Universities on the Crossroads of National and Global Rankings

Summary

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BEFEKTETÉS A JÖVŐBE

1. General Approches

Social sciences are „shooting at a moving target" when trying to interpret the university rankings that have spread worldwide in the past quarter of a century. Even in the current context of higher education, loud with rankings communication, it is worth recalling that measured by the scale of the eight hundred centuries old western university, and even the two hundred years old modern higher education, this is a fresh and short term phenomenon. Media rankings aiming to inform the public only appeared in several countries in the early nineties, upon the initiative of the US NEWS and Reports, following the century-old precedents that had existed mainly in the US, and global general rankings are a development of the 2000s. However, the changeability of the subject of ranking research is due not only to the short time span, but also to a particular motive in the development of rankings. Rankings have been subject to a series of criticisms and debates since their inception, and these are not of an abstract, methodological nature, but conflicts which have direct relevance to university politics and sometimes also legislation. All of these have shaped and still shape rankings, while rankings shape higher education through their measurement methods and indicators, prompting institutions and higher education policies to define new priorities. Our study paper gives an overview of the criticism that rankings have faced for their methodology and from university politics, highlighting one of the most important elements of rankings, the use of indicators. In addition, we present an aspect that has been given little discussion so far. The complexity of the rankings phenomenon is enhanced by the fact that universities are assessed in global and national rankings at the same time, and the use of different frames of reference adds a high degree of uncertainty to the relevance of rankings.

Our research, a short summary of which is presented in this paper, also offers a practical aid to the use of rankings, as rankings are primarily tools of providing and gathering information about higher education, therefore their effective use is especially important. As a case study, we analyse the ranking positions of Hungarian higher education institutions, more specifically the aspects used by rankings that foreign students interested in Hungarian higher education use, complementing this with the aspects of the higher education rankings of countries that are dominant in the international mobility of Hungarian students.[1]

The perspective is based on the interpretative frame developed during our research, the essence of which is that rankings do not implement the measurement of the performance of the institutions, but are the currently most efficient media communication tools of higher education. Their power and the dynamics of their spread is primarily a result of the media and social communication environment surrounding higher education at this time. Therefore they tend to stimulate rather than inform their target

[1] On behalf of Tempus Public Foundation, this research was made in the framework of Széchenyi 2020 Programme, within Campus Mundi Programme (project number: EFOP-3.4.2-VEKOP-15-2015-00001), co-financed by European Structural and Investment Funds.

groups, that is, students interested in entering higher education, decision makers, and the institutions themselves.

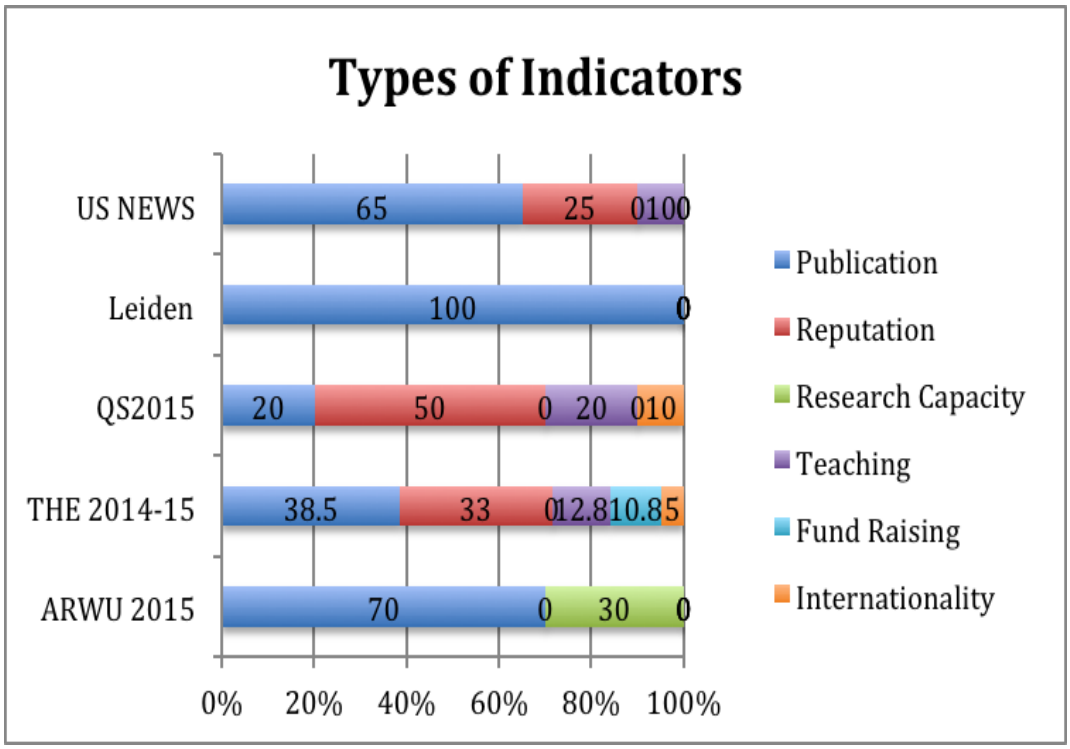
In sum, universities are at the crossroads of the standards of global and national rankings, a fact that primarily faces them with a task of communication, and the users with challenges of interpretation.

