BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Historically, it is correct to say that ‘university ranking’ is a US invention, as the first such attempt was undertaken at the beginning of the 20th century. There have been several ranked assessments of a certain type of higher education, but the ones that we are familiar with and practise nowadays are usually rankings of institutions providing undergraduate study programmes—the first published in the USA was by US News & World Report (see Bibliographical References below, under Websites) in 1983, resembling profiles in a ‘consumer guide’. The origins of the first ranking of German universities, which was published in 1984, were slightly different; that reveals, in the overall monolithic structure of the mass higher education system, the existence of distinguishable qualitative differences (see Bibliographical References below—Rau, 1984).

It can be argued that such reasoning for undertaking rankings of higher education institutions and their activities is basically still valid. However, things have changed in recent years as we observe a rapid increase in the number and type of national as well as international (regional and global) rankings of higher education institutions. The reasons for this new situation are internal and external to higher education enterprise. In addition, globalization is a penetrating force that is affecting a growing number of domains that until now could be controlled within the institutional or national boundaries. This explains the general attention associated with international rankings.

In addition, present-day higher education is complex, costly and important. It attracts (almost) everyone’s attention. Politicians and employers, not to mention potential students and their families, are in need of quantified evidence about quality and performance without going too much into the workings of a particular institution or for the no-less-valid argument of not having sufficient capacity to undertake a fully fledged analysis of performance. The reason and need for simplified expressions of quality and performance are evident.

Of no less importance, and associated with ranking, is a quality debate, which is one of the key policy areas of higher education. This is particularly evident in the case of the Bologna Process, a major pan-European initiative to harmonize the structures and functioning of national systems of higher education among 46 participating European countries. The objective is the functional creation of the European Higher Education Area by 2010. It soon became evident that resolving the issue of the structure of studies was insufficient; it needed to be supplemented by an overhaul of mechanisms and the organization of quality. Given that there
are similar initiatives elsewhere for setting up regional areas in higher education, the ‘quality debate’ can be considered a global preoccupation.

An important part of this debate concerns the distinction between various ways of managing ‘quality’ in higher education. Exponents who prefer to refer to their method as ‘quality assurance’ hold the view that dealing with quality should aim ‘at ensuring the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education as well as at ascertaining whether a given higher education institution or programme meets a defined quality standard without weighting it and without comparing it to any other institution or programme.’ In addition, they argue that rankings are ‘mostly individual, private initiatives undertaken in the absence of a framework of reference as the one that exists for quality assurance, i.e. the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance’ (Council of Europe, 2009). In other words ‘quality assurance’ is contrasted favourably vis-à-vis rankings, as well as classification of the institutions (such as the Carnegie Classification).

The above position is in line with the argument that quality assurance is an issue of ‘internal efficiency’ of higher education, while dismissing the role of rankings as being foremost for external communications purposes. This is recognized by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which points out that ‘quality assurance agencies are producing only part of the information needed by the various stakeholders of higher education and the higher education institutions themselves. Besides quality assurance agencies that enshrine their activities in the ESG—European Standards and Guidelines—’there is a growing number of providers of information about higher education. The proliferation of ranking schemes is one aspect of this increasing need for information about higher education institutions and their activities’ (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2009).

This is why a review of the past decade of developments and trends in higher education in Europe, Canada and the USA (Usher, 2009) states:

‘One significant criticism of quality assurance schemes is that their results are not always easily interpretable, and their definitions of quality not always transparent. And it was in part because of a desire for greater transparency and clarity about what constitutes quality that performance indicators and their close cousins, rankings, were initially created. But for all that these two approaches are thought of as being antithetical to one another, the success of the quality assurance model in the past decade did not mean that the more reductionist and quantitative methods of measuring quality were in retreat. On the contrary, performance indicators and rankings grew to unprecedented heights of importance during this decade.’

A confirmation of the general tendency of such a need for a multitude of information about the performance of higher education can be recognized in other parts of the world as well.

**WHAT IS RANKING AND HOW IS ITS IMPACT ASSESSED?**

A compact definition of ranking is that it is an established approach, with corresponding methodology and procedures, for displaying the comparative standing of whole institutions or of certain domains of their performance. The majority of ‘rankings’ and all ‘league tables’ attempt to reflect the quality of institutions and/or study programme in an ascendancy of the types and domains for which the listing is being done. (All league tables present such ranked order, which is not the case with multi-dimensional rankings, such as the ‘personalized rankings’ that take into consideration institutional diversity, as produced by the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE—Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung) in Gütersloh, Germany, and published in the newspaper Die Zeit—see Websites under Bibliographical References below.)

