

**IREG-5 Conference**: ***The Academic Rankings: From Popularity to Reliability and Relevance***

**organized by**:

IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence

and

CHE-Centre for Higher Educational Development, Guetersloh, Germany

Sponsored by the



With support of

German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)

**Berlin, 6-8 October 2010**

**Abstracts, Presentations and press**

Table of Contents

"Let the Sun Shine In: The Use of Academic Rankings in Developing Countries"- *Alex Usher* 3

"Trends in Academic Rankings in the Nigerian University System"- Peter Okebukola 3

"Rankings in Peru in Context of Recent Developments in Higher Education in the Latin America" - Luis Piscoya 4

"If ranking is the disease, is benchmarking the cure?" – Jamil Salmi 4

"Building a Bridge between the National and International Rankings"- Waldemar Siwiński 5

Classifying Higher Education Institutions in the MENA Region [Middle East and North Africa]: A Pilot Study 6

Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes: a groundbreaking initiative to assess quality in higher education on an international scale *-* Diane Lalancette 7

Developing and Testing the Feasibility of a Multi-dimensional Global University Ranking – the U-Multirank Project 8

Third Mission Indicators for New Ranking Methodologies - the E3M Project 8

Eduniversal Rankings of Business Schools 9

An Inside Look into the U.S. News and other Media MBA Rankings 10

The Ranking Dilemma: AACSB Position on Business School Rankings 10

Rankings of universities according to university-industry research cooperation *Robert Tijssen* 10

The DFG Funding Ranking and its Contribution to an International Monitoring of University, Industry, and Government Cooperation Activities 11

The New Times Higher World University Rankings 12

Development of “Self-directed” College Ranking and the Impact on Taiwan Higher Education 12

A Rating of Research Performance of German Universities 12

To Better Measure Social Sciences Performance: A Review of Existing Ranking Indicators 13

Press: "Conference Highlights Contradictory Attitudes Toward Global Rankings", by Aisha Labi 13

Press: "International Group Announces Audit of University Rankings", by Aisha Labi 15

# "Let the Sun Shine In: The Use of Academic Rankings in Developing Countries"- *Alex Usher*

President of Higher Education Strategies Associates, Toronto, Canada

**Abstract**

University rankings in the developed world usually have the benefit of having access to large amounts of “official” data available through government agencies and/or data form surveys of students, administrators and employers, and/or large-scale bibliometric analyses. In the developing world, however, these conditions often do not apply, or apply only weakly: little data on institutions is publicly available, surveys are not conducted either because of expense or political considerations, and publications in internationally-recognized journals are very few. And yet, there are nearly twenty sets of university rankings in the developing word. The purpose of this paper is to show how rankings operate in these environments and how they differ from those seen in the developed world, both in purpose and constriction. The paper will also show how web rankings such as webometrics have come to such enormous prominence in the developing world and why they are likely to remain a “gold standard” in many countries for some time to come. Finally, the paper will conclude with some thoughts on how to improve rankings in developing countries.



# "Trends in Academic Rankings in the Nigerian University System"- Peter Okebukola

Chairman of Council, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria and former Executive Secretary, National Universities Commission

**Abstract**

Over the past nine years, the Nigerian university system, the most expansive in Africa with 104 universities enrolling about 1.5 million students, has implemented a ranking system that has continued to be refined for improved reliability and relevance. The initial thrust in 2001 of using data from the system-wide comprehensive accreditation exercise has been strengthened with a number of additional variables adjudged to crosscut major international ranking schemes. After four years of implementation and wide acceptability by the university system and the general public, the scheme was further refined in 2009 to enhance its national application as well as application across the Africa region. . The Times Higher Education Ranking, Academic Ranking of World Universities, Webometrics Ranking, Professional Ranking of World Universities, Newsweek Ranking, Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities and the African Rating Mechanisms contributed variables to the NUC-Ranking System. The Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions were applied to the NUC-Ranking System and found to achieve a high level of compliance. The paper highlights the stages of evolution of academic ranking in the Nigerian university system from 2001 to 2010 and describes the impact of ranking on improving quality and efficiency of the Nigerian university system.



