

Global University Rankings, Transnational Policy Discourse and Higher Education in Europe¹

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Introduction

Global university rankings have helped to frame higher education as a Europe-wide policy problem that now concerns the EU and national governments alike. They have been referred to in the identification of the above policy problem, but they have also provided an ideational input for policy measures tackling the perceived problems facing higher education institutions (HEIs). This article concentrates on the power aspects of rankings regarding their ability to frame policy problems. While the ranking producers have no authority over the European Commission or EU Member States, the rankings are nevertheless highly influential in framing their higher education policies. But the actual effects of rankings are conditioned by institutional traditions (cf. Erkkilä, 2013).

At a general level, there is a drive for uniformity in the policies and practices of higher education as a result of the use of global university rankings. This convergence favours notions of competition, economism and élitism, often referred to as excellence in higher education. Though diversity is officially emphasised in the debates concerning rankings, they nevertheless tend to enforce uniformity among disciplines and academic institutions. However, the impacts of the rankings mostly tend to be indirect, often pitching and echoing existing ideas and discourses about higher education in Europe. Moreover, there are still considerable differences between national models and reform agendas in Europe, owing to institutional traditions.

The rankings have the ability to politicise issues, making them a subject of active politicking (Palonen, 2003). They have been used in the framing of the policy problem of 'European higher education', where the relatively poor outlook of the European higher education institutions marks an opening for their reform. Such framings have power implications, as they fix the problem setting and the potential solutions, making it difficult for alternative perceptions to emerge (Bacchi, 1999). The rankings can be seen as a transnational policy discourse that nevertheless has national variants, emphasising contextual aspects of policy transfer (Schmidt, 2006). Also, rankings' actual effects can be seen to be conditioned by the institutional context and traditions (Gornitzka, 2013; Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

Below, I will briefly discuss the global university rankings as a policy discourse. Arguing that they have the power to construct and reframe policy problems, I will analyse how they have been used by the European Commission in its attempt to gain influence in higher education policies in Europe, although these were not within its mandate. The rankings are often seen to cause isomorphic changes and policy convergence, but recent analyses show that their effects are felt differently in

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European countries (Erkkilä, 2013), owing to their size and position in a centre-periphery axis.

Global University Rankings as a Policy Discourse

The global rankings have geographic implications, as they produce rankings not only of universities, but indirectly also of countries and regions, revealing differences among them. They render institutional traditions visible, making the European university model a policy concern for the EU. The rankings are also increasingly policy relevant. They have helped to create a political imaginary of competition, where European universities must be reformed if they are to be successful. There are several on-going reforms in the domain of higher education in Europe that refer to the university rankings when identifying states of affairs that demand action. Europe is not alone however. In fact, the motivation for creating the Shanghai ranking was said to be because the Chinese authorities wanted to know how their HEIs fared in comparison to 'world class universities' (Kauppi & Erkkilä, 2011).

Ever since their launch a decade ago, global university rankings have been keenly followed by higher education policy experts and scholars (Cheng & Cai Liu, 2006; Cheng & Liu, 2007; Hazelkorn, 2008; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Salmi, 2009). Much of the research has concentrated on the methodology they use (Dehon, McCathie, & Verardi, 2009; Dehon, Vermandele, & Jacobs, 2009; Shin, Toutkoushian & Teichler, 2011). But rankings also have deep impacts on higher education institutions (Hazelkorn, 2011), reshaping the higher education landscape (Erkkilä, 2013; Kehm & Stensaker, 2009; Münch, forthcoming) and global governance (King, 2010; Shin & Kehm, 2012). They increasingly provide an ideational input for higher education policies at the EU level. They also inform university reforms at national and institutional levels. Though the organisations producing the league tables possess no apparent norm-giving authority, they have nevertheless come to steer decision-making.

