Editorial: The Ranking Game

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A video abstract of this article can be viewed at http://youtu.be/jZDm8HrNLzw

In December 2011, the journal *Science* published the information that two Saudi-Arabian universities were massively recruiting highly-cited research stars from Cambridge, Harvard & Co. who had made it to the ISI list of most frequently cited researchers. For about $ 70,000 per year they were offered an affiliation to these universities in exchange for the obligation to be present once a year for a short period and to indicate in all their publications their affiliation to the Saudi University. The result was that within two and three years both institutions made it from not listed at all into the group of the top 200 to 300 in the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU Ranking). Thus, universities are buying the reputation of researchers in order to increase their own reputation. Not all researchers who were contacted could be bought. However, in March 2012, the largest Australian daily *The Australian* published a list of 60 frequently cited researchers who had been appointed as 'distinguished scientists' at one of the two Saudi-Arabian universities, among them 13 Germans. Altogether, it comprises a number of researchers from top universities in the US, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Australia. All are men, some of whom are already retired.

In 2012, the Australian University of New South Wales published a job advertisement for 'Strategic Reputation Management' and the Australian La Trobe University was looking for a 'Manager for Institutional Rankings'. For an annual salary of $ 100,000 the job comprised among other things the task to manage the university's relationships with ranking agencies and to 'maximise' or 'optimise' the respective institutions' ranking position (Inside Higher Ed, 22 March 2013). In the same article, the University of New South Wales' Pro-Vice Chancellor was quoted as having stated that it was essential for a university to have a team that takes care of the proper presentation of the numbers.

But does this kind of manipulation work? And, more importantly, is such a practice still related to good science and scholarship? It becomes clear that rankings 'seduce and coerce at the same time' (see Locke in this issue). Those universities which want to participate in the ranking game must 'internalise and institutionalise' the logic of the rankings (ibid.). Morphew and Swanson (2011, p. 188) have pointed out that 'rankings determine and even codify which kinds of organisational behaviour and practices are legitimate'. Therefore the players know that they must be successful under the conditions of the measurements. Ranking positions have a signalling effect and contribute in a seemingly objective way to the discussions about what constitutes quality in higher education. Thus, universities use a number of gaming techniques in order to improve their ranking positions. Morphew and Swanson (2011, p. 190) provide further examples from US American universities:
- Adjunct instructors are not counted when reporting the percentage of full-time faculty employed;
- Admission data are presented in such a way that they signal a high level of selectivity;

- Law Schools are spending large amounts of money on glossy brochures to influence reputation scores.

Hence the authors come to the conclusion that these forms of participation in the ranking game simultaneously challenge and reinforce the legitimacy of rankings. A classical paradox!

In her survey among university leaders published in 2007 Ellen Hazelkorn found that 93% of the respondents wanted to improve the position of their university in national rankings and 82% wanted to improve the position of their university in international rankings. 70% wanted to see their university among the top 10% in national rankings and 71% wanted to see their university among the top 25% in international rankings. However, other studies have shown that variations in ranking positions are only temporary and mostly disappear after two years. Between 1988 and 1998, 20 universities out of the top 25 identified by the US News and World Report Ranking never fell out of this top group. Therefore it is almost impossible for other universities to move into it.

Global rankings like the ARWU Ranking of Shanghai Jiao Tong University or the ranking produced by the Times Higher Education provide information about four to six percent of all universities globally. As a consequence 'all universities are judged on the basis of criteria that are only appropriate for top universities' (Rauhvargers, 2011, p. 68). This leads to the construction of a 'deficit model' (Locke, 2011) which drives all universities that participate in the ranking game into a perpetual race to improve their ranking position. At the same time, rankings hardly offer any possibility to rise into the top group. So why all the excitement?

First, good ranking positions trigger the famous Matthew effect. Better students and academics apply, donations by alumni rise, and in many countries such universities receive increased budget allocations from the State.

Second, rankings distribute reputation. And reputation is an important immaterial resource, difficult to build up and easy to lose.

Third, rankings are popular among political decision makers. On the one hand because they reduce complexity, on the other because high ranking positions of one or more universities in the country have become an indicator for the scientific and technological capacity and productive efficiency of the national economy as such.