# "Rankings in Peru in Context of Recent Developments in Higher Education in the Latin America" - Luis Piscoya

Professor at San Marcos University of Lima, Peru

**Abstract**

The arising of the first world university rankings, ARWU (2003) and THES (2004), allowed to mint the term World-Class Universities and created a list of 500 institutions, of which only seven were Latin American. The 2010 editions of said rankings and of the THE, the U.S. News, and the QS rankings show slightly different results. As for the Latin American perspective, there is a growing interest in building rankings--started in Peru and continued in Mexico, Brazil, and Chile--to which is added the tendency to present accreditation results in the form of rankings. Thus, based on the Peruvian experience, this paper attempts to explain the mechanisms that have given rise to such a tendency and to evaluate its projections by discussing the role of underlying methodological assumptions about paradigms of academic excellence, pertinence criteria, and choice criteria of an adequate language to describe levels of performance in terms of qualities.



# "If ranking is the disease, is benchmarking the cure?" – Jamil Salmi

Tertiary Education Coordinator, the World Bank, Washington DC, United States

**Abstract**

The main objective of this presentation is to propose a new way of assessing the performance of tertiary education. It will start by summarizing the main limitations faced by existing ranking systems that serve as proxies of institutional performance. It will then outline a benchmarking approach that considers how entire tertiary education systems operate. It will finish by illustrating how this approach can be used to identify bottlenecks and inform policy making to improve the principal dimensions characterizing the performance and health of tertiary education systems.



# "Building a Bridge between the National and International Rankings"- Waldemar Siwiński

Vice-President of IREG-Observatory, President of Perspektywy Education Foundation, Warsaw, Poland

**Abstract**

Over the past few years academic world has been fascinated by international rankings. This phenomenon was bravely started by professor Nian Cai Liu who, as the first, published its pioneering Academic Ranking of World Universities in 2003. The process of globalization and availability of the ever up-to-date publication and citation data encouraged many players to start drawing their own world maps of higher education by the method of ranking. Among them are academic institutions (Leiden University), education market organizations (QS), media (THE) and strictly political structures (European Commission) with various motivations: be to research, business or politics. They all, however, have faced the similar barriers. There is a dramatic lack of comparable data describing higher education in different countries. The shortage of such data along with diverse cultural environment in which universities function make it difficult to establish satisfactory ranking criteria.

In this context, we should take a second look at the national rankings. They are, compared to their international counterparts, much more developed (advanced), partly due to their by 20 years longer history (since the first “US News & World Report” ranking). National rankings can be more comprehensive because higher education institutions on the country level function in a similar cultural and legal environment, and comparable data is readily available. This, of course, allows for selection of a broad set of criteria, common to a group of ranked higher education institutions. This in turn facilitates a smooth evolution of methodology a must in knowledge-based economies.

The analysis of selected national rankings (UN News & World Report, Perspektywy) on the one hand and of the main world rankings (ARWU, THE, QS) show that the picture of higher education institutions ranked on the national level is far richer and comprehensive than ranked on international level. On the national level it is also easier to ”recognize the diversity of institutions and take the different missions and goals of institutions into account”. (Berlin Principle, par. 3) and ”cultural, economic, and historical contexts of the educational systems being ranked”. (BP, par. 5). It is worth mentioning that every year there are more countries were professional rankings of higher education institutions are published. There is a growing element of competition as in a number of countries more than one ranking is published contributing to their increasing quality.

The managers of higher education institutions undertaking reforms of their institutions are increasingly looking for benchmarks to monitor the effects of their actions. University ranking can be here a very useful tool. The international ranking can be of little or no use in this respect since they are limited to hundreds of universities worldwide (the magic number 500). Theoretically, this number could be much larger, but we know, the diversity diminishes dramatically as differences between subsequent institutions become lesser and lesser. The only decent advice we can give to these managers and ambitious rector is: take seriously national rankings because only by improving your position in a national ranking, you may build a position that may lead you to a better place in international rankings.

The national and world university rankings are two totally separated worlds. We should, I believe, look for the narrows, closest points between these two worlds. In order to build a bridge (passage) between them I suggest:

- The authors of international rankings use national rankings in pre-selecting institutions to be considered in their international rankings. I would also suggest they introduce a set of synthetic criteria reflecting institution’s position in national ranking (s) – for example a criterion demonstrating their national leadership or regional position. Such a criterion with a relatively light weight of 1-3%, could play an important role in building a cohesive ranking system.

