

Rankings and Classification in Higher Education

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Growth and (the lack of) Diversification

- As the number of students has grown, the number of higher education institutions has grown too.
- With massification and the emergence of the knowledge society, diversity of institutional profile and mission in HE becomes important.
- In order for higher education systems to respond effectively (e.g. widening access, enhancing excellence, contribution to regional development, innovation and economic growth), more diversity is needed.
- However, insufficient diversity at system level has been identified (by the EC and several individual countries) as a problem for European HE.

Global Competition, Rankings and Diversity

- Globalization leads to increasing competitive pressures on institutions, in particular related to their position on global university rankings (“reputation race”), for which their research performance is almost exclusively the measure.
- Global rankings suggest that there is in fact only one model that can have global standing: the large comprehensive research university.
- This has an adverse affect on diversity since academic and mission drift (isomorphism) can be expected to intensify as a result.
- One-sided competition also jeopardizes the status of activities that universities undertake in other areas, such as undergraduate teaching, innovation, their contribution to regional development, to lifelong learning, etc. and of institutions with different missions and profiles.
- As a result: vertical stratification rather than horizontal diversification. Hierarchy rather than to diversity; specialization and diversification are not generated unless the incentive structure favors this.

A Closer Look at University Rankings

- Are far from problem-free, yet seem to be here to stay, and have a great impact on policy makers at all levels
- Urge decision makers to think bigger and set the bar higher, especially in research universities
- Major concerns are related to their methodological underpinnings and to their policy impact on stratification rather than on diversification of mission.

Main Problems with Rankings

- Research rankings are biased towards the natural and medical sciences and the English language.
- The fact is that essentially all of the measures used to assess quality and construct rankings enhance the stature of the large universities in the major English-speaking centres of science and scholarship and especially the US and the UK”.
- Common limitations (on the methodological side):
 - most rankings systems evaluate universities as a whole (denying the fact that they are internally differentiated)
 - the weightings used to construct composite indexes covering different aspects of quality or performance may be of arbitrary character,
 - are biased on research (especially in the natural and medical sciences)
 - and provide little (or no) guidance on the quality of teaching.

The Dilemmas of Rankings: Limitations and Methodological Issues (1)

- **Rankings differ considerably** related to their methodologies, criteria, reliability, validity, and are driven by different purposes
- They are associated with different notions of what constitutes university quality and may be measured by a variety of indicators, depending on the perspective of the ranking's creators.
- Which suggest that *there is no commonly accepted static definition of quality that would fit all institutions, regardless of type and mission, and thus that any single, objective ranking could not exist.*

The Dilemmas of Rankings: Limitations and Methodological Issues (2)

- **HEIs have different goals and missions and are internally differentiated.** So it is invalid to measure and compare individual higher education institutions as a whole; let alone across national and regional borders.
- Holistic institutional rankings norm one kind of higher education institution with one set of institutional qualities and purposes, and in doing so strengthen its authority at the expense of all other kinds of institution and all other qualities and purposes.
- It might be argued that *the comprehensive research university is the only kind of institution sufficiently widespread throughout the world to underpin a single comparison, and the science disciplines are common to these institutions*

The Dilemmas of Rankings: Limitations and Methodological Issues (3)

- *Holistic institutional rankings are a fallacy as they lead to methodological anomalies. It is dubious to combine different purposes and the corresponding data using arbitrary weightings.*
- The weightings vary across rankings and typically reflect the view of the publisher rather than being theoretically grounded.
- There is general consensus that this arbitrary and subjective element is a fundamental flaw in the methodology of rankings
- Another major flaw in rankings may be their continual changes in methodology. For instance, although institutions may not actually change in a significant way, ratings can fluctuate year-to-year as rankers change the weight assigned to different indicators
- Another common problem is that institutions are rank ordered even where differences in the data are not statistically significant.

The Dilemmas of Rankings: Limitations and Methodological Issues (4)

- **Few rankings focus on teaching and learning** and none has been able to generate data based on measures of the 'value added' during the educational process.
- *There are, in fact, no widely accepted methods for measuring teaching quality, and assessing the impact of education on students is so far an unexplored area as well*
- Indicators such as student selectivity and research performance have become proxies for 'quality'; yet these qualities drive the reputation of a higher education institution more than they drive its educational program.
- there is no necessary connection whatsoever between the quality of teaching and learning, and the quantity and quality of research (let alone the level of student selectivity).
- When criteria such as research and student selectivity are adopted as the base of holistic rankings of institutions for market purposes, the terms of inter-institutional competition are being defined by credentialism but not the formative role of higher education, as if students' only concern is the status of their degrees not what they learn.

