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## Turning the ranking tables on their head: how to improve your standing

Research Trends Editorial Board

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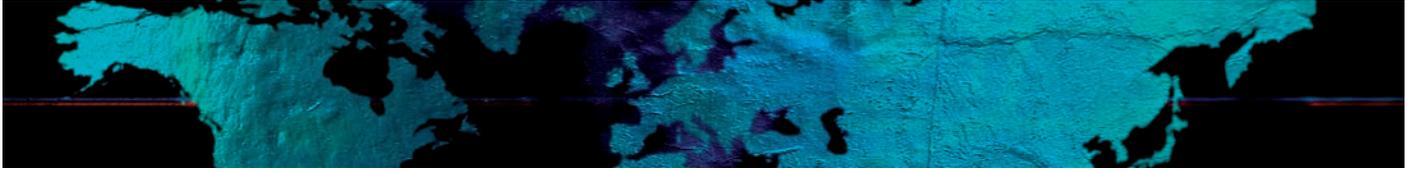
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## Country trends



# Turning the ranking tables on their head: how to improve your standing

In February 2009, the third International Symposium on University Rankings was held in Leiden, the Netherlands. University rankings were discussed from several perspectives: from the position of the researcher or organization developing the rankings to that of the university dean or provost using the rankings to improve their university's position.

Professor Anthony F.J. van Raan from the Centre for Science and Technology Studies, Leiden University, gave a presentation on the methods used by the various university-ranking systems around the world. For instance, where The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) bases its analysis on 20% bibliometric input, Shanghai uses 80% and Leiden 100%.

National rankings often also take external inputs, such as average rents for student accommodation in the relevant city, into account. Gero Federkeil, from the Centre for Higher Education Development, explained that some rankings are even bringing their successful alumni into the picture in much the same way that the research community looks at Nobel Prize Laureates. Having a high number of graduates go on to become CEOs at major companies can also be an indicator of quality.

### What do these rankings mean to a university?

In many of the discussions, the speakers said that rankings should not be used for resource allocation. It would be wonderful if they could be used to predict, navigate and forecast, but this is not yet possible. This is an area where further research and development are needed.

Professor Luke Georghiou, University of Manchester, explained that while universities do try to improve their ranking, it is less clear how the rankings actually influence behavior.

### Climbing up the rankings

One country that has steadily increased its output and quality of papers in recent years is Finland (see Figures 1 and 2). University administrators are very interested to learn how this remarkable success has been achieved.

Jamo Saarti, Library Director at Kuopio University, Finland, says his university has improved its ranking by focusing on strategic research and supporting this with funding. "Kuopio University has made publishing papers in international and high-quality journals a clear priority, and we have been using bibliometric tools to find out where to publish."

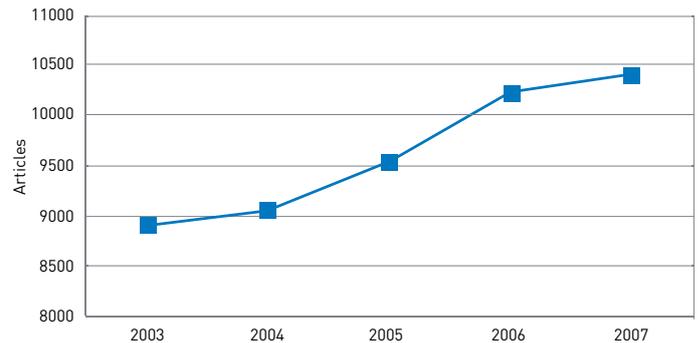


Figure 1: Article output in Finland has been rising steadily for some years.