- There is, of course, the other side of the issue. High position in international and world rankings strongly reflects on higher education institution’s position in its own country. Institution’s position in international rankings, should also be taken into account by national ranking. The criterion of international prestige or international recognition should be introduced, I believe, to a national ranking with the weight of 1-3%.

The Perspektywy Education Foundation is already preparing a criterion of international recognition to be introduced in the next edition of the Perspektywy University Ranking. We are now consulting the issue with university managers. We propose that international recognition criterion will have the weight of 1% in 2011, 2% in 2012 to reach the final level of 3% in 2013. The process reflects the philosophy of the Ranking Board to introduce changes in methodology in a evolutionary (smooth) way in order to ensure that results of the rankings can be comparable over the period on several years.

****

# Classifying Higher Education Institutions in the MENA Region [Middle East and North Africa]: A Pilot Study

Adnan El-Amine – Lebanese Association for Educational Studies, Lebanon and

Rajika Bhandari – Deputy Vice President, Research and Evaluation, Institute of International Education (IIE), New York, US

**Abstract**

While the number of global and country-level ranking and classification systems continues to expand, a regional classification and assessment of higher education institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has not been developed to date. Such a system is particularly needed given the rapid expansion of the higher education sector in the region, as new domestic institutions and branch campuses of overseas institutions emerge. Recognizing a significant need for reliable and accurate institution-level data on higher education institutions in the MENA region, the Institute of International Education (IIE) recently received support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to carry out innovative research that aims to develop, on a pilot basis, a system for classifying and assessing higher education institutions in the MENA region. During the conference session, key project staff from IIE and the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies (LAES) will discuss the current status of the project and will facilitate an engaging discussion on the methodology, challenges, and significance of the research.The project covers the following eight countries from the region: Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Morocco, and Tunisia.

It is envisioned that the project will help to strengthen MENA institutions locally by providing benchmarks and key indicators against which they will be able to measure their growth, as well as a means to compare themselves to similar institutions. The new classification system will also help generate international interest in the region’s institutions—which supports a secondary goal of the project, which is to deepen linkages between MENA higher education institutions and other institutions around the world to facilitate knowledge sharing, research collaboration, and institutional capacity building.



# Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes: a groundbreaking initiative to assess quality in higher education on an international scale *-* Diane Lalancette

Analyst, OECD Directorate for Education, Paris, France

**Abstract**

The OECD launched the first international study of what students in higher education know and can do upon graduation: the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO). Higher education constitutes a critical factor in innovation and human capital development, and yet, there are no tools available to assess the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions on an international scale. The few studies that do exist are nationally focused, while international university rankings are based on reputation and research performance, and do not reflect the quality of teaching and learning, nor the diversity of institutions’ missions and contexts. The AHELO feasibility study is a unique attempt to fill this gap. It aims to explore the feasibility of measuring higher education quality across different institutions, countries, languages and cultures. The feasibility study involves three strands of work to be undertaken separately but coherently: the generic skills strand, the economics strand, and the engineering strand. The work will unroll in several phases.

Phase 1, from January 2010 to June 2011, will consist in the development of provisional assessment frameworks and testing instruments suitable for an international context, and their small-scale validation.

In Phase 2, from July 2011 to December 2012, the practical aspects of assessing students learning outcomes will be under focus. A contextual dimension will also be embedded to make some preliminary explorations of the relationships between context and learning outcomes, and the factors leading to enhanced outcomes.

Should those two phases be conclusive, the last phase will be to develop a value-added measurement strand to explore methodologies and approaches to capture the contribution of higher education institutions to students’ outcomes, irrespective of students’ incoming abilities.

By the completion of the feasibility study in late 2012, the information collected on student performance and the analysis of the results will help assess whether a full-fledged AHELO study could be taken forward from both scientific and practical standpoints.



