Everyone’s a winner

The sector’s Usain Bolts may take rankings gold, but other players are top-quality, say Maria Yudkevich, Philip Altbach and Laura Rumbley

Just as the sporting health of nations is often judged on their athletes’ performance at the Olympic Games, so the health of countries’ higher education systems is often judged – for better or for worse – on the basis of their universities’ performance in global rankings.

Rankings, in parallel with the Olympics, are highly competitive, offering participants the potential to earn prestigious prizes that can shape their future prospects in profound and quite tangible ways. For athletes, this may result in fame and opportunities for lucrative endorsements. For universities, the reward may be high international visibility; interest from desirable prospective students and faculty; and income from private funding agencies, industry, philanthropists and government.

The Olympics and the rankings pull together actors who share both an appreciation for the highest levels of performance on a worldwide stage, and a drive to compete and win. Not all competitors are created equal, however. Being smart and rich helps. So does deep familiarity and experience with the rules of the game, as success often hinges on leveraging strengths and minimising weaknesses.

Inherent attributes may also explain the disproportionate success enjoyed by some countries. Olympic medallists often represent countries with good natural training conditions for the sports in question. Meanwhile, it is generally accepted that English-speaking countries and institutions have a huge advantage in university rankings because their academic systems already function in the global language of science and are home to many of the top scientific publications and the peer reviewers who control access to them.

At the Olympics, there is only one gold, silver and bronze medallist. In the global rankings, the same holds true. There is only one number one university, and only 100 institutions can be in the top 100 – even though in reality excellence is not limited to any specific number of academic institutions.

Another parallel can be seen in the substantial, expensive efforts that some countries make to be serious contenders in the rankings: witness the “excellence initiatives” adopted recently by countries such as China, France, Germany and Russia. This is not dissimilar to what we see as countries mobilise their sports teams to participate in the Olympics.

In both arenas, it is rare for winners to emerge from weak systems.

To be competitive in the Olympics, a well-developed and adequately funded infrastructure supporting youth sports must be in place. Similarly, the best national universities need to have a renewable supply of academic talent. This puts a premium not only on investing in top universities but also on cultivating entire systems, which ultimately enable elite performance to emerge.

For strong universities and strong athletes to meet their full potential internationally, they also need to be kept on their toes by a competitive environment locally that allows them to discover their weaknesses and hone their strengths. For universities, this ideally means requiring them to actively compete with other institutions for students, funding and faculty.

The ability of systems to draw talent to them is another parallel between ranking and Olympic success. In sport, national teams may include athletes or coaches who are originally from other countries. Many universities around the world are similarly engaged in attracting top international talent.

Both the rankings and the Olympics generate enormous public excitement, and the thirst for more seems insatiable. But there is a dark side to both. Some ranking organisations are as focused on commercial gain as they are on objective measurement of the quality of universities. And the potential cost of failure for athletes and universities may be enough to encourage contenders to do whatever it takes to secure a strong finish; the long-standing culture of doping in competitive cycling has its parallels in academic papers published in fake journals that are mistakenly indexed in major citation databases.

The motto of the Olympic Games is “cittius, altius, fortius”, meaning “faster, higher, stronger”. Who would not be moved by such an inspiring call to greatness? However, while the awarding of rank-order medals on the basis of performance on a given day during an Olympic competition may satisfy the world’s top athletes, the evaluation of the achievements of the world’s universities must extend beyond the rank-order positions on a list.

A university’s commitment to pursue a path towards greatness should rest on a deep understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the university itself, and on a sophisticated examination of how the institution can best foster both its own health and dynamism and the broader public good. These bedrock efforts must be allowed to unfold beyond the fanfare of lights and anthems, in thoughtful, steady and sustainable ways.

At the same time, there needs to be recognition that not everyone should focus on Olympic-level competition. An athletics club member’s inability to keep up with Usain Bolt does not invalidate the health and well-being benefits of putting on a pair of running shoes. And a local institution’s inability to match Harvard University’s research quality does not mean that it is not doing sterling work in providing access, educating students well and serving local and regional needs. There may be no gold medals in such provision, but it is arguably worth its weight in gold.

Maria Yudkevich is vice-rector and director of the Center for Institutional Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow; Philip Altbach is founding director and Laura Rumbley is associate director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. An expanded version of this article will appear in The Global Academic Rankings Game, edited by the same authors (2016).