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6. TOWARDS A EUROPEAN APPROACH TO RANKING

INTRODUCTION

Recently the European Commission launched a project to develop a multi-dimensional university ranking. More precisely, the project concerns a feasibility study on the design and testing of a new multi-dimensional global university ranking. This paper will inquire the background of this decision and the particular approach chosen. It will also explore the expected consequences for institutional development and for patterns of cooperation and competition (and beyond) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA).

RATIONALE AND KEY PRINCIPLES

A European ranking initiative was announced by the European Commission in December 2008, shortly after a European conference on the international comparison of educational systems organized by the French EU Presidency in late November 2008. The final conclusions of the French Presidency (2008) confirmed that the phenomenon of ranking has become increasingly an accepted method of evaluation and an expression of the performance of higher education institutions, but also that league tables produced for whole institutions might be of high interest for media but are of little use to most stakeholders in higher education (p. 1). And that next to the need to assess research performance, there is also a need to establish reliable European measures to assess teaching and learning, as well as other aspects of the mission of higher education institutions (p. 3). Consequently the French Presidency called on the European Commission to launch a call for tender to explore and test the feasibility of a multi-dimensional “mapping” of European higher education and research.

The call for tender was presented a few weeks later by Ján Figel, the then European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, by explaining that:

There are not many ranking systems of universities of the type we are interested in. At present most rankings are typically mono-dimensional. But while they may have some merit, we are more interested in developing a ranking system that goes beyond the research performance of universities, to include elements such as teaching quality and community outreach. What we

are looking at is multi-dimensional, because we want to take account of the rich diversity of our universities, so that potential students, researchers and staff can get better picture about the respective university. (EC Press Release, 11 December 2008)

The winning bid was announced in June 2009 and comes from the CHERPA-Network consortium, which is led by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) of the Twente University in the Netherlands and the Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung (CHE) in Germany. At that occasion the Commissioner stressed again that:

It's important that we look into the feasibility of making a multi-dimensional ranking of universities in Europe, and possibly the rest of the world too. Accessible, transparent and comparable information will make it easier for students and teaching staff, but also parents and other stakeholders, to make informed choices between different higher education institutions and their programmes. It will also help institutions to better position themselves and improve their quality and performance. (EC News, 2 June 2009)

After years of unresolved discussions on the emergence, popularity, and the effects of university rankings, the European Commission publicly embraced the notion that comparable information on higher education institutions and their teaching and research programmes should make it easier for students, researchers, academics, and parents to make informed choices on where and what to study and where to work. Better information would also help policy makers at institutional, national and European levels develop future strategies in higher education.

The idea that good information will support informed choices, would not easily be contested by stakeholders. However, many concerns arise around the basis on which comparisons will be made. Widespread critique concerns in particular the fact that existing rankings tend to focus on research in the "hard sciences" and ignore the performance of universities in areas like humanities and social sciences, teaching quality and community outreach.

Consequently, the project should take an incremental approach (feasibility study) and draw on the experience of existing university rankings and of EU-funded projects on transparency in higher education, e.g. the Classification Project¹ and transnational projects on the use and effectiveness of student information systems and (performance) indicators.

The envisaged new European ranking system should therefore be:

- Multi-dimensional: covering the various missions of institutions, such as education, research, innovation, internationalization, community outreach and employability;
- Independent: it should not be run by public authorities or universities;
- Transparent: it should provide users with a clear understanding of all the factors used to measure performance and offer them the possibility to consult the ranking according to their needs; and
- Global: covering institutions inside and outside Europe (in particular those in the US, Asia and Australia).

Clearly, the key idea is that the new ranking should avoid a one-dimensional view on excellence in higher education. Rather, it should emphasize variation in areas in which universities can excel, thus stimulating diversity in institutional profiles and missions².

This view was also endorsed by European ministers responsible for higher education who gathered in April 2009 in Leuven for a meeting on the next phase of the Bologna Process (2010–2020). The conference communiqué acknowledges the need for “Multidimensional transparency tools”, while emphasizing indeed the importance of diversity.