# Developing and Testing the Feasibility of a Multi-dimensional Global University Ranking – the U-Multirank Project

Gero Federkeil – Vice-President IREG Observatory, Centre for Higher Education Development, Gütersloh, Germany, and

Frans Kaiser - Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), Enschede, The Netherlands

**Abstract**

Global rankings receive high attention and have an impact on discussions about quality and excellence of universities in many countries. But by their choice of indicators and data bases existing global rankings mainly focus on research excellence of internationally oriented research intense universities only (the so-called “word-class universities”). Yet the vast majority of higher education institutions around the world have different institutional profiles and missions. The concentration on one type of institution can be a danger to the diversity of higher education institutions. The U-Multirank projects aims at developing a concept for rankings for different “types” of higher education institutions in order to make visible the existence of other forms of excellence than excellence in research only. Higher education institutions can be excellent in teaching & learning, in knowledge transfer, in regional engagement and other dimensions. Hence U-Multirank is aiming at a multi-dimensional concept for rankings of institutions with a comparable institutional profile. The presentation gives an outline of the basic approach of the U-Multirank project in terms of ranking methodology, the model of dimensions and indicators and the pilot study which is going to start in autumn. As the project is still running this will be a report on work in progress.

****

# Third Mission Indicators for New Ranking Methodologies - the E3M Project

Marko Marhl – Vice-Rector of the University of Maribor, Slovenia, and

Attila Pausits – Head of the Centre for University Continuing Education and Educational Management, the Danube University Krems, Austria

**Abstract**

It has been traditionally recognised that the two main missions of universities are teaching and research. However, in recent years, another mission is being considered in order to reflect all contributions of universities to society, what is generally known as ‘Third Mission’. While several rankings systems exist for the first and second missions, the Third Mission lacks any cohesive methodology. The E3M project addresses this need. The commonly accepted ranking systems for the classical missions of the university provide indicators to measure excellence in higher education institutions around the world. At the same time, rankings can improve quality assurance by allowing the institutions to understand their own performance, develop best practices and provide effective and efficient value to society. They also provide quality indicators to governments, society and industry. However, there are no commonly agreed indicators or methodologies to assess quality in Third Mission activities.

As a first approach of the project, it is needed to find a common definition for Third Mission activities. Then, three dimensions are proposed for classifying these activities: Continuing Education, Technology Transfer & Innovation and Community Engagement which are indicative of the Third Mission as a whole. From an established conceptual framework, different processes associated to each dimension are described. The identification and definition of these processes allow us to design a set of indicators for each dimension. Finally, Delphi Method is used to obtain a selected set of indicators (relevant and feasible) which determine the basis of the ranking methodology criteria. The objectives of this project are to create European standard indicators to measure the effectiveness of Third Mission provision as well as a ranking methodology to benchmark European Third Mission Services of higher education institutions. The main purpose is to generate a comprehensive instrument to identify, measure, and compare Third Mission activities from a wide perspective.



# Eduniversal Rankings of Business Schools

Martial Guiette – President and Director General, Group SMBG Eduniversal, Paris, France

**Abstract**

During the last 15 years, first in France and, since 2007, on a worldwide level, EDUNIVERSAL informs and advises students all over the world. Initially a consulting firm, EDUNIVERSAL is today a rating agency specialized in evaluating the universities and schools, but also the academic programs in fifty different specialties (Accounting, Finance, Marketing, HR Management, Communication, Law, International Management, Corporate Strategy, Supply Chain, etc.).

With a view of contributing to the international development of Higher Education, the philosophy of EDUNIVERSAL is based on an entirely universal approach. Based on its primarily experience of advising students, the aim of EDUNIVERSAL is to build reliable and serious tools of information and to guide those who have to choose: What, by whom and where it is the most appropriate to study.

Over 9 years of experience in the Masters ranking, the methodology used to rank the academic programs is enriched by the recommendations of an International Scientific Committee, composed of high level experts in the field of higher education. The usefulness and reliability of these repositories have also been demonstrated. Its growing use - as a tracking tool of formations for students - , as a solution to identify the best candidates by companies -, and - as a means of recognition of their expertise by universities/schools and their professors -, show that those involved have chosen to take into account/used them and that they participate, more and more and in a better way, at these assessments.

Recognizing the impact of the rankings, EDUNIVERSAL is concerned about preserving its independence and ethics. Through these annual surveys, EDUNIVERSAL is intended to follow the evolution of higher education courses and to enhance the expertise of universities/schools as a means of differentiation and identification of the strengths of each academic institution.