2. World of Indicators

Rankings provide statements about higher education in two ways: on the one hand, by what they measure, on the other hand, by where they position the given institution through that measurement. Their content is therefore outlined by the indicators they use, and the choice and definition of the latter is a choice of values that also anchors an image of higher education at the same time. The way they use these indicators is predominantly a matter of methodological choice, which is less about higher education, and just results in a distortion of the reality of higher education to varying degree.

a; Indicators of Global Rankings

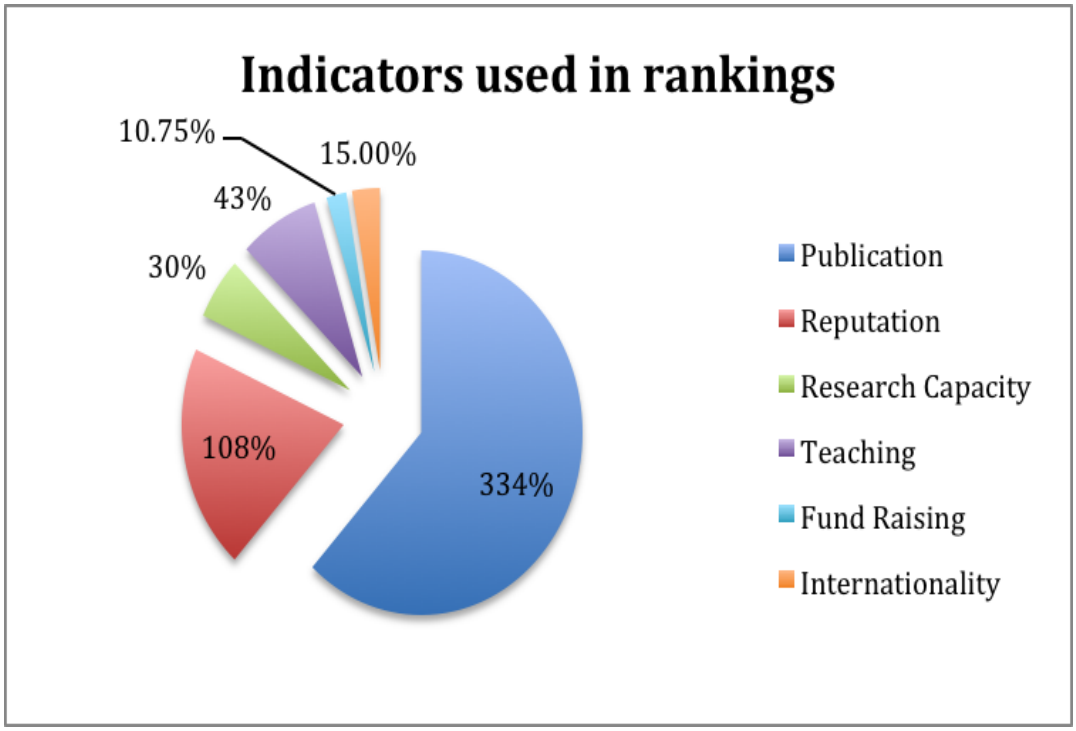
This distorsion is particularly striking in the case of the indicators of global rankings. If we were to accept the credibility of the picture that the rankings paint, we would consider higher education to be a system of insitutions dominated by research in the (natural) sciences, in which education or the humanities were just complementary activities.



Source: own calculations

The polarised character of indicators is even more apparent if we sum them up (undifferentiated, but with a good indication of the tendencies).

The aggregate indicators of the global rankings show that publication activity and international recognition weigh the most.



Source: own calculations

For the leading national universities this means that global rankings stay blind to about two-thirds of their activties. Whether we look at the student and staff composition, the scientific and training profiles, or the economic, social and community mission, we find that Hungarian institutions do not match these criteria unless they give up the social expectations raised for them, in order to meet, for example the need for teacher training, the maintenance and mediation of cultural values, the regional requirements and the maintenance of contact with local economic players. Cultivating national themes is also a priority task, which also draws resources from participation in the international natural sciences competition.

So, the majority of the non-Anglo-Saxon arts faculty and social science products (except those from traditional cultural leader countries like Germany, French, Spain and Italy) has and will have no substantial effect on the publication indicators of global rankings. The choice of subject matter, the linguistic and professional-geographical distance makes an international publication presence difficult a priori in these areas.

Moreover, the definition of „educational activity" is also quite rough, as it basically means the number (ratio) of instructors/students and the number/ratio of students participating in PhD programs.