With regard to power, we may see rankings as a form of Foucauldian governmentality, where the mechanism of influence is actors' compliance with a perceived norm, i.e. improving one's standing in the assessments. Through this reflexivity, the rankings create a political imaginary of competition (Löwenheim, 2008), related to the numerical presentation of the policy information (Porter, 1996). Max Weber identified this as a general concern of modern government, arguing that statistics and book-keeping can create an 'iron cage' which seemingly leaves no other option but to submit to their calculative logic (Erkkilä & Piironen, 2009). This, according to Weber, limits the realm of politics and ethics (Weber, 1978).

As policy instruments (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007), rankings are part of the transnational drive for evidence-based decision-making (Djelic & Sahlín-Andersson, 2008) and global knowledge production (Mittelman, 2004; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Their global field has developed rapidly and there are now disputes over how to best evaluate 'world class' higher education (Kauppi & Erkkilä, 2011). The most prominent rankings such as the Shanghai and Times Higher Education Rankings are being increasingly contested in terms of their methodology. The critique also tends to take a numerical form, so that those wishing to criticise the existing figures often end up developing a new dataset of their own. This is apparent in the case of U-Multirank endorsed by the European Commission. In terms of unintended consequences (Baert, 1991), the critique of a numerical assessment in higher education may lead to the further institutionalisation of this practice.

The rankings have caused particular policy concern in Europe because of the somewhat poor ranking of European universities and Europe's decreasing role in the global economy. What is interesting about this development is the role of the European Commission, which has been active in drafting policies for 'European higher education'. These initiatives have been closely linked to the EU's economic ambitions. Europe also provides an interesting case for analysing the perceptions of global university rankings, since they provide a contrasting image to longstanding academic traditions in Europe (Ridder-Symoens, 2003a, 2003b; Rüegg, 2004, 2010).

Global university rankings can be seen as a case of transnational policy discourse on higher education that contains several sub-discourses. Previous analyses have linked the rankings to a specific discourse on economic competitiveness that now covers academic competition and the pursuit of becoming a 'world class university' (Shin & Kehm, 2012). They are also part of the EU's 'modernisation' agenda in higher education, which somewhat paradoxically claims to strive for both 'excellence' and 'diversity', even though these qualities are in apparent conflict. Global rankings are also part of a discourse on academic 'quality', serving as evaluative tools.

At a national level, various university reforms include rankings as a point of reference for certain policy measures. Typical of transnational policy discourses (Schmidt, 2006) are the differences in the domestic discourses about rankings, despite general recurring themes that are part of the reform agenda. The way policy problems are framed has power implications, as it often initialises the discussion and blocks other perceptions from entering the agenda (Bacchi, 1999). The rankings have helped to frame higher education as an issue of economic competition that needs actions at the EU level. At a national level, policy actors have also referred to rankings when promoting reform agendas.

However, the institutional outcomes of the growing competition between universities are not straightforward and there are clear national differences. Gornitzka points to three ways whereby national traditions are accommodating the changes: institutional legacies merely channel the transnational policy scripts leading to converging national policies; they may act as buffers that isolate national policies from external influences; or they may filter the transnational policy scripts, meaning that the respective changes are nationally specific (Gornitzka, 2013). This resonates with the new institutionalist accounts on institutional change that draw attention to the contextuality of change and its different modalities (Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

Nevertheless, the rankings create a political imaginary of competition that has policy implications; they idealise certain models, advancing ideas involving privatisation, accountability, (financial) autonomy, and excellence initiatives. Moreover, they have geographical implications, making it possible to identify 'European' policy concerns, leading to attempts to increase EU-level regulation of higher education that previously remained under national competencies.

European Higher Education Policy and Ranking

The future of higher education in Europe has been perceived as a policy problem for some time. It has led to the outlining of a European university model based on the Humboldtian tradition (Ash, 2008; Paletschek, 2011) that is now seen as being under threat with the Bologna Process (Michelsen, 2010), forcing universities to

become part of economic competitiveness (Nybom, 2003). The rankings are related to the above processes by shaping the policy problems and the political and institutional responses to them (Hazelkorn, 2011; Kehm & Stensaker, 2009). Only a few European universities have received top ratings in the league tables of 'world class universities', strengthening the policy concerns over the state of higher education in Europe.

