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University Rankings: Seeking Prestige, Raising Visibility and Embedding Quality – the Editors’ Views

JAN SADLAK, JAMIE MERISOTIS and NIAN CAI LIU

Almost a decade ago, Jamie Merisotis and Jan Sadlak, two of the authors of this introductory article, initiated a serious dialogue about a relatively new international phenomenon in higher education – rankings of universities and other higher education establishments. At the time, they had no idea that their conversation would foreshadow what is an increasingly discussed and in some cases hotly contested issue in higher education taking place around the globe.

The initial interest in rankings was primarily from the perspective of analysts and researchers interested in gaining a more comprehensive picture of available indicators that could accurately describe developments in higher education within individual nations. Their quest for reliable indicators led them to search for relevant benchmarks, standards and practices that might translate across national borders.

The third co-author of this article, Nian Cai Liu, began raising the visibility of that debate in a different way, at first merely by trying to assess the quality of higher education in the world’s most populous nation with the largest system of tertiary education – China. That initial quest led to the establishment of a cross-national system of indicators that has become one of the most important and intensely debated topics at international meetings dealing with quality assessment in higher education – namely, the so-called ‘Shanghai Ranking’, and the concept of a ‘World-Class University’.

In the intervening years, the topic of higher education rankings began to grip the attention of institutional leaders, researchers, and policy makers. Dozens of nations now have ranking systems in place, and more are being established each year. Two papers in this issue represent the first national ranking of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan (Kalanova), and an example of the use of ranking for academic staff assessment in the University of Maribor, Slovenia (Rozman and Marhl).

At that time, prevailing reactions to the practice of ranking universities have evolved from disdain, unsubstantiated arguments about their contribution to ‘academic drift’, the negative impact of rankings on institutional diversification, or the ‘turning of trust into commodity’, to a more balanced view of accepting stake-holders’ demands for a type of information rankings that can provide and even recognizing the value of rankings. Now, the conversation of many informed observers has shifted to focus on how the methods behind rankings can be as clear and reliable as possible as well as to go beyond reflecting foremost research-based institutional performance.

Although a positive view of rankings is not unanimously shared, it is likely that the naysayers are fighting a losing battle. The number of meetings and references to ranking of higher education confirms a wide interest and attention to this phenomenon. There is now increasing evidence that ranking systems are here to stay, and are having a growing effect on global dialogues about higher education quality and accountability. In recent years, this effect is beginning to be seen at a policy level and not just as a matter of curiosity for students and university leaders. Two examples from

very different constituencies validate our argument about the policy relevance of rankings.

The first example comes from the Union of Scientists in Bulgaria (USB), which, in a recently adopted memorandum, offered a diagnosis and proposed corrective measures for the underperformance of Bulgarian science and higher education. Deficiencies in these disciplines, according to the memorandum, will lead to strategic shortfalls in Bulgaria's own development in a knowledge-based economy. Furthermore, the memo's authors assert that, Bulgaria will be hard-pressed to contribute to the European Union objectives, as presented in the *Lisbon Strategy*.¹

The memo's authors – representing the country's largest organizations of scientific and higher education – postulated that, to improve the quality of higher education, Bulgaria must, among other action steps, “introduce annual ranking of universities and colleges, based on a number of criteria”. These criteria include successful participation in programmes and projects, publication in respected journals, and the successful proliferation of patents. They contend that “the rankings must be performed by a government body, public organization or public-private institutions set up for this particular purpose” (USB, 2007, p. 13).

A second example that validates the policy relevance of university rankings comes from France. The Minister for Higher Education and Research, Valérie Pécresse, recently pointed out that France, which holds the Presidency of the European Union from 1 July to 31 December 2008, will place a high priority on quality assurance of higher education programmes across Europe. The Minister explained that this drive to quality assurance will entail a thorough analysis of international indicators of higher education, as well as a focus on the impact of international rankings. The Minister expressed her aspiration that the French Presidency would move toward defining ranking criteria that were better adapted to European higher education and that these discussions would promote dialogue about possible European-wide rankings (EUA, 2008).

As these examples demonstrate, the interest in college and university rankings is no longer confined to the curiosities of researchers. Demand for reliable data about quality performance is now flowing from the ranks of industry and government. That demand has fanned a proliferation of inquiry. For example, the sixteen papers presented in this double issue of *Higher Education in Europe* were originally presented at the third meeting of the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG-3), held at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China, between 28 and 31 October 2007. As interest in the topic has grown, IREG, which first convened in 2004, has become the most representative global forum for presentation and analysis of college ranking.

The papers presented in this issue fall into three distinct groupings:

1. Papers that reflect on international rankings.
2. Papers that present new developments and recent experiences with national rankings.

¹ The *Lisbon Strategy*, also known as the *Lisbon Agenda* or *Lisbon Process*, is an action and development plan for the European Union. Its aim is to make the EU “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010”. It was laid out by the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000, against the background of productivity in the EU being below that of the United States. It is significant that when assessing the contribution of higher education in EU countries towards achieving the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda, reference is made to two international rankings – *The Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU) and *The World University Ranking* (WUR) from *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (Commission of the European Communities, 2007).