We note that there are several current initiatives designed to develop mechanisms for providing more detailed information about higher education institutions across the EHEA to make their diversity more transparent. We believe that any such mechanisms, including those helping higher education systems and institutions to identify and compare their respective strengths, should be developed in close consultation with the key stakeholders. These transparency tools need to relate closely to the principles of the Bologna Process, in particular quality assurance and recognition, which will remain our priority, and should be based on comparable data and adequate indicators to describe the diverse profiles of higher education institutions and their programmes (Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven, 2009).

BACKGROUND: TO RANK OR TO BE RANKED

The question about the factors leading to this decision and the particular approach chosen can be discussed from a range of perspectives. First of all, there is of course a pragmatic argument for developing a European ranking. As university rankings have established themselves at global level (dominated by the ones published by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) and the Times Higher Education (THE), European universities are subject to ranking, whether they like it or not. And even though rankings are far from problem-free, they seem to be here to stay. In other words, they cannot be (and in fact are not) ignored; research has already shown a great impact on policy makers at all levels (Hazelkorn 2007; HEFCE, 2008; IHEP, 2007). “To rank or to be ranked” is thus the question (Marginson and Wende, 2007). Obviously, this argument has at the same time a political dimension: it cannot be left to others (only) to define the criteria against which performance is measured and the methods on which comparisons are based, and (thus) reputation is established. Especially not when the region’s own institutions are rarely ranked at the top³.

A CRITICAL STANCE TOWARDS EXISTING GLOBAL RANKINGS

Second, the wealth of critiques on existing rankings urges for a new and more sophisticated approach. These critiques focus in particular on the fact that rankings are biased towards research and more particularly towards the natural and medical sciences and use of the English language. Essentially all of the measures used to

assess quality and construct rankings enhance the stature of the large comprehensive research universities in the major English-speaking centres of science and scholarship and especially the US and the UK. In this way global rankings suggest that the model global university is English-speaking and science-oriented and that there is in fact only one model that can have global standing: the large comprehensive research university. Common limitations on the methodological side are that most ranking systems evaluate universities as a whole, denying the fact that they are internally differentiated, that the weightings used to construct composite indices covering different aspects of quality or performance may be of arbitrary character, and that they provide little to no guidance on the quality of teaching (Marginson and Wende, 2007; 2009). See for a more detailed discussion of methodological and conceptual issues: Wende, 2008.

It should be noted that the higher regard for research institutions cannot be blamed on the rankings as such, but arises from the academy's own stance towards the importance of research. Although it can be argued that a league of world-class universities needs to exist as role models, the evidence that strong institutions inspire better performance is so far mainly found in the area of research rather than that of education (Sadlak and Liu, 2007). Critics even claim that world-class research universities need not be doing a good job at (undergraduate) education at all (Bok, 2005).

Especially the concerns related to biases *vis a vis* particular functions (research) and types of institutions (global research universities) ensure that rankings are seen as problematic in relation to information to stakeholders (especially students), institutional development, and diversification at system level. Holistic institutional rankings do not only ignore the fact that higher education institutions are internally differentiated, but also that they have different goals and missions. Rankings tend to 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 institutions and all other qualities and purposes. This type of one-sided competition 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. Consequently, variation in institutional development and the need for diversification at the system level are under pressure, since academic and mission drift (isomorphism) can be expected to intensify. Vertical stratification rather than horizontal diversification may be the result. Hierarchy rather than diversity; specialization and diversification are not generated unless the incentive structure favours this.