In this context of discussion about ranking and classification, it should be mentioned that criticism of the so-called one-dimensional rankings is based on their set of indicators providing summative ordering of various
higher education institutions and, as such, not taking into account institutional diversity in higher education. In other words, such criticism is arguing that ‘classification is a prerequisite for sensible ranking’ and should be combined with ‘multidimensional’ ranking (van der Wende and Westerheijden, 2009).

There are less typical rankings, which are only indirectly related to the quality of higher education. For example, some rankings look at the proportion of graduates of a given institution that obtain employment or at the degree of institutional adherence to equal opportunities policy. There are also those rankings covering specific institutions or types of higher education, such as law or business (MBA) schools. There are even ‘amusing’ rankings such as those produced by the Princeton Review, which establishes, for example, the annual list of ‘best US party schools’, its scope including the use of hard liquor, beer drinking or marijuana smoking. However, even in such cases, rankings can provide useful information about campus security or student life outside the classroom.

The worldwide mapping of ranking activities demonstrates that it is a growing global phenomenon in place in more than 40 countries. Taking into consideration that, in a number of countries, there is a variety of rankings of higher education institutions, an overall number of rankings easily exceeds 100. Higher education ranking is present in all regions of the world, including those in which universities are striving to ameliorate their position in the global rankings, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa (Sall et al, 2009) and Muslim countries (Billal, 2007).

Among the international or global rankings produced at present, a special mention is merited for the following:

- the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), compiled by the Centre for World-Class Universities in the Graduate School of Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (People’s Republic of China), was first released in 2003 and has a ranking table covering the first 500 higher education institutions;
- World University Rankings from Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), were first released in November 2004 and present the top 200 higher education institutions;
- Webometrics’ Ranking of World Universities from the Cybermetrics Lab, a research group of the Spanish Scientific Research Council (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas—CSIC), was first released in 2007 and had data on 6,000 higher education institutions; and
- the Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities from the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan.

There are also rankings that deal with professional schools and programmes. Internationally, the most popular are those of business schools and MBA programmes from publications such as the Financial Times, The Economist, the Wall Street Journal and Business Week. As such, these rankings are perceived as important supplements, relevant to professional accreditation because of the attention given to rankings by various professional bodies (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Ranking is done for a variety of reasons, the most frequent being:

- to provide the public with information (whatever the specifics of the ranking format) on the standing of higher education institutions for individual or group decision-making (potential students, parents, politicians, foundations, funding agencies, research councils, employers, international organizations, etc);
- to foster healthy competition among higher education institutions;
- to provide additional evidence about performance of particular higher education institutions and/or study programmes;
- to stimulate the evolution of centres of excellence; and
- to provide additional rationale for allocation of funds.
There are, generally speaking, four sources of data and information that are collected for the conduct of rankings:

- surveys that allow the receipt of opinions from various stakeholders (there is a clear preference for peer-review) in order to obtain a set of comparable data on quality and prestige for different institutions, study programmes and/or other activities;
- generally available (public domain) data and information collected by government agencies and other various agencies involved in higher education and research;
- data and information collected by institutions of higher education, which can be of two types—data on governance and management that is usually collected by institutions, and/or data and information exclusively requested and provided to those drawing up the rankings; and
- bibliometric/scientometric databases, such as those run by Thomson Reuters (ISI Web of Knowledge) and Elsevier (Scopus), which facilitate a multi-disciplinary and research performance assessment.

There are factors for and against each of the above basic sources, particularly the surveys. However, even more frequent and pronounced criticism is voiced with regard to the methodologies adopted for a given ranking, thus contesting its credibility. In general, the critics of ranking point out that it fails to do justice to such important tasks of any higher education institution as teaching and learning. They also claim that it leads to an undue stress on prestige, status and brand, including, in some cases, providing misleading information. More specifically, the less dogmatic (therefore more credible) criticisms question:

- the appropriateness of aggregating information across a range of study programmes for a large and multi-disciplinary research university into a single ranking number;
- how calculations and outcomes of ranking are based on the arbitrary assignment of weight to variables that, by themselves, might be of questionable validity in the first place;
- drawing comparisons from survey data with low response rates;
- the lack or insufficiency of ‘warning clauses’ about the methodological limitations of a particular ranking or league table exercise;
- the arbitrary selection of respondents for the reputational surveys;
- the favour shown to research outcomes in natural and life sciences vis-à-vis humanities and arts (not to mention that, apart from the former’s substantially better coverage in bibliometric databases, such rankings do not give sufficient credit to books published, thus not recognizing the value of synthesis in research assessment); and
- how institutions without prestigious ranking often believe that their poor rating creates a cycle of disadvantage for them.