**

# An Inside Look into the U.S. News and other Media MBA Rankings

Bob Morse – Director of Data Research, U.S. News, Washington DC, USA

**Abstract**

The presentation will answer such key questions as: what role should MBA rankings play in deciding where to apply and go to business school; why the MBA rankings are done by U.S. News; the philosophy behind the MBA rankings; details on the how the MBA rankings are calculated and the statistical factors used; a comparison of the B-school ranking methodologies used by Business Week, U.S. News, Financial Times, Forbes and The Economist and implications for B-Schools and prospective students; and the U.S. News response to ongoing criticisms of the rankings by B-School academics



# The Ranking Dilemma: AACSB Position on Business School Rankings

Peter Lindstrom – The Association to Advance Collegiate Business Schools ( AACSB), University St. Gallen, Switzerland

**Abstract**

Media rankings are here to stay, widely read, and important for the reputation of business schools. However, media rankings have narrow definitions and cannot be relied upon as a sole measure of success. In contrast, the breadth and depth of AACSB accreditation truly measures quality. It provides leverage to help maintain and increase quality and sends a credible signal to the public about the quality of the programs.

This presentation provides a constructive view on media rankings from an accreditation organization’s perspective.



# Rankings of universities according to university-industry research cooperation *Robert Tijssen*

Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS), Leiden University, the Netherlands

**Abstract**

It is common knowledge that many of the world’s leading research universities have extensive research cooperation links with a variety of business enterprises. Statistics on the volume of business sector funding, and publicized university-industry alliances, provide ample empirical evidence of strong ties with science-based industries. Most of these, often celebrated, ‘entrepreneurial’ universities are located in the USA, Europe or Asia. However, the overall picture is much less clear: the volume and intensity of university-industry ties within world’s research-active universities remains very elusive. No systematic comparative information exists as to which universities are heavily engaged in joint R&D with business sector partners. The University-Industry Research Cooperation Scoreboard, launched by CWTS in 2008 and freely available on the CWTS website, attempts to fill at least part of this striking gap in information. UIRC’s statistical data is derived from counts of university-industry research publications (UICs) which are jointly authored by university researchers and staff employed by business enterprises. UICs represent not only an output of joint research, but also tap into knowledge flows and institutional ties that were part of the research process. The analytical potential of UICs for classifying and ranking individual universities was first explored by Tijssen et al. (2009), on a set of 350 of the world’s largest research-active universities, and using the research publications indexed by the Web of Science database. Main methodological conclusion of this study were:

• UICs offer an useful and interesting new source of statistical data for domestic and international comparisons of research universities

• pending further validation studies, UIC statistics should preferably be used only within non-evaluative multidimensional benchmarking frameworks rather than for university league tables. Several of those studies are now in preparation.

UIRC’s framework offers a novel and rich source of empirical data for benchmarking and comparing the UIC-performance of research universities – either domestically, regionally or worldwide. UIRC findings are now mentioned on the websites of several universities.

This presentation will elaborate on the design and content of UIRC’s 2009-2010 edition. Its potential as a tool for academic rankings will be discussed, highlighting the various UIC indicators, while introducing ranking data across the world’s top-500 largest research universities, and touching on further developments that are planned for the near future.

****

# The DFG Funding Ranking and its Contribution to an International Monitoring of University, Industry, and Government Cooperation Activities

David Bovelet – Project Manager, German Science Foundation (DFG), Bonn, Germany

Jürgen Güdler – Head of Division “Information Management”, German Science Foundation (DFG), Bonn, Germany,

Miriam Hensele – Science Officer, German Science Foundation (DFG), Bonn, Germany

**Abstract**

International research ranking studies for the most part focus on comparisons of higher education institutions. Nevertheless those rankings are also often seen as direct performance indicators for the research competitiveness of entire countries. National research systems, however, differ widely in the degree of participation of universities, governmental research centers and the industry.

In Germany, for example, publicly funded non-university research institutions like the Fraunhofer or Max Planck Society are key players in the national research landscape. On this note, the DFG Funding Ranking also accounts for governmental as well as industrial research centers within the consideration of funding statements and, in particular, by a strong focus on the analysis of regional cooperation patterns between the various research performing institutions.

As a case study, this contribution explores the relationship between divers national organization structures of research systems and the results of international university rankings. Based on data for the Sixth EU Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development we aim at identifying the profiles and strengths of national research systems in an EU wide comparison. To match the results with the findings of international university rankings the focus of our analysis is on a comparison of the relative performances of higher education institutions, governmental research centers and industry companies.

Our analysis reveals significant differences in the relative shares of funds allocated to these different actors between the European states. While in the United Kingdom, more than half of the funds went to the university sector, in France, for example, the largest shares went to governmental research centers. In Germany, the industry, governmental and university sectors were allocated roughly equal funding amounts. These cross country differences indicate different ways of organizing national research systems.

