

MEASURING GENDER EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT RANKINGS AND QS SUSTAINABILITY METRICS

Summary

This research explores the application of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (“Gender Equality”) metrics in evaluating Ukrainian universities during wartime, comparing the approaches of THE Impact Rankings and QS Sustainability Rankings. It highlights how wartime conditions, such as male mobilization, can distort gender representation statistics, leading to misinterpretations of progress. THE Impact Rankings focus primarily on women’s participation, relying heavily on quantitative data that may overlook deeper structural inequalities. QS Sustainability adopts a more inclusive approach by recognizing diverse gender identities, but its limited set of indicators restricts comprehensive assessment. The study underscores the need for qualitative evaluations and integrated institutional strategies to address gender equality in higher education, ensuring equal opportunities for all genders.

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 5, “Gender Equality,” outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Quacquarelli Symonds, n.d.) adopted at the UN Summit in September 2015 in New York, aims to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men across all spheres of life. It seeks to eliminate discrimination and violence against women and girls while promoting their active participation in economic, political, and social activities.

The metrics of THE Impact Rankings (Times Higher Education, n.d.) related to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) highlight several aspects that may affect the accuracy of evaluating universities’ progress and real impact on achieving gender equality.

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Notably, the general focus of these metrics is on enhancing women’s roles in institutional and other processes, which aligns with the overarching logic and conceptual framework of this SDG as outlined by the UN. However, it is crucial to consider the specific realities of Ukrainian universities during wartime and the inevitable consequences associated with it, such as the temporary restrictions on the rights of both women and men in the interests of national security.

For instance, an increase in the proportion of women in the metrics’ indicators — such as the share of women among academic staff, students, or graduates — should be interpreted in this context. This increase may not necessarily reflect greater involvement of women but rather the



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reduced participation of men due to their mobilization for national defense efforts.

Another limitation of these metrics is their frequent reliance on quantitative indicators, such as the share of women among students or faculty members. However, such metrics do not always capture the real challenges faced by both women and men. For example, a higher proportion of women in certain roles or among students do not necessarily indicate progress in achieving gender equality if issues such as discrimination or access to leadership positions remain unresolved.

The emphasis on formal indicators may also encourage universities to prioritize improving these metrics without implementing genuine changes in their policies or institutional culture. This poses a risk of addressing gender equality superficially rather than substantively.

In contrast, the QS Sustainability Rankings (United Nations, n.d.) adopt a more flexible approach to assessing gender equality compared to THE Impact Rankings, but they also have notable limitations. A significant feature of the QS metrics is their consideration of both men and women, as well as the inclusion of an “other” category, which facilitates a more gender-sensitive approach. This represents a positive step towards inclusivity by acknowledging diverse gender identities.

However, the QS Sustainability Rankings employ a significantly smaller set of metrics, making it more challenging to comprehensively track progress in implementing gender equality. For example, the metrics primarily focus on quantitative data, such as the number of faculty

members and students by gender and the presence of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies. However, these indicators fail to assess the quality of gender equality initiatives, such as addressing discrimination or professional barriers for both women and men.

Moreover, many Ukrainian universities currently do not incorporate gender-disaggregated indicators (e.g., the “other” category in surveys for gender identification) into their administrative practices or have not implemented adequate policies for engaging diverse groups. Consequently, this may limit the representation of such data in international metrics.

Overall, QS Sustainability offers some flexibility and inclusivity in tracking gender-related aspects. However, its limited set of metrics and emphasis on formal quantitative indicators may not fully capture universities’ efforts to achieve gender equality.

Gender equality in higher education is a complex and multifaceted issue. Both THE Impact Rankings and QS Sustainability strive to reflect progress in this area, yet each has its limitations: the former focuses on women while overlooking barriers for men, and the latter, while inclusive of diverse gender identities, is constrained by the number of indicators. Both approaches underscore the need to transition from quantitative to qualitative evaluations that can genuinely influence universities’ policies. It is, therefore, essential to implement comprehensive strategies addressing all dimensions of gender equality to ensure fair opportunities for everyone.

References

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