Rankings make comparisons seemingly easy. European HEIs are now increasingly being compared to the American and Asian universities. In Europe, they have shown clear differences between countries and systems, such as between the British, German and French universities, where the top institutions in the UK fare significantly better. One critique of this policy discourse has been that it often overlooks the general institutional context in which HEIs function in a given country. For instance, both France and Germany have prestigious institutions of academic research outside universities (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and Max Planck Institutes) that are not included in the current array of rankings. Moreover, the institutional practices of a given country are not easily transferred, since they link to a myriad of cultural and institutional practices that are often not accounted for when assessing HEIs using standardised criteria. Furthermore, the universities must correspond to the prevailing values of a society; for example, Nordic universities have shared a model of broad accessibility, devoid of tuition fees, in line with the egalitarian value base of Nordic societies. Also, the much admired Massachusetts Institute of Technology model is tightly linked to its native institutional and cultural traditions.

Despite these limitations, the global university rankings have direct policy implications. They are increasingly being referred to as a motivation for adopting new higher education policies. Often in the background is the hope for economic gains through higher education as an element of innovation. The poor outlook of European universities in the rankings became a 'policy problem' in 2005 when the European Commission cited 'two recent surveys', the Shanghai and THE Rankings, as having found them to fare more poorly than universities in the US and Asia (European Commission, 2005b). At about the same time, a good ranking in the global assessments became associated with the notion of economic competitiveness (European Commission, 2005a).

Surprisingly, rankings also constitute a remedy for the ailing state of higher education in Europe. Since the mid-2000s, the policy documents of the European Commission have named 'accountability' as a driver for 'modernisation' of higher education in Europe (European Commission, 2005b, 2006). This carries an ideational shift 'from state control to accountability to society' (European Commission, 2005b, p. 9), which means the perceived responsibilities of HEIs for economic growth. Rankings are seen as an element of 'accountability' used for observing and steering research output and effectiveness for the national economy. In other words, they are seen both as indicators of the problems in higher education in Europe and as active tools for reform in order to attain desired goals. Many of these objectives now include those set out in the Lisbon Strategy (European Commission, 2008, 2009).

This double logic is evident in the European Commission's communication '*Supporting growth and jobs — an agenda for the modernization of Europe's higher education system*' (European Commission, 2011). First, the existing rankings (Shanghai Ranking) have shown that there were too few top HEIs in Europe.

Second, we need more transparency — in other words rankings — in order to tackle this problem:

[T]oo few European higher education institutions are recognised as world class in the current, research-oriented global university rankings. [. . .] There is no single excellence model: Europe needs a wide diversity of higher education institutions, and each must pursue excellence in line with its mission and strategic priorities. With more transparent information about the specific profile and performance of individual institutions, policy-makers will be in a better position to develop effective higher education strategies and institutions will find it easier to build on their strengths (European Commission, 2011, pp. 2–3).

Here, the European Commission denounces the idea of a single model for excellence in higher education and calls for ‘diversity’. But how does diversity match with quantification? The Communication quoted here coincides with the launch of U-Multirank, which is allegedly a new type of assessment tool, allowing users to choose the assessment criteria to be used in a particular rating. However, the criteria and their attributes are defined by the developers of the U-Multirank, leaving only limited room for case-by-case considerations. The broader institutional context in different countries is also not acknowledged.

In short, EU policies on the ‘modernisation’ of higher education are shifting towards an increasing use of rankings. The competition between academic institutions is now closely linked to economic competitiveness and universities’ ‘accountability’ towards ‘society’ for their performance in research ‘output’ (Erkkilä & Piironen, 2013b). The European Commission has highlighted rankings in the problem identification and refers to them in justifying its further intervention in the field of higher education.