3. Papers that contribute to the enhancement of ranking by analyzing typology or the possibilities for multi-dimensional rankings.

We are grateful to all the authors who have lent their expertise in these three areas of inquiry. They are as follows:

- *Category 1*: Cheng and Liu; Federkeil; Aguillo, Ortega and Fernández; Cunningham; Berghoff, Brandenburg, and Müller-Böling; Sowter; and VanDyke.
- *Category 2*: Devinsky; Kalanova; Siganos; Rozman and Marhl; Williams; Jobbins, Kingston, Nunes and Polding; and Morse.
- *Category 3*: McCormick; Montesinos, Carot, Martinez, and Mora.

A word of context is in order about several of these papers. For example, McCormick's text examines the interplay between college rankings and 'classifications', as in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education in the United States. His analysis underscores the imperative of building into rankings a well-conceived typology of higher education institutions. Such a typology must reflect the diversity of higher education in Europe. Because of this diversity, comparing and ranking categories of similar institutions is more appropriate than ranking across sectors, which amounts to comparing apples with oranges.

Robert Morse, one of the pioneering figures in the ranking enterprise through his editorial leadership at *US News and World Report*, discusses the nature and extent of the influence, sometimes exaggerated by its opponents that rankings wield. The *US News* rankings, which target the consumers of higher education – students and families – provide evidence of the impact rankings have, not only on US consumer behaviour, but also on the institutions that serve them.

Similarly, the 2006 report of a student survey – conducted by the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) in collaboration with AIESEC (*Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economique et Commerciales*), an international organization of students in economics and business studies – documents how students in countries participating in the Bologna Process perceive how certain trends, such as the Bologna Process and student rankings, exercise an effect on them. Half (fifty-one percent) of the student respondents said they had no interest in rankings or university reports. The other half said they do pay attention to rankings, with twenty-two percent saying they analyze rankings in the international press, and twenty-seven percent saying they consider university reports and rankings in the local or national press. Despite the fact that only half of the respondents claimed to rely on rankings, the survey results showed that 'overall reputation' is a deciding factor that students use in selecting a university for foreign study (EFMD-trendence, 2006).

The growing influence of rankings on the behaviour of colleges is also documented in a report commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), a major funding body for higher education. The study entitled "Counting What is Measured or Measuring What Counts? League Tables and Their Impact on Higher Education Institutions in England", is the product of analytical work done by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) of the Open University and Hobsons Research.

Specifically, researchers sought to investigate how higher education institutions respond to rankings and to what extent rankings influence institutional decision-making and actions. They looked at institutional responses to five of the foremost international rankings: *The Sunday Times University Guide*, *The Times Good University*

Guide, *The Guardian University Guide*, *The Academic Ranking of World Universities* (published by Shanghai Jiao Tong University Institute of Higher Education), and *The Times Higher Education/Quacquarelli Symonds*.

The authors conclude: “The influence of League tables is increasing both nationally and internationally, and cannot be ignored despite serious methodological limitations”. In addition, the authors offer this observation: “They [the rankings] are being used for a broader range of purposes than originally intended and being bestowed with more meaning than the data alone may bear” (HEFCE, 2008, p. 8).

We concur with these conclusions. Rankings, if used appropriately, can be valuable in promoting healthy competition among institutions and fostering informed discussion in support of higher education. On the other hand, semi-obsessions and/or misuse of rankings can distort the appropriate relevance of a particular ranking (the areas which are subject to a given ranking) and/or institutional reality (type of institution, specificity of a given system of higher education, academic tradition, etc.).

The good news is that positive developments in the way rankings are constructed reduce the chances of bias and distortion. For example, IREG discussions reveal that rankers are becoming increasingly sensitive to institutional data that appear too good to be true. To counter this possibility, they are challenging institutions to use ‘sniff tests’ as a reality check on their data. In this context, the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions, which were adopted by IREG in May 2006, marked a turning point in the quest for gaining legitimacy and gradual acceptance of ranking. Acknowledging the persistent deficiencies in rankings is another step toward ensuring that rankings are held in proper perspective. These deficiencies include issues of accuracy, methodology, and cultural bias, as well as broader concerns about how well rankings capture the teaching and social-change roles of universities.

It is inevitable that further progress in academic ranking is going to take place, and that alternative approaches for reflecting performance and reputation might be presented, but with all these qualifications in mind, we resonate with the words of Jan Figel, European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, who said in a recent speech that, “Good ranking is better than no ranking at all”. We would add that, as rankings become more credible, they will become more accepted and more valuable in the desirable goal of raising the quality of higher education. For this reason, IREG has decided to continue its activities in a more structured format by establishing the IREG-International Observatory for Academic Ranking and Excellence.² In short, we have not yet climbed to the top of the mountain of learning about higher education ranking, but it is a mountain worth climbing.

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² Information about IREG-International Observatory is available on its website <www.ireg-observatory.org>.

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