This rough and in many ways irrelevant image of higher education that global rankings draw cannot handle the specific higher education environment. However, the usefulness of certain criteria is

fundamentally defined by the general financial structure of higher education, the extent of social mobility, the levels and forms of higher education and their permeability, the type and special needs of the population participating in higher education, and the relation of the research-development centres to higher education. There are certain indices which can be extremely misleading (for example, the amount of donation to the alma mater per graduate, or the amount of central research money obtained, or, perhaps, the number of post graduate scolarships), as they are not relevant to every higher education institutional system. On the other hand, the most generally useful cirteria - such as expenditure per student, the level of infrastructure, student/teacher ratios, support given for finding a job, etc. – also have completely different meanings in the various disciplines and the broader professional fields.

b; Indicators of National Rankings

Upon a survey of some seventy national rankings, we have observed significant differences from the logic of global rankings, while we can see that some major tendencies are prevalent in most places due to the general characteristics of the workings of higher education.

Based on analysis of national rankings, the most important special indicators are in them:

- percentage of (undergraduate, graduate, PhD) students
- infrastructure, facilities
- social inclusion
- community links
- retention
- student statisfaction
- national student surveys
- application, admission
- student entry scores

c; Typology of Indicators

Considering all the above, the types of indicators used in a lot of rankings can be included in a single coordinate system only with great care – and conclusions cannot be drawn for the various rankings or regarding the importance of specific indicators. Instead, such a typology can demonstrate the image the various ranking makers have of higher education, if we are to use it to classify the various indicators. The joint value of the three dimensions (type of indicators, classification and weight) can only be shown three dimensionally, so here we only show the schema, while the results of the data analysis can be found at: ranking.elte.hu

Type of indicator **Classification of indicators**	**Source (independent/ institution/survey)**	**Data or opinion based**	**Level of measurement (institution/ faculty/department**	**Exactitude of data (quantifiable, measurable)**	**Weight (%)**	**Validity**
situation of recruitment (number of applicants, their performance, rate of entry, social and ethnic aspects)						
student performance (scientific work, academic competitions, number of students, student ratios between undergraduate levels, distribution of students by professional field)						
teacher supply (ratio of students/teachers, number of teachers, full-time/part-time teachers, qualification of teachers)						
teaching conditions (square metre, library, IT, budget)						
learning environment (availability of dormitories, fees, scholarships, sports and cultural facilities, education administration, student organisations)						
eduicational output (ratio of graduates, ratios of graduate levels, time required for graduation)						
usefulness of degrees (job availability, salaries, staying on the career path)						
research (publications, citations, awards, research programmes)						
capacity to raise funds (competition results, economic partnerships, external commissions, ratio of students paying tuition fees)						
reputation (student and teacher acknowledgement, recognition, opinion of labour market and social players)						

international character (ratio of students and teachers, intra-institutional relations, number of joint research work, publications, grants, financing, organisational membership, conferences and events)						
social and economic presence (career image of graduates, ties with alumni, financing by alumni, economic and social relations)						
web presence (popularity, number of visitors, links, number of web contents)						

Two approaches:

– Output indicators are strikingly underprepresented[2]. The literature especially points out labour market feedback and learning efficiency as missing. But it is not justified to view the labour market as an entity operating with objective and reliable criteria compared to higher education or student opinions.

– The measurement of training efficiency is a basic requirement of the all-time education policy. This is considered as an important element, that is, they wish to use it as a comparable indicator.

3. Positions of Universities on the Global and National Rankings

The important differences between methology and results of national and global rankings come first of all from the data resources and role of the educational indicators. The comparison of these two types of the rankings leads to a controversial result: while the top universities attain very similar places, at the lower-valued groups the ranking-places of universities are in random relation to each other. Some examples:

United Kingdom:

University	QS	THE	ARWU	GUG	Guardian	CUG
University of Cambridge	4	4	4	1	1	1
University of Oxford	6	1	7	2	2	2
UCL (University College London)	7	15	17	6	14	10
Imperial College London	9	8	22	5	7	4
……						
Cardiff University	140	182	101-150	46	33	35
University of Aberdeen	141	188	201-300	44	36	42
University of Liverpool	157	158	101-150	39	59	38
Loughborough University	237	301-350		11	4	7

With converted ranking-numbering (USA):

	QS relative	THE relative	ARWU relative	USNEWS USA	WSJ/ THE	Washington Monthly
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	1	3	4	7	2	3
Stanford University	2	2	2	5	1	1
Harvard University	3	4	1	2	6	2
California Institute of Technology	4	1	6	12	10	34
University of Chicago	5	6	8	3	13	92
Princeton University	6	5	5	1	8	15
Yale University	7	8	9	3	5	13

[2] BOYADZHIEVA, P. – DENKOV, D. – CHAVDAR, N. 2010. *Comparative analysis of leading university ranking methodologies*. Sofia: Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, Bulgarian. 15:06 EUROPEAN UNION EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND Operative Programme „Human Resources Development 2007– 2013 August.