THE NEED FOR DIVERSIFICATION

Diversity is of particular importance in the European context. It is generally understood that in order for higher education systems to respond effectively to external demands from students with an increasingly wide range of educational backgrounds, from the labour market, from the economy (e.g. contributions to regional development,

innovation and economic growth), diversity is a favourable condition (Van Vught, 2009). However, insufficient diversity at the system level has been identified as a problem for European higher education. The European Commission considers uniformity in provision due to a tendency to egalitarianism and a lack of differentiation as one of the key problems of higher education. Insufficient differentiation is especially observed in the fact that most universities tend to offer the same mono-disciplinary programmes and traditional methods geared towards the same group of academically best-qualified learners, but that Europe has too few centres of world-class excellence (EC, 2005). Also, from within the sector itself it is acknowledged that it is evident that the European university system must allow for more diversification within the system in order to broaden access on a more equitable basis and to reach out to increased excellence at the same time (EUA, 2006).

It is important to distinguish the various dimensions and definitions of diversity, such as external diversity (differences between higher education institutions) and internal diversity (differences within higher education institutions) (Birnbaum, 1983). Huisman (1995) distinguishes between systemic diversity (differences in institutional type, size and control found within a higher education system) and programmatic diversity (differences in degree level, degree area, comprehensiveness, mission and emphasis of programmes and services provided by institutions). And Teichler (2007) between vertical diversity (differences between higher education institutions in terms of (academic) prestige and reputation) and horizontal diversity (differences in institutional missions and profiles) (see also Van Vught, 2009).

It is felt that the global rankings enhance in particular vertical diversity (or stratification), whereas more horizontal diversity would be more desired from the point of view of the functioning of the system as a whole. This follows more the Australian idea of a “world-class system” rather than focusing too much on the “world-class institution”. Consequently, new policies and instruments (for instance multi-dimensional ranking) should strive to correct the perverse effects arising from league tables and to advance horizontal institutional diversity and informed student choice. And they should stimulate and enable higher education institutions 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 and regional development, need to be developed and integrated into such instruments. 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, in other words, classification is a prerequisite for sensible rankings. Such a classification of higher education institutions in Europe has been developed over the last years (see Van Vught et al., 2005; CHEPS, 2008).

DIVERSITY: A FACT OF LIFE IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Third, while more rather than less diversity may be desired with respect to the variety of institutional missions and profiles, European higher education most certainly possesses an abundant diversity in a range of other dimensions. Diversity is a fact

of life in European higher education. Different national and regional languages, cultures, educational systems, academic traditions, admission systems, and even academic calendars, characterize the way in which higher education is performed in the different countries. In addition, legislation, governance models and funding systems (and consequent tuition fee policies) may differ depending on constitutional realities (at federal, national and regional levels) and on political and ideological positions. Countries' demographic development and economic strengths and growth patterns usually explain further particular directions in steering higher education system.

Whereas this diversity certainly holds challenges to be overcome (see next section), it is also, certainly at the political level, seen as a potential strength of European higher education:

In a world where people and ideas are circulating at an ever increasing pace, it is a major challenge for Europe to make its high degree of linguistic, educational and cultural diversity, a unique source of open-mindedness and cross-fertilization (French Presidency, 2008, p. 1).

Obviously, the Bologna Process aimed at enhancing convergence, and has indeed been successful in bringing systems closer together in a range of areas, particularly those related to degree cycles, qualification levels, and frameworks for quality assurance (accreditation) (EURYDICE, 2009; Rauhvargers, et al., 2009). Despite such achievements, certain tensions between convergence and diversity have continued. In-depth studies and comparisons between countries showed that the actual implementation of the new structures can still vary significantly (see for instance: Witte, 2006; Huisman and Van Vught, 2009).

The relationship between the strive for more convergence on the one hand and for diversity on the other, is quite ambiguous. From their analysis of this relationship Huisman and Van Vught (2009) conclude that

In sum, two supranational policy contexts (EU policies and the Bologna process) both support the idea of institutional diversity. But this support appears to be conditional. First, the policy documents are in favour of “organized diversity”, thus setting some boundaries to institutional variety. Second, the policy documents are rather vague when it comes to specifying which elements of diversity are appreciated. It would not be too far-fetched to conclude that institutional diversity is appreciated as long as it does not go against the need for convergence of the fragmental European higher education system (p. 22).