Therefore it is of great importance to also consider the different organization structures of national research systems when interpreting results of international university rankings in the context of a cross country comparison of research performance.

****

# The New Times Higher World University Rankings

Phil Baty – Deputy Editor, Times Higher Education, London, United Kingdom, and

Simon Pratt - Project Manager, Thomson Reuters, US

**Abstract**

Mr Baty and Mr Pratt will give insiders’ accounts of the development of the new and improved methodology for the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and will delve behind the rankings headlines with information on Thomson Reuters’ Global Institutional Profiles Project.

****

# Development of “Self-directed” College Ranking and the Impact on Taiwan Higher Education

Angela Yung-chi Hou - Director of International Exchange, Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT)

**Abstract**

Because traditional college rankings had many methodological problems, a new type of user-based ranking called “personalized college ranking” started to develop in many nations in the late 1990s. The main objective of this paper, therefore, is to outline the rational, strategies and pathways for establishing a personalized college rankings called “College Navigator in Taiwan” by Higher Education Evaluation & Accreditation Council of Taiwan and its impact on students’ selection process over which is the best school for them to study and institutional policy making

****

# A Rating of Research Performance of German Universities

Elke Lütkemeier – Coordinator Research Rating, German Science Council (DFG), Cologne, Germany

**Abstract**

At the request of the German federal government and the states (Länder) governments, the Wissenschaftsrat (German Council of Science and Humanities) has developed the concept for a new subject-specific, multidimensional research rating which stands out by a number of unique characteristics:

* Research quality is assessed by informed peer review on the basis of an extensive, comparative analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.
* Criteria and data are defined in a discipline-specific manner by experts from the individual fields of research.
* Research quality is assessed at the level of research units, making it possible to make transparent differences in research quality within individual institutions.
* The institutions are assessed by six different criteria which are not aggregated to an overall result. Thereby, the assessments reflect the institutions' different profiles and missions.

Beyond that the inclusion of non-university research institutions in the research rating exercise is one of the great advantages of this procedure over existing national and international ranking schemes. In many subject areas non-university institutions contribute an important share of the volume and quality of German research achievements. The best non-university institutes can even serve as a benchmark for international research quality, and thus help to calibrate the assessment scale. The question how the characteristics of non-university research institutions, in particular the organization as multidisciplinary facilities, can be taken into account in the rating procedure requires further examination. After assessing the German research performance in chemistry and sociology the Council decided in May 2008 to continue the research rating with two more subjects – one from the technical sciences and one from the humanities - in order to improve its methodology.

****

# To Better Measure Social Sciences Performance: A Review of Existing Ranking Indicators

Ying Cheng – Center for World-Class Universities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China

**Abstract**

Universities’ excellence in social sciences and humanities are often underestimated or even neglected in institutional rankings from the point of view of the indicators they use. The study analyzes a number of indicators used in major ranking systems and tries to reveal the inherent difference in performance indicators across fields based on experiential evidences. The findings suggest when using indicators at institutional level, the field difference cannot be simply ignored even for non-research indicators. Recommendations on data collection and process to rankers and other statistical agencies are made accordingly.

****

# Press: "Conference Highlights Contradictory Attitudes Toward Global Rankings", by Aisha Labi

lobal Edition

[](http://chronicle.com/section/Global-Homepage/433/)

October 7, 2010

Few topics in higher education are as contentious as university rankings and the increasingly prominent role they play in shaping the decision-making of students and their families, institutional priorities, and even government policies. A conference devoted to the topic, being held here this week, is bringing together people involved in the best-known global rankings as well as some of their most vocal critics.

The conference is the fifth meeting of an international organization now known as the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, and Germany's Centre for Higher Education Development is co-host for the gathering here.

In his opening address on Thursday, Peter Greisler, head of the universities directorate at Germany's education ministry, noted that the situation in Germany typified some of the contradictory attitudes toward rankings. While there is "widespread skepticism and debate about the methodological insufficiencies of rankings," he said, the growth in higher-education enrollments highlights the need for some kind of tools that allow students and employers to compare programs and assess their offerings—the kind of information that rankings provide. He emphasized, however, that "rankings are only useful if the indicators they use don't just measure things that are easy to measure, but the things that need to be measured."