Such criticisms of ranking motivated some leaders and organizations to urge a boycott of participation in rankings. However, according to a survey of US News’s America’s Best Colleges ranking (Morse, 2008): 97% of participating institutions reported that they planned to participate again next year and in the foreseeable future; 59% of participating schools said that ranking reports were ultimately beneficial to students during the application process; and 57% of the institutions said that the US News rankings provided fair school assessment.

In the above context of criticisms of rankings, it should be pointed out that, in a field as error-strewn as statistical evidence of academic quality, caution is always wise. It needs to be repeatedly said that rankings can only be an approximate reflection of the complex work of the higher education enterprise. However, at the same time it is worthy to point out that there can also be the following ‘hidden agenda’ reasoning for the dismissal of rankings (Carey, 2006):
'Colleges object to universal, highly public, well-understood rankings precisely because they’re so influential. Rankings limit colleges’ ability to control their image and the terms of their own success. Antipathy to rankings, as well as the consistent refusal of the higher education establishment to provide clear, detailed, public information about how well it serves students, is rooted in an intense desire for independence.’

It should also be acknowledged that well-conducted rankings can play a role of key differentiator between legitimate institutions and programmes, and degree mills, as well as dealing with certain taboos about the inner workings of higher education.

There is a perception, eagerly upheld by opponents of rankings, that they are a self-promotion initiative of the press or media generally. In reality, the number and type of providers of rankings is diversified, representing media, government agencies, independent professional organizations, accrediting bodies, funding agencies for higher education and/or research, academic mobility agencies, individual or group initiatives and academics themselves.

It would be misleading to say that rankings provide an incontestable picture of the quality and performance of higher education. It is equally incontestable that rankings do have impact on institutions, policies and decision-making at the individual, institutional and governmental level. However, it is an exaggeration to say that there is a ‘worldwide “obsession” with league tables’, despite the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study showing that higher education institutions worldwide were much more concerned about league tables and ranking systems than expected. The study, which was conducted by Ellen Hazelkorn of the Dublin Institute of Technology, in Ireland, was based on a survey of leaders and senior managers in more than 200 higher education institutions in 41 countries; it is influencing key policy-making areas and is taken seriously by students, government and the media (Hazelkorn, 2007). The main findings show that:

- 58% of respondents were not happy with their current ranking;
- 70% wanted to be in the top 10% nationally;
- 71% wanted to be in the top 25% internationally;
- 57% believed that league tables and rankings were influencing the willingness of other institutions to form partnerships with them; and
- 56% had a formal internal mechanism for reviewing their rank order.

Hazelkorn pointed to strikingly similar types of actions across institutions, such as incorporating the outcomes of rankings into their strategic planning, their marketing, their taking of decisions leading to reorganization of their institutions in order to achieve higher rankings and, in general, their using the results to identify weaknesses and eradicate problems. The last application of rankings to a great extent resembles the main function of another important tool for quality enhancement, which is ‘benchmarking’, a comparison of performance of the whole institution or its components within an agreed set of parameters but without hierarchical presentation of the outcomes. In several instances, respondents indicated that a special investigation team had been appointed or assigned to ensure regular observations of rankings and methods and to monitor the performance of peer institutions.

A study recently produced by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) in Washington, DC (USA), tried to understand the role that rankings play in institutional decision-making and how institutions in countries covered by the study—Australia, Canada, Germany and Japan—use rankings (IHEP, 2009).