But rankings do not provide any information about the quality of a university as a whole, even if they pretend to do just that. And there are only few players who have the capacity to play the game profitably. According to Salmi (2009, p. 32), these are in particular large, preferably older and research intensive universities with a broad spectrum of subjects (i.e. including medicine) located in the English-speaking world. In addition, they have to have three further features: abundant resources, a benevolent management, and a concentration of talent. Other potential players should better abstain from playing the game. They do not stand a chance.

In the meantime, resistance against rankings has become more frequent and more visible. In Germany, several learned societies have recommended to boycott the CHE Ranking, among them the German Society for Sociology, the German Society of Historians, the German Society of Chemists, and the German Society of Education. These organisations have issued appeals to both their individual academic members and the respective university faculties and departments not to submit data any longer. In addition, four universities have asked not to submit any data for purposes of rankings: Hamburg, Leipzig, Cologne, and the Distance

University of Hagen. The Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Hamburg stated in an interview that the generation and proper presentation of data for the CHE ranking would require the work capacity of 12 people and they were not prepared to finance this any longer when the task of a university is to provide a good education to the students.

In March 2013, 300 professors of economics in Germany rebelled against a ranking of business studies and economics professors carried out by the *Handelsblatt*, a daily newspaper focusing on economic news. Their main argument was that such a ranking worked with wrong incentives and that a heading like 'Germany in search of the super prof' was too tacky. For all those who are not very familiar with Germany, there is a German television show called 'Germany in search of the super star' in which young talents (mostly singers) compete against each other. The show became known in particular for its prejudiced and mean comments by the jurors.

This issue contains a number of contributions from scholars who critically assess rankings and the ranking game. The Shanghai Jiao Tong University celebrated the 10th anniversary of its ARWU Ranking in November 2013 with a memorable international conference. Several of the contributors to this issue of EJE had been invited to it and, apart from congratulating the Shanghai Ranking Group on their phenomenal and quite surprising success, a critical discussion was started about a number of unintended side effects of (global) rankings which have to be taken into account by any further exercises – be they global, regional or national – to establish different, new, better, or methodologically sounder rankings.

Many experts have said that rankings were here to stay. Views continue to vary with respect to recommendations about how to deal with rankings. And such recommendations will have to be different for the national policy level and the institutional strategic dimension. However, the editors of this issue thought that the time had come to put together the various aspects of critical assessment and have the most important arguments lined up.

Themes and Outline of the Issue

Along the broad themes concerning rankings as a phenomenon, the contributions of this issue analyse the rankings as knowledge products and measures. Further contributions analyse their effects on higher education policies and institutional practices. We begin this issue with Ellen Hazelkorn's insightful overview of global university rankings. This is followed by two analyses of rankings and their methodology. Andrejs Rauhvargers' article discusses recent developments and changes in global rankings. Simon Marginson aims to measure rankings against their theoretical grounding in social sciences.

A further part of the issue focuses on the effects and impacts of rankings. Richard Münch and Len Ole Schäfer explore the effects of rankings on diversity and renewal in science, providing a comparison between Germany, the UK, and the US. William Locke analyses the intensification of ranking logics as part of an intensified marketisation of higher education in the UK. Tero Erkkilä's article discusses the rankings' ability to frame higher education as a policy problem in and of the EU and at national levels and tries to answer the question concerning the effects this is causing. Finally, Barbara Kehm provides a summary of many viewpoints above, discussing the impacts and unintended side effects of ranking at national and institutional level.

The First Decade of Global University Rankings

All the contributions of the issue are attuned to the short history of global rankings. The Shanghai Ranking was first published in 2003, a mere ten years ago, which serves as a reminder of how quickly the rankings have become a central element in the external assessment of higher education institutions. However, we could also say that we have already been ranked for a decade, thus giving us an opportunity for critical reflection.

Rankings have intensified the cross-country comparisons in higher education. As Hazelkorn points out, this can be linked to the attempts at modernising higher education amid the transnational drive for evidence-based decision-making. As global knowledge products, university rankings can be further linked to the recent surge in various other rankings and country comparisons in terms of their governance and economic performance. The global university rankings are also related to global power shifts, in the framework of which Asia is challenging Europe and the US through its economic competitiveness and growth. Hazelkorn further identifies different phases in the development of university rankings, starting as a domestic affair in the US in 1910, gaining popularity there by the 1960s and also inspiring other national rankings before the emergence of global rankings since 2003.

