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European Students' Union

Rankings: student information or university hit list?

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Rankings have been a controversial issue for many years now. The **world rankings**, like the Shanghai ranking and the Times Higher education supplement ranking, get a lot of press coverage every year. Higher education institutions send out press releases to celebrate their high position. News papers tell their readers how good or bad their higher education is scoring. Politicians make bold statements on their higher education systems. But are they worth all this attention?

The Shanghai and Times Higher rankings are hit list of universities. The Times Higher ranking measures mainly the reputation of institutions. Shanghai ranks higher education institutions based on academic and research output. Important parameters are the number of alumni and staff with a Nobel Prize or Field Medal and the number of publications and citations of conducted research. The rankings do not only receive a lot of press coverage. They also receive a lot of comments on the methodology. Even on the Shanghai ranking website, they state themself that: "There are many methodological and technical problems". Does a nobel price mean that you are good teacher? Is reputation really of measure of quality? Of course not. World rankings are a waiste of time and money and we should not care about them.

Not only Chinese academics are occupied with ranking universities. In Europe there have been several attempts to create new **multi –dimensional rankings**. Many conferences took place the past months where policy makers discuss why European institutions score poorly on the world ranking systems. Several countries have attempted, or are attempting to implement the CHE-ranking. Currently also the OECD is working on the development of a new kind of ranking system that should compare learning outcomes.

The CHE-ranking claims a new approach. 'Nothing short of brilliant', according to some ranking experts. CHE differs in many ways to the traditional rankings. It gives students the opportunity to use criteria they think are most important. It ranks programmes, not institutions. It has more criteria than the traditional rankings. And most importantly, it takes into account the opinion of students. Without a doubt, CHE is better then the traditional rankings.

But is the CHE-ranking trully brilliant? The criteria CHE uses are based on facts, student's opinion and professor's tips. But are all the facts reliable and relevant? The bias problems of bibliometrics for humanities and non-english research are well known. CHE does not use many facts and some of them are completely irrelevant for students. To be valuable for students, more facts on study expenses, study presure and workload, student/staff ratio, student counseling and student participation are needed.

The student opinion is based on student surveys. But students do not like to spend a lot of time on questionaires. They all ready have to fill out several surveys a year. For example in the quality assurance proces, the student evalutions are very important. So how many students are willing to fill out an extra survey just for a ranking? And finally there is the professor's tip. This measures nothing more then the reputation of institutions. But on what is this reputation based? Obviously, it is not really an objective indicator of the quality of an institution. Clearly, also in CHE, many methodological and organisational problems need to be solved.

These modern information systems, like CHE, are too often designed in a way which enables simplistic ranking of Higher Education institutions. Surveys carried out under students, presenting a generalised student opinion on their institution also falls in the definition of ranking and are in principle different from sustainable quality assurance and institutional evaluations, which can also deliver valuable information for students to make a qualified choice. Rankings thus in principle do not acknowledge cultural diversity and holistic interpretations of the purpose of education systems.

The **Berlin principles** on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions is a list of criteria for good rankings. They state that a good ranking should "recognize the diversity of institutions and take the different missions and goals of institutions into account. Quality measures for research-oriented institutions, for example, are quite different from those that

are appropriate for institutions that provide broad access to underserved communities." A good ranking should also "specify the linguistic, cultural, economic, and historical contexts of the educational systems being ranked. International rankings in particular should be aware of possible biases and be precise about their objective. Not all nations or systems share the same values and beliefs about what constitutes "quality" in tertiary institutions, and ranking systems should not be devised to force such comparisons."

As students we can only support this principles. However, we wonder how any ranking wants to put them to practice. This would mean that local situations can be taken into account. But how is this possible if they want a similar ranking in several different countries? Without a similar ranking there can't be international comparison. These questions need torough reflection. This problem also occured in the CHE ranking, with for example a bias against non-german universities in Switserland?