That study is consistent with previous research findings on the topic and with other studies, such as that one carried out by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Despite criticisms of rankings such as too much importance being given to them over other institutional assessments and practices, or that rankings can tilt institutional resources to favour research over teaching, the study found overall that rankings could...
also serve as leverage to make higher education more effective and innovative (HEFCE, 2008). The following domains in which rankings can help were identified:

- improved data-based decision-making, as higher education institutions increasingly use data to inform their decision-making and to document student and institutional success; rankings can prompt institutional discussions about what constitutes success and how the institution could better document and report that success;
- increased participation in broader discussions about measuring institutional success, encouraging institutions to move beyond their internal conversations to participate in broader national and international discussions about new ways of capturing and reporting academic success and excellence;
- despite the fact that most rankings favour research over teaching, institutional use of rankings to prompt changes that directly improve student learning experiences, demonstrating that rankings can also lead to positive change in teaching and learning practices;
- contribution to identification and replication of model programmes in the context of the peer benchmarking function of the ranking of higher education institutions; and
- contributing to an increase of institutional collaboration.

The last finding of the HEFCE is particularly interesting in view of the criticism of rankings as an instigator of competition among institutions to the detriment of collaboration and solidarity. The IHEP study, too, suggested that rankings foster collaboration, such as research partnerships, student and faculty exchange programmes, and alliances. More specifically (IHEP, 2009):

‘Rankings can be important starting points to identify institutions with which to collaborate and partner. In highlighting ways ranking systems can positively impact institutional decision making, this issue brief also underscores the continued need for attention to potential negative effects of rankings. These include the degree to which rankings—and an emphasis on developing world-class universities—undermine college access for disadvantaged student populations; an unbalanced emphasis on research over teaching; the ratio between full-time and adjunct faculty; the improvement of key rankings variables as a substitute for comprehensive, institution-generated strategic planning; and the funding of world-class institutions at the expense of institutions that further other national goals. Institutions should consider the concerns raised about the effects of rankings as catalysts for direct policy actions to mitigate potential negative impacts.’

Given that higher education rankings have become an established phenomenon to be found around the world, it is not surprising to see that the ranking scene is evolving—first and foremost in a good direction. Those who produce and publish rankings are increasingly aware that they put their reputation on the line if ranking tables are not free of material errors or if they are not carried out with due attention to basic deontological procedures. In this context, an important initiative was undertaken by a group of experts and producers of university rankings known as the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG), which in May 2006 came up with a set of guidelines and goals for bodies involved in the practice of ranking—as the working paper was known, ‘The Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions’. Adoption of the Berlin Principles (see Websites under Bibliographical References below) was a logical and quality self-assuring measure on behalf of IREG in view of the rapid developments in this area. IREG has recently decided to move further in order to promote quality self-assuring measures, elaborating the framework procedures for undertaking audits of rankings in line with the Berlin Principles. A positive result of such an audit would be to receive the label of ‘IREG Recognized’.

An important new initiative to modernize global university rankings has been proposed by the European Commission of the European Union (EU), which has awarded a four-country consortium of institutions a
contract to design and test a new multi-dimensional rankings system. The project will take two years and should produce an alternative to other global rankings by reflecting not only research but also teaching and employability. Some 150 institutions in the fields of engineering and business studies in member states of the EU, Australia and countries of North America and Asia will be selected to test such rankings. A ‘pre-final’ report on the testing phase is due in November 2010; in the second half of 2011 the new European rankings system should be launched (according to the emailed/online newspaper, *University World News*—MacGregor, 2009).

Another interesting new development that could be interpreted as a hybrid of quality assessment and of rankings is a recent initiative of the OECD called the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO—see Website below). Its aim is to measure various types of learning outcomes and to examine criteria influencing those outcomes. Ten countries are participating in the feasibility study: Australia, Belgium (specifically, Flanders), Finland, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. In each participating country some 10 higher education institutions will undertake assessment of the learning gain of students in two disciplines, engineering and economics, the learning outcomes of which tend to be more or less invariable across countries and cultures. However, although it is stressed that AHELO is not a league table and that it might achieve assessment of teaching and learning (which are most neglected by international rankings, primarily because of the lack of appropriate evidence and data), it remains to be seen whether hierarchical differentiation will be totally absent.

**CONCLUSIONS**

From this brief review of current developments, initiatives and research it can be concluded that rankings influence many areas crucial to the performance of higher education. They can be of assistance in such areas as strategic positioning and planning, staffing and organization, quality assurance, resource allocation, marketing and fundraising, admissions and financial aid, student and academic mobility, etc. All these areas are of great importance in the context of the new paradigm of higher education and the global competition for talent, resource and prestige, nowadays associated with seeking the status of a world-class university (Sadlak and Liu, 2007).