The global rankings coincide with and enforce certain global scripts and EU policies on higher education (Reinalda, 2013), but many of these had already begun before the first global rankings, such as the Bologna Process (Reinalda & Kulesza, 2006). Nevertheless, they have helped to construct a European-wide problem of higher education that calls for EU level action. They have also helped to politicise the issue — making it playable (Palonen, 2003) — and allowed the European Commission to attain a role in a policy domain that was outside its mandate. The framing of the policy problem entails power, as it has contributed to the construction of a firm understanding of the issues of concern and their remedies (Bacchi, 1999).

Effects of Ranking

There is a keen reflection on the global rankings at the national level in Europe. Despite its policy feed, the rankings discourse has acquired different national forms in the EU Member States, echoing institutional traditions, public values, and historical narratives on education. This is typical for transnational policy discourses that often have variants within the transnational networks of policy experts and at the national level involving the general public (Schmidt, 2006). Also, there is a need to contextualise the national level institutional analyses. According to Gornitzka’s (2013) typology of institutional change, we can identify different modalities (channeling, filtering, buffering) that tradition has in accommodating the impacts of ranking. Recent European case studies show certain

patterns owing to size of the country and its position with regard to the centre-periphery axis (Erkkilä, 2013).

At a general level, we find that the rankings contribute to the ongoing convergence of global higher education and innovation systems (Erkkilä, 2013). The institutional outcomes of this process include a stratification of university systems and increasing inequality between HEIs and academic disciplines. The rankings also contribute to the commodification of higher education and pave the way for institutional and disciplinary uniformity at the cost of diversity in higher education. There are also differences at the level of the disciplines, as the social sciences and humanities are particularly under pressure to change (Berndtson, 2013; Mustajoki, 2013). The commodification of higher education strives for economic competitiveness, but, in doing so, it could change the mission and social function of the higher education institutions (Mittelman, 2013). In this respect, the rankings are also prone to unintended consequences, self-fulfilling prophecies and negative side-effects.

The pressure for institutional change is felt most in small European countries, such as the Nordic countries which now favour international journals and publishers. This has developed into a language issue, as journals in the domestic languages are now struggling to survive and, indeed, to acquire material to publish. In the long run, this could lead to a loss of national journals. Although there are formidable changes taking place within Nordic higher education (Erkkilä & Piironen, 2013a; Gornitzka, 2013), the institutional traditions of these countries mostly filter the policy prescriptions of rankings. Most notably, their universalist welfare-state model and the widespread idea of education as a public good are likely to form different layers of old and new institutional forms that may exist side by side (cf. Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

The effects of global university rankings are perhaps least felt in the context of the UK, which now has a significant background in national rankings and has even served as an example for the global rankings (Nixon, 2013). Here, the global rankings may even retain a secondary role compared to national evaluation schemes. The UK context is most likely to channel and absorb the pressures of global rankings, as HEIs are already deeply involved in the numerical assessment of research output and standing in national rankings. Moreover, the top UK institutions fare well in the global rankings.

The rankings have taken other large European countries, such as France and Germany, by surprise, showing their academic institutions in a somewhat negative light. Nevertheless, these countries have been more dismissive of rankings and there has been open resistance to them, as well as to the related journal ratings (Kauppi, 2013; Münch, 2013). The issue of language is also not as pronounced as in small countries and French and German still remain central languages of academic inquiry. Although there are significant changes in these contexts that stem from the ideational input of rankings and global competition in higher education, such as the excellence initiatives and university mergers (Münch, forthcoming), the higher education systems in Germany and France nevertheless seem to be more robust in safeguarding themselves against certain aspects of rankings. It therefore seems that these academic traditions tend to buffer the institutional changes impelled by ranking.