**Regional Approaches**

Much of the day's discussion was about the different ways in which various assessment exercises around the world are approaching that challenge, with a focus on the growth of regional efforts.

In a presentation on the use of academic rankings in developing countries, Alex Usher, president of Higher Education Strategy Associates in Toronto, noted that the existing rankings literature has focused on North America and Europe, but that a growing number of assessment efforts are now coming from less-developed countries. Those efforts have been the source of significant innovation in rankings.

A working definition of educational quality, with a selection of indicators appropriate to that definition, is an essential precondition to any rankings system, Mr. Usher said, but he noted that many developing countries simply do not have enough data to fill those indicators. This lack of data has spurred the innovative use of alterative sources of information, such as accreditation information and bibliometrics. Accreditation is a central source of data in many countries, and using this information as a basis for rankings "is one way of turning quantitative data into something qualitative," he said.

In a presentation on the use of rankings in Nigeria, Peter Okebukola, a former executive secretary of that country's National Universities Commission, noted that Nigeria had turned to accreditation data when it began compiling national rankings in 2001. Mr. Okebukola described the effort, which has since incorporated additional indicators from some of the well-known international rankings, as a success, in large part because all of the indicators that are used were agreed upon in consultation with university leaders and academic officials. Nigeria is also closely involved in a new African Union-led quality rating project, which he said might eventually merge with the Nigerian effort.

In another presentation, Rajika Bhandari of the Institute of International Education and Adnan El-Amine of the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies described a new regional pilot project they are working on to develop a classification system for higher-education institutions across the Middle East. The goals of the project include providing more comprehensive information for students, better understanding of the diverse range of institutions in the region, more effective benchmarking and comparison both within the region and outside, and increased degree recognition and academic mobility.

The pilot project will classify institutions according to 11 indicators, including teaching, student, and faculty profiles; research involvement; and regional and international engagement. Although the project's goal is not to establish a rankings system, the presenters assured the audience, the information could eventually be used in a rankings system of some kind.

**Ranking vs. Benchmarking**

For a conference devoted to the topic of rankings, much of the discussion seemed to consist of semantic efforts to distinguish various exercises from actual rankings. A woman from Malaysia's national ratings agency, for example, corrected Mr. Usher's description of her agency's effort as a ranking. "In Malaysia we do not call it a ranking exercise," she said firmly, saying that the effort was instead a benchmarking exercise that attempts to rate institutions against an objective standard.

In his presentation, titled "If Ranking Is the Disease, Is Benchmarking the Cure?" Jamil Salmi, tertiary education coordinator at the World Bank, said that rankings are "just the tip of the iceberg" of a growing accountability agenda, with students, governments, and employers all seeking more comprehensive information about institutions. "Rankings are the most visible and easy to understand" of the various measures, but they are far from the most reliable, he said.

He advocated benchmarking—which he described as "the process of comparing the performance of one's tertiary education system to that of other systems"—as the preferred approach, because it is more holistic. "Rankings don't tell us anything about the overall performance of a tertiary education system—about issues of access versus equity, for example," he said.

He cited the case of Finland, which, he noted, "may not have universities in the top 100, but has very strong system." The danger of an exclusive focus on world-class universities, he added, is that "it might put too much effort where it is not needed," particularly in systems that cannot afford to spend limited resources on attempting to launch their institutions into the global top ranks.

Jamie P. Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation for Education, is attending the conference as an observer. Mr. Merisotis was involved in the establishment of the IREG Observatory in 2004 when he was president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, which he founded. He described himself as a longtime skeptic of rankings, but noted that "these kinds of forums are useful, because you have to have conversations involving the producers of rankings, consumers, analysts, and critics."

Although the Lumina Foundation, which focuses on issues of access and equity, is not directly involved in rankings, "we are interested in the potential unintended negative consequences of rankings on discouraging low-income, first-generation, and students of color," he said. "But we're also interested in ways in which the sorting mechanism of rankings could in fact direct students to the right kinds of institutions."

# Press: "International Group Announces Audit of University Rankings", by Aisha Labi



At a conference in Berlin, higher-education officials are discussing the growth of university rankings, including a new effort to evaluate the ratings systems themselves.