As measures of transparency, the rankings have exposed higher education institutions to international comparison, but also helped to link the issue with economic competitiveness (Hazelkorn; Erkkilä; Münch and Schäfer). Despite the methodological limitations and flaws, the field of global rankings is becoming more structured with new players joining in (Hazelkorn; Rauhvargers). The existing numbers are criticised with new ones leading to the further institutionalisation of rankings as a means of assessment.

There are clear indications that the rankings are causing changes in higher education policies and institutions (Kehm; Hazelkorn) and their impact is assumed to increase (Rauhvargers). Though it might be rather soon to estimate the full scope of such changes, we can already see some general trends. The contributions of this issue point to policy convergence (Hazelkorn), declining diversity (Münch and Schäfer), marketisation and stratification (Erkkilä; Locke), as well as richness of unintended consequences (Kehm; Erkkilä) with regard to ranking. In addition, when analysed in terms of their theoretical grounding, rankings also fall short in one or more respects (Marginson).

But what do the rankings actually measure and whom do they serve (see Kehm)? The question implies an analysis of the rankings as knowledge products and measures, pointing to policy analysis and institutional outcomes.

Assessing the Rankings

During the last ten years, we have seen a rapid development within the field of global rankings, with new ranking producers joining the activity and the methodologies of the early rankings being revised. While the problems and limitations of the rankings are by now well documented, the constant development in the field makes them a moving target. Rauhvargers explores the recent developments in global rankings, showing the different kinds of knowledge products that have evolved recently from these rankings.

In general, there seems to be a shift in the assessment tools that now exceeds the rankings and reaches out to a broader collection and presentation of data.

Rauhvargers and Marginson see a further trend in the ranking production, namely that the ranking producers are becoming more critical about their knowledge products and more responsive to critique. There are new attempts at providing benchmarks that are not in the form of a ranking and there are also regional rankings to challenge the truly global ones (Rauhvargers; Hazelkorn; Kehm).

One of the particular concerns with university rankings has been that they idealise the publication models from the natural sciences and medicine. In particular, the publication patterns of social sciences and humanities are not well acknowledged by the rankings. Consequently, these disciplines are under pressure to change. Somewhat ironically, the rankings themselves largely build on social scientific methods. Marginson's contribution critically analyses the social scientific premises of the rankings, delivering a comparative analysis of prominent global rankings. He analyses six global rankings against six social scientific criteria and two behavioural criteria. The resulting matrix draws attention to certain limitations of the rankings, such as the problems regarding the use of surveys, normalised (Anglo-American) institutional forms, and the commitment to produce a single ranking number.

The contributions present several methodological limitations and flaws in the rankings (Kehm, Hazelkorn). While global university rankings have been developing rapidly in the first decade, the major issues concerning the ranking methodology are still largely unsolved. Rather, it seems that while the rankings are not fully capable of assessing the complexity and diversity of global higher education, it is the higher education institutions and policies that are changing to fit the new norm.

Institutional Effects and Unintended Consequences

Rankings have come to steer the activities of individual higher education institutions. They are means of control and evaluation but at the same time they are producing negative effects and unintended consequences (Kehm). For instance, they have been criticised for leading to new status hierarchies in higher education, convergence at the cost of diversity, and commodification of higher education.

Münch and Schäfer provide a broad and compelling comparison of the effects of rankings in three university systems: Germany, the UK and the US. This comparison of three national trajectories draws attention to history and cultural norms and values in which universities are embedded. Essentially, rankings are cartographies of institutional pasts. They portray institutional differences within and among systems but, as they are currently produced almost in real time, the reading of the rankings is, surprisingly enough, wholly ahistorical. Rankings make institutional traditions appear as mere policy choices that are easily changed. In reality, we are looking at long institutional trajectories that are closely linked to the general conditions in a society.