The fact that diversity is and will to a certain extent be sustained (see also the next section for some of the reasons why) implies that any policy measure or concrete instrument should have a type of in-built flexibility, thus reflecting this diversity while at the same time enabling transfer and cooperation between the various systems. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the International Diploma Supplement (IDS) are good examples in case. Information and transparency are

seen as the basis for these mechanisms. The new European ranking system should be based on the same principles (see first section of this article). In this sense, it should also follow the principles for good ranking as outlined in the Berlin Declaration (IREG, 2006):

Specify the linguistic, cultural, economical, an historical contexts of the educational systems being ranked. International rankings in particular should be aware of possible biases and be precise about their objectives. Not all national or systems share the same values and beliefs about what constitutes “quality” in systems should not be devised to force such comparisons.

EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A YOUNG AND STILL FRAGMENTED REALITY

Fourth, European higher education encompasses between 3000 and 4000 institutions in between 27 (counting the countries that are members of the European Union) and 45 countries (the number of countries that have joined the Bologna Process, together constituting the European Higher Education Area, EHEA). The EHEA is a very young initiative and can hardly be called a reality in the operational sense yet. The Bologna process of convergence between the different national systems started only ten years ago, although it should be acknowledged that previous periods of increasing cooperation (the ERASMUS programme started in 1987) were certainly meaningful as well. Moreover, Bologna is a voluntary process without any legally or politically binding elements. The ownership of the process rests with the ministers of higher education and the European Commission’s political authority and legal competences in the area of higher education are still quite limited. As the main steering mechanisms - legislation, planning, funding, quality assurance - are concentrated at national (or in some cases even sub-national) level, the coordinating powers are thus extremely decentralized and dispersed. At European level, in fact only cooperation mechanisms (the Erasmus Programme and the Bologna Process being prime examples) and some peer-pressure type of coordination (i.e. the Open Method of Coordination) exist, apart from some legal provisions arranging for recognition and free mobility. But despite the converging degree cycles and qualification frameworks, one cannot really speak of a “European higher education system” as such, i.e. with an integrated steering core, including funding mechanisms, legislation, etc. In this sense European higher education cannot be compared with systems like the USA (although specific per State), let alone China. Consequently, policy measures and concrete instruments can never be launched in a top-down fashion or through straightforward legislation. Instead, this happens through incremental, non-rigid, bottom-up policy-making processes backed up with substantive consultation rounds. A wide diversity of interests and contexts need to be taken into account. Consequently, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional solutions are in fact a *sine qua non*. In the same fashion, some dimensions of (criteria incorporated in) the new European ranking will be found more important in some countries than in others.

At the same time, the new European ranking system could only be developed and defined at European level. None of the participating countries alone is large and influential enough to compare itself to the other major higher education systems (USA, China). Only Europe as a whole has this capacity and considers itself now ready and able - despite the early phase of its integration process as described above - to engage more actively and play a more influential role at global level in the setting of systems and criteria against which performance is measured and the methods on which comparisons are based, and (thus) reputation is established.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: PATTERNS OF COOPERATION AND COMPETITION

As has been stated above, European higher education is strongly focused on cooperation between countries and institutions. Inter-institutional cooperation has been the most important basis for achieving the mobility of students and scholars. Over the last two decades, various transfer mechanisms and later on common frameworks have been developed in order to overcome obstacles related to differences between national systems and institutional models (see above). More recently, European higher education institutions have become more aware of the challenges of global competition, not in the least place fuelled by the impact of global rankings. Both cooperation and competition are now important determinants for institutional strategy development, and at policy levels intra-European cooperation is considered to be a condition for strengthening positions in global competition (Huisman and Wende, 2004; 2005).