It is very true that the domains of activities performed by higher education institutions that are then reflected in rankings are directly related to quality and performance (as well as excellence and reputation). They can be defined, understood and interpreted differently by different stakeholders, thus representing a degree of fuzziness. However, there is ample evidence that these drawbacks do not totally prevent such exercises from being undertaken, nor from being taken into consideration in case of individual as well as group decisions. It should be mentioned that higher education is not the only domain in which the decision-making process has to deal with fuzziness and with trying to turn subjective concepts into more or less meaningful statistical evidence—other sectors, for example, are health services and banking. In addition, even if rankings are rough and ready and a minimalist reflection of performance and quality, they can give the opportunity of determining whether a particular policy is effective.

In the world of today, it is growing difficult for leaders of higher education institutions to contest external assessment using ‘a shield of exceptionality’ for each study programme or institution. Equally important, the higher education community and other stakeholders are better informed about what rankings can and cannot present. There is a growing understanding among leaders of higher education institutions that using ‘a shield of exceptionality’ for each study programme or institution has its limits and that externally carried-out assessment is part of the quality culture.

It would not be far-fetched to associate the proliferation in rankings and league tables with the ‘massification’, or unprecedented increase in enrolments, in higher education around the world. In addition, the flood of cross-border private and distance providers, the trend towards internationalization of tertiary education and
the related increase in stakeholders’ demands for greater accountability, transparency and efficiency have all contributed to increased incentives for quantifying quality.

It is not surprising, then, that, in the present tertiary education world characterized by increased global competition for students, the number of rankings has grown as governments and the public at large are ever more preoccupied with the relative performance of tertiary education institutions and with getting the best perceived value as consumers of education. In such a context, ‘quality’ and ‘prestige’ become important distinctions in brand battles and one of the key elements in a competition for scarce resources and talents. Moreover, whereas in the past the system of higher education was assuring the good quality of a given university, nowadays it is the institution or group of institutions that do well in international rankings that is raising prestige of the wider system.

In the 10 years or so since higher education league tables and rankings began to grip the attention of institutional leaders, researchers and policy makers, much has happened. The continuum of reaction has moved from an almost universal derision or disdain of the practice, to a benign acceptance of having to ‘put-up with’ or ‘live with’ rankings and, finally, to accepting their role and value—provided that their methodologies are clear and transparent. In conclusion, higher education ranking can be of relevance for seeking prestige, in raising visibility and in embedding quality.

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**


University World News—see MacGregor, K.


WEBSITES

Academic Ranking of World Universities: www.arwu.org


Berlin Principles: www.ireg-observatory.org


Business School Rankings (Financial Times): rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/global-mba-rankings

Business Schools—Rankings and Profiles (Business Week): www.businessweek.com/bschools


Carnegie Classifications: www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications

CHE Ranking of European Universities, from the Centre for Higher Education Development (Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung) in Gütersloh (at Zeit Online): ranking.zeit.de/che10/CHE

ISI Web of Knowledge (Thomson Reuters): www.webofknowledge.com
OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes—see AHELO

Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities: ranking.heeact.edu.tw/en-us/2008/Page/Methodology


Ranking Web of World Universities (Webometrics): www.webometrics.info

Scopus (Elsevier): www.scopus.com

World University Rankings (THE/QS): www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/hybrid.asp?navcode=105&pubcode=1&typecode=142


Which MBA online (Economist Intelligence Unit): mba.eiu.com
This essay was originally published in The Europa World of Learning, a guide to higher education, research and other academic institutions throughout the world. The print edition of this internationally respected title was first published over 60 years ago and has become widely acclaimed as the premier source of information on the academic sphere world-wide. The online version, updated quarterly, offers an unprecedented level of access to global institutions of higher education and learning, and to the people who work within them.

Each year The Europa World of Learning features introductory essays by respected experts and academics on themes around international higher education and research. They are intended to give readers an insight into these sectors and help them develop a fuller understanding of how they stand now and may develop in the future.

To find out more about The Europa World of Learning see www.worldoflearning.com, or contact reference@routledge.co.uk to arrange a free trial.

© Routledge 2011, all rights reserved.


For more information see www.worldoflearning.com.