Münch and Schäfer argue that in the light of the ranking results, the competitive resource allocation and stratified university system in the UK have not given it a relative advantage compared to Germany's less stratified system. On the contrary, they see more potential for scientific renewal in the German context. On the other hand, the stratified university system in the US is assessed more positively. But as the authors argue, the US system is large and diverse enough to contain stratification's negative effects on academic renewal.

This systemic analysis also highlights the peculiarities of global university rankings. While most of the global economic and social indicators compare countries, the rankings in the domain of higher education focus on individual institutions. The systemic level is therefore often neglected in the analysis. The article by Münch and Schäfer is an important contribution to highlight the systemic differences with regard to the growing competitive logic in higher education.

The case of the UK is more closely analysed in the article by Locke, showing how the intensification of the rankings logic plays out in the marketised higher education environment. Based on interviews, the article explores the attitudes towards ranking in British universities. Locke shows how the position in the rankings influences the mind-set of actors and also causes changes in institutional practices. In this respect, the rankings have further facilitated the marketisation of higher education in the UK. According to Locke, the existing status and reputational hierarchies condition how institutions at the different ends of the hierarchy approach the rankings. In this respect, the rankings further serve the inequality between institutions and the stratification of the system.

Global university rankings assess individual institutions but they also make comparisons between countries and regions possible. European higher education institutions fare somewhat poorly in global rankings, leading to policy efforts to improve the rankings by the European Commission and national governments alike. Erkkilä shows how the rankings have the power to frame policy problems, leaving seemingly no room for alternative problem settings. There is now an EU level policy discourse on 'European higher education' that links the pursuit to improve standings in global rankings to agendas for improving economic competitiveness.

At the national level, the discourse on global rankings reflects the public values and historical narratives prevailing in the national context. Nevertheless, there is a strong policy convergence in EU member states that uses rankings as a means of problem identification and also refers to them when identifying solutions. But the actual institutional changes are again conditioned by the traditions that prevail in the respective national contexts. Moreover, not all European countries are equally affected by rankings and we can identify differences owing to size and position in the centre-periphery axis (Erkkilä).

There is also the issue of stakeholders, as the rankings are not only influencing the universities and national policy experts, but also the students. Kehm argues that, although the rankings are increasingly being used by students and their parents when choosing the place to study, the choice of institution in Europe is often still guided by geographical factors and the rankings are of limited importance for most students.

We are currently witnessing a competition in prestige (see Weber, 1978) among institutions and policy makers (Kehm) based on a status anxiety (Locke). At the European level, this is leading to concentration of research and growing mistrust among universities that only want to collaborate with institutions of similar ranking. At the national level, the rankings have brought higher education to the top of policy agendas, leading to concentration of research funds and vertical stratification at the cost of diversity.

The Way Forward

This issue of the Journal aims to provide a critical assessment of the global university rankings, outlining the developments and issues of concern after ten

years of global rankings. Looking at the way forward, how can we live with the rankings?

Several contributions discuss ways to contest the rankings through new knowledge products (Hazelkorn; Rauhvargers; Kehm; Locke). Although the rankings build on social science methods, the social scientists themselves have not been particularly happy with the results that are often seen to favour natural sciences and medicine. Marginson argues that the rankings are far too important to be left to the ranking producers alone. He therefore encourages social scientists to take the initiative to criticise the methods used and provide alternatives.

The conventional wisdom is that the (global) rankings are here to stay. But some of the authors assess that the rankings might eventually become challenged with more elaborate and detailed assessments (Locke) and even more individualised content spread in social media (Hazelkorn). Moreover, there might also be new demands for regional university rankings that take institutional contexts better into account. But there seems to be something persuasive about the numerical presentation of higher education evaluation. Even if we were to expect more detailed assessments of less than a global scope, the numerical information is likely to remain a central element of the assessments.

Based on the above critical contributions, we can argue that any university reform which uses rankings as a guideline would be short-sighted and lack historical awareness and contextual understanding. Moreover, we should develop a critical understanding of policy discourses that are presented in numerical form – what is actually being measured, by whom and for what purposes? With regard to the future, the most important decision for the different stakeholders is whether they are willing to play the ranking game. We should focus on maintaining high academic standards instead of being obsessed with the rankings that, after all, have had such a short institutional lifespan.