Rankings focus on differences without providing information on wether basic needs are met. An institution that does deliver good quality, but is not scoring the best on the indicators measured in the ranking appears to do worse in the ranking than it does in reality. On the other hand institution that only score a bit better then the others will be perceived as much better and gain reputation. Resources will go to institutions with a good reputation. Differences will grow untill we have an excellent education for some and average education for the masses. Is this the higher education we want? Or do we strive for a high quality education for all?

The efforts being put into the ranking of Higher Education Institutions are a byproduct of the increasing emphasisis on **competition** between students and institutions in order to achieve "excellence" which in this context means attracting the most talented students and teachers. By applying market laws to education we are turning Higher Education into a commodity that can be bought and sold. Higher Education institutions need more financing in order to be able to compete and are increasingly turning to tuition fees which again limit access to Higher Education.

ESU believes the shift from HE being viewed as a public good to it being viewed as a private good is dangerous. The focus should be on the importance of Higher Education as a means for social development, democratic empowerment and means of gaining and sharing knowledge rather then it's limited amount of economical aspects. ESU

acknowledges the economical gains knowledge can have for a society but believes excellence is not the right way to build a strong knowledge society. The focus should be on equal access and quality education for all.

It is crucial that the institutions provide high quality and easy accessible information in many different languages regarding the learning outcomes, didactic and aims of the educational programs to aid **students' choice** and thereby create transparency in Higher education systems and education in Europe. This is a pre-requisite for students to make a qualified choice for an institution based on their own preferences and needs.

This leads us to a fundamental question: are we discussing ranking or are we talking about student information systems? The new rankings, like CHE, claim to be a student information system. However, the essence of the student information system is still a ranking that compares programmes of different institutions and divides them into average, better and worse. Do we really want to reduce student choice to counting the number of green dots for a programme? Or are there better ways of providing students with relevant information? Before investing scarce resources in developing a ranking system, we should have a fundamental debate on student information. What is the best system or providing relevant information for students? This debate should not only be about choosing the institution that fits the student best, but also about finding the programme that suits the student best.

The focus in providing information for student choice should be on quality assurance, where the problems institutions have are identified and can thus be worked on to improve the quality of the institution. Ranking systems do not help to improve the quality of Higher Education Institutions as they line them up according to simplistic ranking criteria. One might argue that ranking systems are only one factor that should be accompanied by quality assurance, just something to give the institutions a little "boost" to encourage them to strive for excellence. What must, however, be kept in mind is that ranking systems do not favour diversity as they put pressure on Higher Education Institutions to pick the path that leads to success which leaves little space for diversity.

For the moment this entire debate had been skipped and ranking project are started. The analyses seemed to be 'we do not score well on the existing rankings and they do not measure quality anyway so we want another ranking.' The correct analyses however

would be 'students need more information so that they can choose the programme that suits them best and we will figure out the best way to do that'. We ask for a fundamental debate on the necessity of yet another ranking and on the possible alternatives for better student information systems.

These debate can only be valuable if it considers the **needs of the students** themselves. Only we now what information we really need. To be valuable for students, more facts on study pressure, student/staff ratio, student counselling, guidance and student participation are needed. We also need information on study costs, like prices of books and courses, tuition fees, prices for housing and mails, transport costs, anti-discrimination mechanisms and appeal procedures, etc. Critically but constructively we want to cooperate so that together we can work out the best system. One thing is all ready very clear to us: we are not interested in yet another university hit list.

ESU believes the multiple purposes of higher education cannot and should not be simplified with either general quantitative or qualitative indicators as exemplified in rankings and typologies of higher education institutions. Rankings can have dangerous effects and should not be carried out with the existing methodological problems. Rankings push governments and insitutions to implement policies aimed at letting universities excel on a small set of indicators used in these rankings. In order to score good in rankings, higher education institutions are asking for more selection possibilities and higher fees. This leads to exclusion of potential students and rankings are therefor contradictory to the social dimension aim of the Bologna Process.