University of California, Berkeley	15	7	3	20	37	7
University of California, Los Angeles	16	10	10	24	26	8
University of California, San Diego	17	22	12	44	49	4
New York University (NYU)	18	19	22	36	33	174
Brown University	19	26	45	14	20	49
University of Wisconsin-Madison	20	23	21	44	67	28

And the case of a "little ranking-country":

Perspektywy	University	University	QS	THE	ARWU
1	University of Warsaw	University of Warsaw	366	501-600	401-500
2	Jagiellonian University in Krakow	Jagiellonian University	431-440	601-800	401-500
3	Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan	Warsaw University of Technology	601-650	501-600	
4	Warsaw University of Technology	AGH University of Science and Technology		601-800	
5	AGH University of Science and Technology	Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń	701+	801+	
6	University of Wroclaw	University of Łódź	701+	801+	
9	Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun	University of Wroclaw	701+		
12	University of Silesia in Katowice	Adam Mickiewicz University		801+	
14	Gdansk University of Technology	Gdańsk University of Technology		801+	
15	University of Lodz	University of Silesia in Katowice		801+	

In the "university zone" thus created from Helsinki to Sofia, the dominance of "western" universities is obvious, but of course, not surprising. The University of Helsinki is highly positioned in all rankings, it is placed continuously in the first hundred, and the improvement of its publication performance ensures an improving position for it on several rankings. Austrian universities are placed a category below, but are also solidly in the group of the best two hundred, with the University of Vienna especially strong on publication and the power of attracting international students. Of the universities of the former socialist countries, Charles Unversity of Prague is the most internationalised (although this is partly due to the large number of students traditionally arriving from the Slovak areas who are now considered foreigners), and its scientific performance is also competitive, so it is palced right after the Austrians.

As there are practically three factors (scientidic publication achievements, international prestige, foreign students' interest) that decide the ranking chances of universities among all the indicator packages internationally, the group of Hungarian universities standing a chance to appear on general institutional lists is not surprising.

As for research excellence however, the performance of Hungarian higher education is outstanding in true scientific evaluation. For example, looking at the distribution of ERC grants of the EU within the dramatically undervalued East-European scientific world, Hungarian scientists won more grants till 2015 than all the former socialist countries together.

UNIVERSITY	COUNTRY	ARWU					THE						THE BRICS&Emerging	THE Europe
		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-2017	2016	2016
University of Vienna	Austria	151-200	151-201	151-200	151-201	151-200	139	170	182	182	142	161	country not assessed in the ranking	67
Technical University of Graz	Austria	401-500	401-500	401-500	X	X	X	X	X	X	351-400	351-401		191-200
Vienna University of Technology	Austria	401-500	X	401-500	401-501	401-500	301-350	226-250	226-250	226-260	251-300	251-301		121-130
Sofia University	Bulgaria	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	800+		X
University of Zagreb	Croatia	401-500	401-500	X	X	401-500	X	X	X	X	X	800+		X
Charles University	Czech Republic	201-300	201-300	201-300	201-301	201-300	301-350	351-400	301-350	301-350	401-500	401-501	44	X
Palacky University	Czech Republic	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	501-600	601-800	92	X
University of Helsinki	Finland	73	76	73	67	56	91	100	103	103	76	91	country not assessed in the ranking	28
Eötvös Loránd University	Hungary	301-400	301-400	301-400	401-500	X	X	X	X	X	601-800	601-801	112	X
Univeristy of Szeged	Hungary	401-500	401-500	401-500	401-500	X	X	X	X	X	601-800	601-801	136	X
Budapest University of Technology and Economics	Hungary	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	601-800	601-801	149	X
Semmelweis University	Hungary	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	501-600	501-601	64	X
University of Debrecen	Hungary	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	601-800	800+	150	X
Corvinus University of Budapest	Hungary	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	601-800	X	X	X
CEU		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	301-350		
University of Trieste	Italy	X	X	401-500	401-501	X	226-250	226-250	201-225	201-225	301-350	351-400	country not assessed in the ranking	141-150
Jagiellonian University	Poland	301-400	301-400	301-400	301-401	401-500	301-350	X	X	X	601-800	601-600	107	X

University of Warsaw	Poland	301-400	301-400	301-400	301-401	401-500	301-350	301-350	301-350	301-350	501-600	501-601	71	X
Babes-Bolyai University	Romania	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	501-600	601-800	97	X
University of Bucharest	Romania	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	601-800	800+	146	X
Comenius University	Slovakia	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	601-800	601-801	135	X
University of Ljubljana	Slovenia	401-500	401-500	401-500	401-501	401-500	X	X	X	X	601-800	601-801	116	X