The Polish case provides an interesting contrasting example with a large country that is likely to feel the heat of global university rankings (Dakowska, 2013). Despite the size of the academia and a formidable academic history with

some of the oldest universities in Europe, Poland willingly subscribes to the global policy scripts on higher education. The university rankings have also played a central role in these reform debates. In this context, the perceived peripheral position of the Polish universities in the global field of higher education signals a starting point for its reform. Somewhat surprisingly, Poland might also provide a case where the institutional traditions channel the global policy scripts: the rankings are perceived as a feature of modern higher education vis-à-vis the undesired Communist legacy (Dakowska, 2013), lending them credibility.

As the discussion above indicates, there is a need to contextualise the national-level institutional analyses to understand the effects of ranking. It would be too simplistic to label the institutional outcomes as outright isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Pelkonen & Teräväinen-Litardo, 2013). We may conclude that the national institutional traditions are able to accommodate and filter the above changes, but different countries in Europe are not equally positioned to weather the pressures of rankings. There are also different national discourses concerning the global rankings that can nevertheless be seen as instances of the same transnational discourse.

Conclusion

Rankings portray the global field of higher education as a competition between different actors, such as HEIs. Moreover, they set goals for improvement (rank order) and, through their attributes, they outline what to improve. Furthermore, the highest-ranking universities become ideational models. Hence, university rankings as a phenomenon are closely linked to the convergence in higher education and innovation policies globally, often motivated by the perceived gains for the knowledge-based economy. There is a sense of economist reductionism in the development, as higher education is only valued for its economic potential.

On the one hand, global university rankings are a result of tightening international collaboration in higher education policies; so far, higher education was a subject of limited global or transnational policy work and regulation, but because of the high economic stakes involved, new means are being sought to assess and steer this policy domain. As the discussion of the European Commission's policies reveals, the concern over 'European higher education' has paved the way for the growing role of the Commission in this policy domain, despite its lacking competencies in education policies.

At present, there is growing concern over the academic performance of European HEIs in the light of global university rankings that portray them as faring poorly by international comparison, with only a few exceptions. The top HEIs in the US enjoy higher rankings. European nation states still have differing national discourses regarding academic institutions and their reform. This reflects the relatively limited extent of international regulation in the realm of higher education. However, the construction of a European policy problem of academic performance has marked a start for institutional reforms in Europe, often drawing its insights from global narratives on higher education (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), as echoed by the university rankings.

The European policy actors' reflection on ranking figures leads to imitation and has the potential for institutional isomorphism. The rankings are a new form of normative expert knowledge that is appealing in its simplistic representation and global reach. Rankings have become a reference point for legitimising higher

education reforms throughout Europe. Hence, there are changes in the academic practices both at institutional and disciplinary level, such as the stratification and homogenisation of HEIs and commodification of higher education. Rankings are also prone to unintended consequences and are making universities reconsider their traditional values and functions. This may have significant negative effects on society, including the economy.

It is difficult to identify the direct impacts of rankings, but they have an indirect impact on the ongoing reforms of higher education by raising new issues of concern and identifying apparent solutions to them. They also reinforce certain existing reform agendas. We can observe some paradoxes in the university rankings and also perhaps in the system of global rankings. The producers of ranking information possess no norm-giving authority over the HEIs or national administrations responsible for higher education, but yet they seem to have a major influence on higher education policies and institutional reforms in Europe. The producers of rankings themselves have very limited accountability, though their policy instruments are becoming increasingly powerful in shaping policies at a national level.

The discussion on the power relations of global university rankings highlights the ideational and symbolic aspects of this discourse. The interpretations also share the perspective of dominance and the loss of alternatives. Rankings tend to create political imaginaries that leave seemingly little room for political alternatives. It is therefore interesting to note that their actual effects and impacts are less uniform and conclusive. This highlights the importance of the institutional context and traditions in understanding the effects of global rankings. The actual impacts of rankings are often indirect. Moreover, the institutional outcomes of rankings are likely to be conditioned by the institutional traditions, marking also an opening for resisting the rankings.

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