 technical and vocational training colleges. The total budget is only slightly higher than the average annual expenditure for each of the top 10 THE ranked universities, which sat at US \$5.1 billion. In Nigeria, sub-Saharan Africa’s second-biggest economy at the time of writing, the situation is even worse. Education *as a whole* was allocated 7.9% of the country’s ₦27.5 trillion budget. This translates to about US\$1.3 billion, significantly

less than any of the annual expenditures for any of the top 10 THE ranked universities. And this budget covers both basic and higher education!

Based on the assumption that expenditure translates into resources, it is very unclear to us why any reasonable person or institution would actively embrace participation in a ‘competition’ where the game is as heavily stacked against you as they are in the university rankings game. The annual expenditures of the top-ranked universities in the world are just so far in excess of those of African universities that comparing their performance is, well, unintelligent.¹

Table 3: New Times Higher Education (THE) university rankings adjusted for annual operating expenses

THE Rank	Name	Operating expenses (USD billion)*	No. of FTE Students	THE Estimated overall score**	Score per dollar
801-1000	Covenant University	0.04	8 362	34.6	961.6
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1 One final indication of how nonsensical these rankings are. Try and find a Cuban university in these rankings. If you find any below the 1500+ category in any of the major rankings, we will be very surprised. Then go and count the number of doctors trained in Cuban universities who are treating people across Africa. You can compare this to the number of doctors from, for example, the top 21 ranked universities in the world. There are apparently 21 medical schools in Cuba.

THE Rank	Name	Operating expenses (USD billion)*	No. of FTE Students	THE Estimated overall score**	Score per dollar
3	Harvard University	5.91	22 584	97.9	16.6
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Of course, we are not the first ones to draw attention to the lack of logic pervading this game. In the South African context, one public university – Rhodes University – has offered some leadership in this regard, formally refusing to participate in any such rankings.² Besides emphasising the poor science involved in the assembly of all of the ranking systems (including those that purportedly focus on emerging economies or sub-Saharan Africa), Mckenna (2022) and Mjekula (2024) also note the profoundly neo-colonial impact of these rankings. Specifically, they have emphasised how these global rankings encourage publication “by publishing houses in the Global North” (Mjekula, 2024).

This is a key element of our little problem as the *African Journal of Business Ethics*. Here is the whole argument:

P1: African universities appear to have lost good sense where university rankings are concerned, and pursue improved positions with irrational fervour.

P2: ‘Research quality’ or ‘research impact’, typically measured on the basis of citations, is a key variable in all university rankings.

Conclusion: Therefore, African universities zealously incentivise publication in ‘international journals’ with ‘impressive’ impact factors.

The corollary to this is that African journals, which one hopes treat African scholars and their work with appropriate respect, are relegated to places where junior postgraduate students submit their mini-dissertations (now that submitting a paper to a journal has become one of the key criteria for graduation, for several qualifications). It is, really, just as simple as that.

² <https://www.ru.ac.za/latestnews/rhodesuniversityreaffirmsitsrejectionofscientificallydubiousuniversity-1.html>

5. So where does this leave us?

Well, as far as the *African Journal of Business Ethics* is concerned, it really leaves us with an appeal more than anything to vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors responsible for research in African universities: please stop selling our continent into intellectual slavery by incentivising the continent's best scholars to publish in 'international' journals simply because this is what university rankings (that are in desperate need of reformulation, or inversion at the very least) measure. Please, can we stop being our own worst enemies? Beyond this, all we can say is that we will continue to do what we do. We will continue to publish papers considering any aspect of business ethics, broadly defined, and related, in some way, to Africa. We will also continue to uphold high scholarly standards even if this means that we sustain an 88% rejection rate or, if need be, an even higher rejection rate.

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