The question is what the consequences of the new European ranking system will be for institutional development and for patterns of cooperation and competition in and beyond the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). As both cooperation and competition constitute major strategic options for HEIs and governments in Europe, the question is in fact to what extent the new ranking would be useful for expressing distinct institutional profiles with a clear mission and could thus and on that basis help institutions to cooperate better with their partners, to identify new ones, and to compete better against their competitors, as far as these categories can always be clearly distinguished. At this point, these questions can only be explored in a very preliminary (even speculative) fashion.

It is expected that the new European ranking system will stimulate a range of different institutional missions and profiles, rather than imposing only one reference model. Hitherto, in many cases governmental policies were necessary to avoid mission (usually academic) drift within the system. Apart from comparative multi-country studies, no systematic studies have yet been made into this phenomenon at the European level as a whole. The formation of European leagues and consortia may be expected to play a role in this respect; they reflect dynamics in the system more than established associations of certain categories of institutions (e.g. the European Association of Universities (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), whose mission it is to preserve those

categories. The formation of new leagues and consortia so far demonstrates quite different characteristics. The League of European Research Universities (LERU) focuses on a top-level echelon of prestigious research universities, whereas the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) emphasizes rather the innovative and entrepreneurial character of its member institutions. Other consortia may focus on locations (e.g. UNICA, including capital-city universities), disciplines (e.g. the IDEA League of Engineering Institutions, or ELIA, the League of Institutes of the Arts), or on cooperation and exchange as such (e.g. the Santander and Coimbra networks). There is no systematic knowledge on what role the position of institutions on rankings has played in the formation of these consortia and networks, as compared to other factors, such as for instance perceived reputation and personal relationships.

It is in any case remarkable that the sector which is most involved in rankings, i.e. the business schools (MBAs in particular), which is constantly being compared within Europe as well as against their global counterparts (e.g. in the Financial Times ranking of business schools) and which even has a European quality label (through the EQUIS accreditation) and usually use “Europe” into their institutions’ names, hardly have a defined European league or even network (apart from a small - three institutions - and recent initiative connected to the EuroMBA). Apparently, competition prevails here and less focus is placed on cooperation as such.

It may be expected that the new European ranking with its multi-dimensional features would provide more detailed insight into potential cooperation partners as well as into the strategic assets of competitors. However, the added value of it as compared to the current situation will have to be examined. Many university consortia were established in the 1990s (some of which mentioned above) with the idea that the formation of strong international consortia (cooperation) of universities would make individual institutions less vulnerable and would enhance their strategic options (competition). Research into these consortia has shown that a successful composition of such relationships has to be based on both complementarity and compatibility between institutions, which is certainly not always the case (Beerkens, 2004). Consequently, a new ranking system providing more detailed information could in principle be useful for both cooperation and competition purposes. And learning from the research cited, it would be as important to know in which aspects a potential partner institution is different (complementarity) as well as similar (compatibility).

At the same time, it should be realized that the policy context for higher education institutions in Europe is extremely complex. While institutions are encouraged and challenged to cooperate and compete internationally, their actual performance is still by and large defined by national systems. Governments all wish to make the higher education system more nationally effective, Europeanized and globally competitive at the same time. They usually present a, not necessarily coherent, mix of policy options, including models for cooperation and competition at national, European and international levels. The various policy choices at national level are at this point only to a limited extent guided by an overarching European vision, as embodied in the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy. It is certainly not

realistic to speak about an effective division of labour or a considered balance between global competitiveness, European agendas, and national priorities and interests. Institutions have to pave their own avenues in this reality. Consequently they as well as their stakeholders will always benefit from more information and indeed only multi-dimensional transparency instruments could in principle prevail.

NOTES

- ¹ See: <http://www.u-map.eu>.
- ² More details on the project are presented in the paper: Multidimensional Excellence of Higher Education Institutions. Recognising and Acknowledging World-Class Performances, by Federkeil et al.
- ³ 32 European Universities appeared in the top 100 of the Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking 2009, of which only two were in the top 20.

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