UNIVERSITY	COUNTRY	QS-World					QS - EECA			Leiden (World)					Leiden (European)				U.S. News	
		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016-2017	2014	2015	2016	2012 (1-500)	2013 (1-500)	2014 (1-750)	2015 (1-750)	2016	2012	2013	2014	2015	2015	2016
University of Vienna	Austria	160	158	156	153	155	country not assessed in the ranking			205	262	281	270	276	73	97	101	96	209	196
Technical University of Graz	Austria	373	394	411-420	X	X				X	X	676	697	716	X	X	265	269	579	660
Vienna University of Technology	Austria	274	264	246	197	183				382	408	424	431	446	160	172	168	165	307	327
Sofia University	Bulgaria	601+	X	X	X	651-700	x	x	x	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	678	676
University of Zagreb	Croatia	551-600	601-650	601-650	701+	651-700	36	38	37	247	343	342	341	347	89	138	132	129	602	
Charles University	Czech Republic	286	233	244	279	302	2	3	4	158	169	161	167	167	49	52	48	53	204	201
Palacky University	Czech Republic	X	X	X	X	651-700	71	64	59	X	X	731	730	718	X	X	284	280	473	494
University of Helsinki	Finland	78	69	67	96	91	country not assessed in the ranking			72	76	90	90	93	19	17	24	20	101	91
Eötvös Loránd University	Hungary	551-600	551-600	601-650	601-650	601-651	15	16	27	491	X	667	698	732	215	x	260	270	465	505
Univeristy of Szeged	Hungary	501-550	501-550	551-650	501-550	501-551	22	13	15	478	X	600	651	651	205	x	231	248	745	787

Budapest University of Technology and Economics	Hungary	X	X	X	X	701+	24	32	22	X	X	697	745	738	x	x	274	284	722	861
Semmelweis University	Hungary	X	X	X	X	X	x	X	x	X	X	668	691	717	x	x	261	266	736	682
University of Debrecen	Hungary	601+	601-650	601-650	601-650	651-700	25	29	29	X	X	701	711	702	x	x	276	273	585	559
Corvinus University of Budapest	Hungary	551-600	651-700	701+	701+	701+	42	42	41	X	X	X	X	X	x	x	X	x	x	X
CEU														X					X	X
University of Trieste	Italy	501-550	501-550	601-650	651-700	701+	country not assessed in the ranking			498	497	684	723	734	220	213	269	279	219	186
Jagiellonian University	Poland	401-450	376	371	411-420	431-440	8	7	7	293	327	340	330	323	113	131	130	122	340	364
University of Warsaw	Poland	398	338	335	344	366	4	6	6	379	451	472	461	462	158	189	185	176	301	319
Babes-Bolyai University	Romania	601+	701+	701+	701+	701+	43	41	36	X	X	X	X	816	X	X	X	X	560	569
University of Bucharest	Romania	601+	701+	651-700	651-700	701+	30	36	32	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	588	733
Comenius University	Slovakia	X	X	X	651-700	651-701	40	40	42	X	X	700	717	704	X	X	275	275	505	516
University of Ljubljana	Slovenia	551-600	551-600	501-550	551-600	601-650	19	25	26	216	256	274	269	268	79	94	97	95	386	433

4. Relevancy of Indicators and Ranking-Positions – A Critical Overview

We present the criticism of rankings grouped by the main ranking elements.

a; Rankings present higher education one-dimensionally, in a simplified way, falsifying the essence of university performance.

- The ranking indicators themselves would reflect how students view the universities[3], however, the image obtained through rankings is lopsided. Namely, this image presents higher education as an investment into career development, while for the students, being at university is as much a form of life as an investment into their career.
- The greatest weakness of rankings is that they ignore diversity, that is, they consider institutions without regard to their missions, objectives, and structures.[4]
- Rankings feature mainly institutions, while relevant data are much more accessible regarding specific training programmes, departments and insititutes.
- The publication routines, possibilities and genres greatly differ among the various professional fields, so the rankings that use such indicators (mainly the global comparisons) present by necessity a lopsided picture of higher education institutions.[5]

b; The world of indicators is messy, they distort the reality of higher education.

- The lists do not examine the efficiency of indicators, the various methodologies used are incongruent, and do not answer the need for implementing them in different countries or the issues of compatibility[6].
- While national rankings try to reflect on this aspect somehow (even if in many cases, they too, mainly describe scientific reputation[7]), this practically is not in the scope of global rankings[8].
- The general use of scientometric indices in itself has a dubious validity[9]. With regard to global university rankings, as it will be shown further on, the linguistic and cultural imbalances (the competitive advantage of the universities in Anglo-Saxon countries), the prevalence of (natural) sciences and within that, the

[3] VOSSENSTEYN, J. J. 2005. *Perceptions of Student Price-responsiveness – A Behavioural Economics Exploration of the Relationships between Socio-economic Status, Perceptions of Financial Incentives and Student Choice.* Enschede: CHEPS/UT.

[4] TURNER, David 2005. Benchmarking in Universities: League Tables Revisited. *Oxford Review of Education*, 31(3). pp. 353–371.