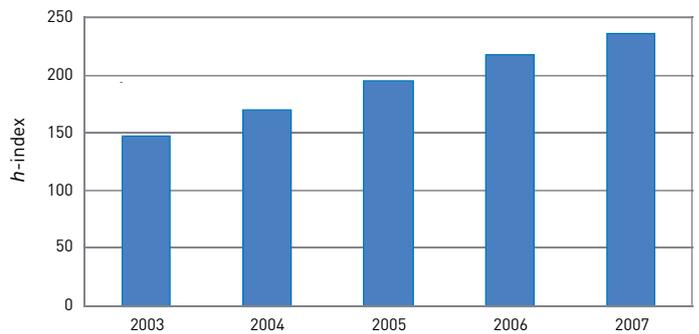


Figure 2: The average h-index of authors in the country went up by 60% in just five years.

Indeed, analysis of recent articles from the university show that well-cited papers have been published in journals such as *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *Cell*, *Nature*, *Nature Genetics*, *The Lancet* and *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*.

"The management at Kuopio University has used ranking lists as tools in evaluation and we in the library have been very active in acquiring the best possible e-journal collections and promoting the use of these to our researchers," explains Saarti.

He believes that this focus on high-quality publications, coupled with international collaboration, which has been adopted throughout the university, particularly within the natural sci-

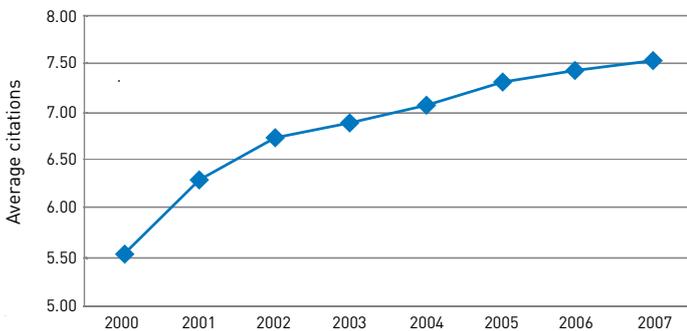
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ences and (bio)health sciences, has been key to their success. Figure 3 supports this view, showing that citation levels for the university have been steadily growing.

Looking at the rate of citations per subject further supports this approach. Kuopio University’s extra focus on fields such as biological sciences and medicine has paid off, as these were among the university’s top-cited subjects in 2006 and 2007 (see Figure 4).

**Tried and tested**

The combination of the university’s strategy, research focus, collaboration with library services and utilization of metrics to



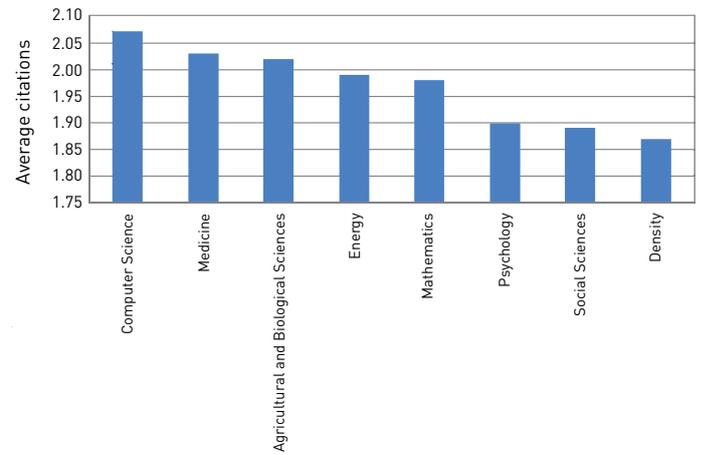
**Figure 3: Kuopio University is succeeding in its goal to increase citations.**

track progress provides a very sensible approach to institute management and one that is likely to reap benefits.

Indeed, many of the efforts described by Saarti are recognized as key strategies for universities to push forward their research productivity and quality.

**Useful links:**

[International Symposium on University Rankings](#)



**Figure 4: Kuopio University’s focus on sciences has pushed its citations in these areas to new highs.**  
*Data is field-weighted to eliminate differences in underlying citation activity between disciplines.*