Referring to Hirsch (1997), Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009) distinguish between normative/cognitive and rational/instrumental forms of trust in European higher education. They argue that over the last ten years or so the normative/cognitive forms of trust have been replaced by rational/instrumental forms. The reasons for this are said to be a growing international and even global interaction of higher education institutions which is mostly no longer based on the forms of trust which develop over time and through longstanding knowledge of the actors involved. Furthermore, the expansion of higher education systems has contributed to a growing number of actors and detailed information is not always available for cognitive/normative trust to develop. Despite this, the frequency of interaction has increased. Within national systems of higher education expansion has led governments to expect their higher education institutions to do more with less funding.

Instruments to monitor and control efficient spending of public money and the quality of activities and services have been developed in order to re-establish trust. However, the trust that developed was less a result of interaction over time but rather a result of the information gathered. Increasingly, higher education institutions had to negotiate with the responsible public authorities for their funding and the social contracts that existed previously were replaced by pacts (Olsen, 2007). Thus, universities were made accountable for their performance and increasingly benchmarked against each other. On the one hand, more autonomy was granted to the institutions to allocate their budgets, recruit staff, select their students, and

decide about the number of programmes and departments, but on the other, results were monitored on the basis of externally set standards. In this way the traditional relationship between higher education institutions and public authorities has been reshaped by basing it on rational/instrumental forms of trust. In addition, external stakeholders have become legitimate actors in the 'trust-creating business' (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009, p. 132) and external agencies have become involved in the setting of standards, procedures and guidelines for quality assurance. Global rankings have greatly contributed to this development. Trust in its rational/instrumental form is thus established through accountability and stakeholder control and has become a multi-actor and multi-dimensional issue in the governance of higher education.

In contrast to these developments, Blass (2012) has argued that 'in the future, universities will need to contribute to the global public good in order to justify their position on the world stage, while contributing to the local private good in order to sustain their existence financially. By achieving the former they will attract students to achieve the latter'. We can see in this argument the beginnings of a new social contract. This has increasingly and more urgently been defined in recent years as higher education producing both high quality and societal relevance in teaching, learning, and research. Thus, the (new?) social contract of higher education is one that must be guided by the question: how can European higher education contribute to the global public good under conditions of market competition in the emerging knowledge societies and economies?

The first article in Part II by Marc Pilkington presents a comparative survey on the French and Indian higher education systems. Despite their respective idiosyncratic features, it shows that the two countries have both evolved comprehensively towards a knowledge-based society in order to ensure the prosperity of their citizens. Secondly, it singles out a threefold convergence between the two higher education systems on academic, technological and institutional grounds.

The second article by Miquel Àngel Alegre and Ricard Benito examines to what extent certain contextual factors explain levels of education attainment and participation amongst youths in 30 European countries, while also exploring the scope for action of education policy when dealing with these issues. By simple OLS regressions, it first evaluates the impact of a group of contextual indicators on two measures: the percentage of the population aged 20 to 24 having completed at least upper secondary education (education attainment), and the number of students aged 18 as a percentage of the corresponding age population (education participation). Secondly, through multivariate OLS analysis, it identifies the impact of some of these factors on the levels of education participation of 18-year-olds. The results show the significance of three factors: low-skilled occupation, the structure of public spending on education, and the importance of vocational education programmes in secondary education

The third article by Madalena Fonseca, Diana Dias, Carla Sa and Alberto Amaral attempts to answer two questions: How does the *numerus clausus* system shape the demand for medical studies? And how do non-enrolled medical candidates influence the global allocation system and generate waves of dissatisfaction? The results show that students who do not succeed in entering medicine register in other programmes, such as pharmacy, veterinary medicine and dental studies, generating a first wave of dissatisfaction. Because students who are not placed in medicine occupy a large share of the places available in those other programmes,

the wave of dissatisfaction propagates, with students being pushed to other pro-grammes, especially biology and biochemistry. This process has also been analysed from a spatial perspective. Apparently, when students are competing to obtain a study place in a programme with prestige and good professional career perspectives such as medicine moving to a more peripheral region becomes more frequent.

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