[5] CLARKE, Marguerite 2002. Some Guidelines for Academic Quality Rankings. Higher Education in Europe, 27(4). pp. 443–459.

[6] Dill, D. – Soo, M. 2005. Academic Quality, League Tables, and Public Policy: A Cross-National Analysis of University Rankings. Higher Education, (49)4: pp. 495–533.

[7] Dill, 2006: 14

[8] MARGINSON, Simon – WENDE, Marijk van der 2007.: To Rank or To Be Ranked: The Impact of Global Rankings in Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11 (3/4), pp. 306–329.

[9] Weingart P (2005): Impact of bibliometrics upon the science system: Inadvertent consequences? Scientometrics 62(1): 117–131.

changing positions in publications or support of the various professional fields cast a doubt on comparisons which use this as a key indicator.[10].

- The opinion of scientists who are in most cases both geographically and professionally distant, is more likely to be based on past performances, and as such, has little value for present evaluation.
- Relying on the so-called "third party" databases, that is, data collection from sources independent from institutions and participants is sometimes an impossible task.[11] The data obtained from surveys are very sensitive to sociological-statistical groundedness, however, empirical surveys often fail to meet such expectations. The use of the reputation indicator raises doubts anyway, because of the halo-effect.[12].
- Often they select a ranking factor to be included among the components based on whether it is available at all regarding the issue in question, and if yes, how easily objective data can be obtained (from open resources), preferably from as many insititutions as possible. In other words: availability overwrites validity in the use of indicators.

c; <u>The conjury of rankings: weighings and calculations are arbitrary and lead to false results.</u>

- In their simplest form, rankings are developed on the lines of mathematical algorithms. However, none of the rankings give any valid explanation of how they weighed a certain area when calculating.
- The logic of the composition of the various indicators is also attacked by many. The summation of indices born from differing factors seems less legitimate[13]. Summated indicators have doubtful results from the point of view of the users, too, as the preferences of future students are manifold.
- The rankings themselves are formed by creating weightings and summated indices. Even small deviations can result in great differences on the list.[14]
- If a list were to upset the "natural order" of prestige in higher education, that is, the elite institutions were not at the top, nobody would take the ranking makers seriously. In addition, commercial ranking publications are accused of having the interest of publishing novelties from year to year, as otherwise no one would be interested in the new publications.

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[10] Cunningham, Stuart (2008) 'University and Discipline Cluster Ranking Systems and the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences', Higher Education in Europe, 33: 2, 245 — 258

[11] YORKE M. 1997. A good league table guide?, *Quality Assurance in Education*. 5(2). pp. 61–72.

[12] STUART, Debra L. 1995. Reputational Rankings: Background and Development. New Directions for Institutional Research In Walleri, Dan R. – Marsha, K (eds.) 1995. *Evaluating and Responding to College Guidebooks and Rankings*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. pp.13–20.

[13] Eccles, C. 2002. The Use of University Rankings in the United Kingdom. *Higher Education in Europe*, 27(4), pp. 423–32: p. 425.

[14] MÜLLER-BÖLING, M. – FEDERKEIL, G. 2007. The CHE-Ranking of German, Swiss, and Austrian Universities. In Sadlak, J.-Cai, L. N. (eds.*). The World-Class University and Ranking: Aiming Beyond Status*. Bucharest, Romania: Cluj University Press. pp. 189–203.

d; Rankings are unfulfilled promises.

- So, rankings are inadequate in providing relevant and exact information on higher education for the students. The aggregated data characterize the whole of the institutions, although the students wish to know what each programme or department is like.
- However, the managements of higher education institutions do not benefit from the adequate information[15] either, as they do not offer a picture of the performance of the various training programmes or individual organisational units, and this is particularly true for the global rankings.[16].
- Due to the strength they represent in the media, rankings urge universities to improve their positions on the lists, often resulting in an autotelic drive for a better placement. As the palcements depend on arbitrary indicators, instead of the complex developments serving real needs, insitutions often make distorted strategic decisions.[17].

5. How to read rankings?

The appropriate interpretation of rankings and their use in the international arena is also becoming more and more accentuated: in 2015 IREG published guidelines for stakeholders on higher education and scientific rankings. The document formulates the following general recommendations:[18]

- Users need to be clear on what a particular ranking is measuring: it is necessary to interpret the aim, main target group, and the various indices of particular rankings.
- Rankings should be used as a source of information. In order to appropriately interpret the contents of rankings, other information and data need to be used as well.
- Long term processes are to be examined with less attention paid to positions and annual fluctuations.
- The methodology of rankings need to be read and understood carefully.

Based on our own analysis of rankings they will be summarized below according to what they represent and the strength with which they provide explanation/information. The two most important rules for reading rankings are systematicity and perspectivity (patience).

a; General Rules

The reading of a ranking should never begin with the numbers – the methodology and the indicators used should always be studied first. These show us exactly what the ranking is about and what can be expected from it.