The Dilemmas of Rankings: Limitations and Methodological Issues (5)

- **It is unclear to what extent the prestige fostered by rankings is grounded in real differences in higher education institution's quality.**
- *The evidence that they inspire better performance is so far mainly found in the area of research rather than that of teaching.*
- In the US, over the years higher education institutions have learned to target their behavior to maximize their position on national rankings. This has had perverse effects from the public interest viewpoint, for example the manipulation of student entry to maximize student scores and refusal rates, and the growth of merit-based student aid at the expense of needs-based aid.
- Access may be threatened by rankings, contributing to the stratification of the US higher education system and, in turn, encouraging such institutional policies as recruiting students who will maintain or enhance their positions in the rankings, early admission decisions, merit aid, and tuition discounting.
- UK research confirmed a strong correlation between ranking position and the relative admission quality of students.
- Studies in the US also found high correlations between a university's league table position and its income per student, although more so from state funding sources than from tuition.

The Dilemmas of Rankings: Limitations and Methodological Issues (6)

- **Reputational surveys not only favor universities** already well known regardless of merit, degenerating into 'popularity contests' they are open to the charge that they simply recycle and augment existing reputation, or reinforce stereotypes and market stratification
- Raters have been found to be largely unfamiliar with as many as one third of the programs they are asked to rate.
- *Well known university brands generate 'halo' effects. For example one American survey of students ranked Princeton in the top 10 Law schools in the country, but Princeton did not have a Law school*
- Moreover, regardless of the particular selection of qualities measured, any system of holistic national global rankings tends to function as a reputation maker that entrenches competition for prestige as a principal aspect of the sector and generates circular reputational effects that tend to reproduce the pre-given hierarchy.

Impact of Rankings

- HEIs believe that rankings influence reputation, status, stakeholders and policy makers
- HEIs are taking the results of ranking seriously and use them to inform institutional decision making
- Highly ranked institutions believe that they are or will be better rewarded with more funding and prestige. Thus institutions are acting rationally and strategically, effectively becoming what is being measured.

(Hazelkorn, 2007)

- Counting what is measured or measuring what counts?
- Institutions are strongly influenced by rankings. They have a significant influence on decision making, although HEIs may be reluctant to acknowledge this.
- They are used as performance indicators; strategic targets, drivers for internal change

(HEFCE, 2008)

- Influential rankings have led colleges and universities to focus their energies on becoming wealthier, more famous and more exclusive, often at the expense of what matters most – educating their students well.

(Carey, 2008)

Alternative Approaches to Ranking

Best Practice from Europe: CHE

- Because “quality is in the eye of the beholder”, rankings should be interactive for users, particularly students. Users should be able to interrogate the data on institutional performance using their own chosen criteria. It is necessary to adapt the definition of quality to the interests, learning approaches and circumstances of ever increasing numbers and types of students—no one size fits all.
- The chief strategic virtue of the CHE rankings, one with far-reaching implications for the character of competition in higher education, is that it dispenses with a spurious holistic (overall or summative) rank ordering of higher education institutions, and instead provides a great range of indicator data in specific areas, including single disciplines collected from individual departments.

Approach is already followed by the Netherlands (SK123) and the UK (The Good University Guide)

Further projects to achieve European scale are expected.

The Need for Counterbalancing Policies:

Avoiding the adverse effect of rankings on diversity

- Policy should strive to correct the perverse effects arising from league tables, and to advance horizontal institutional diversity and informed student choice.
- Higher education institutions should be stimulated and enabled to excel in different missions and to develop distinct profiles.
- Therefore more sophisticated indicators for measuring performance in areas other than basic research, such as undergraduate teaching, lifelong learning, knowledge transfer, innovation, regional development, need to be developed.
- Besides a wider range of indicators, also the development of a good classification of institutions is needed.
- Because rankings only make sense within defined groups of comparable institutions, i.e. classification is a prerequisite for sensible rankings.

Toward a Classification of Higher Education Institutions in Europe

- If it is absolutely necessary to rank institutions, care must be exercised to compare similar institutions. This means going beyond looking at institutions that are similar in name, but making sure that they are also similar in mission, organization and program focus.
- Classification systems (based on sound typologies) are a prerequisite (condition) for ranking.
- They should themselves stay away from ranking, i.e. making comparisons and judging the quality of for instance research or teaching.
- Classifications should be multi-dimensional, in order to get a better grip on diversity.
- Classifications should enable and in fact stimulate higher education institutions to develop distinct institutional profiles and to excel in a variety of domains rather than in one dominant area. I.e. provide a tool for institutional management.

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