By Aisha Labi

Berlin

University rankings organizations could soon find themselves on the receiving end of the kinds of evaluations that have made them so newsworthy and influential. At a conference here last week for academics and institutions focused on rankings, the organizer unveiled a project that would effectively rank the rankers.

The IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, which was created a few years ago to develop quality-control mechanisms for rankings, announced that a volunteer trial audit of two or three rankings will soon be under way.

The International Ranking Expert Group, or IREG, first met in Washington in 2004 and two years later came up with a set of [principles](http://www.ireg-observatory.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=41&Itemid=48) on the ranking of higher-education institutions.

There has "always been the idea that IREG could evolve into a quality assurance" body, said Gero Federkeil, who oversees the rankings of German institutions by the CHE Centre for Higher Education Development, which co-hosted last week's conference.

As rankings proliferate around the world, they are increasingly having a direct impact on the decisions of students, academic staff, institutions, and policy makers, but each of those groups differs in its use of rankings and the sophistication it brings to evaluating them.

Less informed groups, such as students, "don't have a deep understanding of the limitations of rankings," Mr. Federkeil said, and an audit would provide an assessment tool for users. The rankers themselves also need to be held accountable for possible deficits in their tabulations or methodological flaws, he said.

The audit project, which he is helping to manage, will be based closely on IREG's principles, which emphasize clarity and openness in the purposes and goals of rankings, the design and weighting of indicators, the collection and processing of data, and the presentation of results.

"We all say that rankings should aim at delivering transparency about higher-education institutions, but we think there should be transparency about rankings too," Mr. Federkeil said. The audit process could eventually give rise to an IREG quality label, which would amount to an identification of trustworthy rankings, thereby enhancing the credibility of rankings and improving their quality, Mr. Federkeil said.

At the Berlin meeting last week, Mr. Federkeil and Ying Cheng, of the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which produces the best-known and most influential global ranking of universities, outlined the proposed methodology and procedure for the audit. The IREG executive committee will nominate audit teams consisting of three to five people. The chair of each team must not have any formal affiliation with a ranking organization, and at least one member of the audit team must be a member of the IREG executive committee. Audits will be based on self-reported data as well as possible on-site visits, and each full audit is expected to take about five months to complete.

**Skepticism and Unease**

Whether the audit will actually work remains to be seen. Many of the people who attended the meeting expressed deep skepticism and unease about how effectively a rigorous and independent audit procedure could be applied.

"In principle, I think it's a good thing," said Ben Sowter, head of the intelligence unit at QS, which produces the QS World University Rankings. But "there is a long way to go before this audit looks like the kind of measure it needs to be."

Still, if it eventually evolves into a widely accepted and respected quality-assurance mechanism, the audit could become a useful tool "and enable us to counter some of the criticism that we receive," he added.

Robert J. Morse, director of data research at *U.S. News & World Report,* said the magazine would most likely participate in the audit, but only "after we fully understand the processes and how it's going to be scored."

He agreed that it is important for rankers to be held to standards and to be transparent in their work.

"We communicate very frequently with academics, but maybe we would need to also post in more detail about the mathematical processes and quality controls and other steps we take from the academic level, and that's something that we would consider doing," he said.

Mr. Morse and others also asked whether there would really be critical distance between the audit committee and IREG's executive committee.

Ellen Hazelkorn, executive director of the Higher Education Policy Research Unit at the Dublin Institute of Technology and a well-known critic of the growing influence of rankings in shaping institutional and governmental policy, noted that rankings have become an intensely competitive business, and that any audit procedures would need to be clear and open enough to ensure that competitors were not pronouncing on one another's work.

She also said that auditors should ensure that all constituencies are involved in the process, including academics, policy makers, and students.

"I think it could potentially go somewhere," she said of the audit project. "I'm just not sure as to how it would work and who might subject themselves to it."

Some people invoked a comparison between the proposed audit and the accreditation process in the United States, in which universities participate voluntarily, but Ms. Hazelkorn emphasized that "universities have a compulsion to participate in accreditation" in order to secure eligibility for such financial benefits as Pell Grants, and that such an incentive is absent in when it comes to rankings.

But Nian Cai Liu, dean of the Graduate School of Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which began producing the Academic Ranking of World Universities in 2003, applauded the effort.

"We need something, we need to start," he said. "I think there will be more and more rankings, but there will be in a sense be more concentration of rankings," he predicted. Those with an IREG approval label will grow in influence, but the rest will lose significance.