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[15] HAZELKORN, Ellen 2015. *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[16] WESTERHEIJDEN, Don F.– STENSAKER, Bjørn – ROSA, Maria João 2007. *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation.* Dordrecht: Springer

[17] NAIDOO, R. – JAMIESON, I. M., 2005. Empowering participants or corroding learning?: Towards a research agenda on the impact of student consumerism in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), pp. 267–281.

[18] IREG Guideline for Stakeholders of Academic Rankings. IREG. 2015 Downloadable: http://ireg-observatory.org/en/pdfy/ieg-guidlines-for-stakeholders-of-academic-ranking.pdf

A current ranking position in itself does not tell much – changes in the position over time, however, can be informative provided the changes in the indicators used in the rankings examined are also assigned to them.

When reading global rankings, due to the limited validity, and in addition to identifying indicators, it is advisable to adhere to certain factors. First of all, it is sensible to make comparisons in the evaluation of the position of one's own institution, bearing in mind realistic objectives.

We suggest to consider the following points:

- commensurability of the financial and control criteria;
- historical and economic/social background;
- research and education offering, field profile;
- student numbers.

However, from the general rankings one needs to turn, on the one hand to the segmentation of indicators and on the other hand, to the list of fields. If the ranking presents or reveals the orders by indicators, those carry substantive information about the position of an institution in the competitive arena. The group of institutions represented on he lists compiled by research or educational fields is more manageable, scientific performance or student attendance is measured on a similar platform, therefore the ranking position gives an interpretable feedback.

This too shows that the use of rankings requires a methodical approach, but since their target groups turn to them with very different expectations, it is practical to distinguish these groups by their composition and their perceptive horizons.

b; Reading Advice According to Target Groups

- For the majority of those continuing their studies in higher education (and their parents) the national and global rankings presenting the complete institutional sphere and level are practically meaningless. As we have seen earlier, field and institution preferences are in most cases determined, so wider comparisons do not add any substantial information. It is advisable to create "private rankings" which include realistic institution choices for them (some rankings offer easily navigable IT options for this purpose on their websites).
- For students entering a partial upgrading training choosing an institution has a lower stake, while choices are determined almost as strongly by the fields, professional relations, equivalences and language skills. Therefore, although they are more informed, they tend to consider institutional prestige as a decisive factor in international rankings.
- Students view the good ranking position of their own institution as a prestige increasing factor, so they can be involved as partners in processing rankings, or in collecting additional information and experiences from within their circle (for example to measure an institution's prestige amongst the students).

- The academic leaders of the higher education institutions are the most involved readers of rankings. In their case, the most important rule when using rankings is to be able (and sober enough) to separate the real professional information of ranking holistics, their communicative effect and the higher educational policy reflections to be expected. It is particularly important for benchmarking to identify in line with the above, the competitor and reference institutions, and to compare the positions they have obtained and their indicator values with own data. Substantive professional comparisons can best be made on the research/training level, this is the area where enough information is available.

- The institutional PR department needs to react differently in the case of a negative change in the ranking position of the given institution: they might respond with a communication move, or such a tendency may require changes in the positioning of the institution. But it can expressly be damaging if this entails steps related to the institution's organisation or internal resource allocation while having no real content-related relevance (or relevance realistically influenced by content). Higher educational institutions can make use of rankings in tasks and activities such as strategic planning and quality development, and it can also be useful to get information from global rankings when developing international cooperation.[19]

- The leaders of higher education policies cannot use the ranking positions to measure real performance; the indicators at best can be used for this purpose. In addition, ranking positions need definitely be compared to the following data: institutional profiles and training structures (which are also dependent on accreditation and quotas/capacities); budget conditions; geographic / socio-geographic position; research infrastructure.

- The so-called users (recruiters of graduates, employers, enterprises employing the research-development of universities or expert services) read rankings in field selection: besides a general impression, cumulated lists do not offer them anything. The indicators that are meaningful to them on programs related to their fields and research potential are the scientific quality and quantity of training resources, the student/teacher ratios demonstrating the intensity of training, and research incomes.

- The largest user of rankings is the media. Rankings, and especially global rankings "were invented for the media", so temptation is rather strong for journalists to directly refer to them, considering them as a primary source. They actually do this quite often, although if they were to provide information on higher education and not the rankings, similarly to higher education policy-makers, they would have to reflect on the methodology, indicators, etc. of rankings.

c; Martix of Reading Rankings

The following table shows the type of information that can be expected from reading rankings, in relation to the target groups and types of rankings:

[19] IREG, 2015

	All institutions global				Global regional				Global field				All institutions national				National training fields			
Applicants to higher education																				
Entering partial upgrading training																				
Institutional management																				
Institutional management, research teams, trainers																				
(Institutional PR dept.s)																				
Higher education policy-makers																				
Media																				
Employers																				
factors	quality of education	quality of research	individual or institutional communication	raising interest, attention	quality of training	quality of researchl	individual or institutional communication	raising inrerset, attention	quality of training	quality of research	individual or institutional communication	raising interest, attention	qualtity of training	qualtity of research	individual or institution communication	raising interest, attention	quality of training	quality of research	individual or institutional communication	raising interest, attention

6. Interpreting rankings – from a Theoretical and Social Perspective

If we sum up the review of the university rankings, the logical structure of their construction and use become obvious. The algorithm of their reading is not too complicated: the level of the ranked higher educational units, (departments, faculties, institutions); the types and contents of indicators used; the calculation /weighing methods used; and the target group of the information give the coordinate system in which we can locate the type of ranking we are dealing with. Their judgement also depends on a few factors:

- Relevance of indicators (to what extent do they express real performance?);
- The extent to which they offer a common platform for different institutions or, in the case of a global ranking, for the various higher education systems;
- Whether they ensure equal opportunities for competition (are national, regional or field specificities favoured?);
- Which are the possible aims and functions? (providing information for national student or trainer/teacher mobility, measuring international scientific competition, supporting institutional quality evaluations);
- Is substantive information provided to achieve the above aims?
- Are they sufficiently transparent and are their criteria, measurement and evaluation algorithms public?
- Are they suitable for monitoring change on a longer term?
- Media presence, citations.

Despite academic reservations and serious methodological scruples, rankings have a regulatory effect on the functioning of higher education, which is explained by reactivity[20] on the organisation-sociological level. In this process, universities bristle somewhat at the state of "being measured" (a few of them, and only occasionally, do this vehemently), it is more general, however, that due to internal and external expectations of a better ranking placement, they influence their operation even by shaping their institutional identity.[21] This effect surpasses direct ranking positions and the organisational units involved in ranking. The state of "being measured" has a permanent ranking observation effect, similarly to Foucault's description of the state of being observed in prisons which prevails even if the prisoner is not actually being observed by anyone.[22] An explanation can be found to all the above in the social perception of higher education, as knowledge-institutions of academic nature enter the world of media and are portrayed through prestige as the obvious code of interpretation, actualised in the form of a ranking; in other words, with more distortions than tolerable in content, evaluation and interpretation.

[20] Espeland – Sauer: Rankings and reactivity. American Journal of Sociology. Vol. 113, Num. 1. July. 2007. 1-40.
[21] Linda Wedlin: Playing the Ranking Game. Field formation and boundary-work in European management education. 2004.
[22] Michel Foucault: Discipline and Punishment. The History of Prisons.

Because the process is media driven, it continues to strain the already increasing "internal" tension related to the measurable cultivation of science and knowledge transmission.[23] Similarly to the way in which the culture of scientific research had been "turned into numbers" by the languages of mathematical-statistical methods and self-expression[24] at first in the 18th-19th centuries, numerical enchantment became dominant by the turn of the millennium through the notion of accountability in public services, including education. This again takes shape in the ranking based evaluation of higher education, in line with the preferences of the media consumer public and the corresponding expectations of the politicians of mass democracy.

By now, institutional and analytical critiques have profoundly reviewed the methodology of higher education rankings, especially that of global rankings, the image of higher education taking shape through their indicators, and the effect they exert on institutional and higher education policy.[25] The final conclusions of these are usually fatalistic: rankings are here to stay with us. Yet how they stay with us, how they are and will be part of the world of higher education is not necessarily pre-determined. The interesting phenomenon that Hazelcom had noted, namely that the ones who pay the least attention to global rankings are American universities, who happen to lead them can be encouraging for the traditional merits of university research and education.

In other words, the professional value of higher education confident in its own performance, reconfirmed by the participation of excellent teachers and students, or otherwise expressed in institution-organisational language, as well as its autonomy can still be re-formulated, re-built in a world pervaded by the media and management culture. This rebuilding may mot only be inspired by the social ideal of freedom and autonomy, but it can also closely relate to the essence of science, knowledge transfer and acquisition. Homogenizing and simplifying measurements establishes a culture of alignment which punishes non-conformity, therefore it holds back scientific and educational creativity – which in turn affects the organisation of society in which the rationality of science, the dynamics of tradition and innovation are indispensable factors – acting both as a model for and as virtue of the western world.

This notion of the university dates back to a time before than the great changes of the past decades. Since then we are witness to rankings being legitimized by mass media and mass democracy together, therefore a question to the world of academia is whether it can obtain similar legitimacy to its authorities which are indispensable for research and educational activities. The general course of the social perception of higher education and science defines this to a much larger extent than the rankings themselves.

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[23] Hacking, I. (1999). The social construction of what? Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[24] Theodore M. Porter: Trust in Numbers. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1995.

[25] TEICHLER, U. 2011. Social Context and systemic consequence of university rankings: A meta-analysis of the ranking literature. In: SHIN, J. C. – TOUTKOUSHIAN, R. K. – TEICHLER, U. (eds.). *University rankings: Theoritical basis, methodology and impacts on global higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer. pp.55–69.

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