Branding and Ranking in Higher Education

The pursuit of the label ‘world-class’ university is spreading across the globe. Nationally and institutionally, excellence in global higher education has become a matter of policy that affects diverse interests. International rankings form an important input and stimulation in this positional competition for ‘world-class’ status.

I will discuss some aspects of the incredible popularity and growing importance of international rankings. First, I want to discuss conceptual issues in understanding the role of rankings in creating social order. Second, I explore how an increased focus on rankings is affecting political action as well as institutional behavior including branding. Third, I turn to the potential costs of playing the ranking game in international higher education. And finally, if we have a moment left, I want to share thoughts on what can be done to regulate and limit potentially damaging effects.

Creating social order: sorting, ranking and field formation

International university rankings developed in times of global educational expansion and internationalization of higher education. Basically, they contribute to the creation of some social order in the bewildering world of contemporary mass higher education. Higher education has become or is on its way of becoming a mature industry.

In this wider context, international university rankings provide an input for the construction of an institutional field as Linda Wedlin has shown. This field is not just populated by the universities themselves but by all those organizations which participate in the formation of the field, such as ranking organizations, the media, political agencies or data providers.
This field also provides an arena for contestation between actors; about what the appropriate criteria for comparison, success and legitimacy are - for example those in dominant institutions aiming to maintain the orthodoxy and hence the criteria on which the hierarchy of institutions exists; and subordinate but rising institutions which aim to change old rules and introduce new criteria into the field which have the potential to shift these institutions higher up in the hierarchy. Rankings as well as data providers also compete with each other for public attention and policy impact and eventually for profits.

If they are powerful enough, rankings contribute to the establishment of belonging and distinction, and set rules and criteria for those who are or want to be member of the club. Value statements of better and worse and of climbing or falling provide important signals to the members and the outsiders of the field, to relevant others; for example policymakers who want to know where their best universities are or where improvement is needed or parents who want to know where to send their children.

And rankings provide, of course, an input for competition between universities; competition for organizational reputation and reputation related benefits. International rankings stimulate competition across borders and between nations and regions. They stimulate investments according to the rules of the ranking game as everyone strives to improve their competitive positions. Eventually rankings also provide an input to limit competition in cases where membership and rank in the various league tables reach some stable order. In this very sense, rankings provide rhetorical devices with potentially important material consequences- some of which get enacted as self-fulfilling prophecies: external audiences’ reaction to rankings (minor differences become bigger because of rankings stressing difference), the influence of prior rankings on surveys that determine future rank (people responding to reputation surveys are influenced by prior rankings), the use of rankings to make funding decisions within universities (budgets become linked to ranking results, money supports success), and how activities within universities conform to rankings criteria (aligning the organisation and its performance with ranking criteria).
Rankings thus are co-producers of what they measure.

Rankings do Aristotelian science as Michel Focault has analyzed it: Things get classified, sorted into different categories and vertically ordered. They transform qualities into quantities, making it easier to access and process information, and simplification often makes information seem more authoritative. Lists are reassuring and simple sound bites of information have their own beauty. March and Simon (1958) have shown how such processes of simplification obscure the discretion, assumptions, and arbitrariness that unavoidably infuse information. Consequently, uncertainty and contingency get absorbed. Information appears more robust and definitive than it would if presented in more complicated forms.

In fact, international rankings have been positioned as trustworthy and reliable transparency tools, as consumer information and evidence-base for policy-making. Unfortunately, the reality is that current international university rankings receive serious critique as regards their methodology, presentation and marketing. They provide incentives and legitimacy for what Robert Frank has analyzed as the ‘academic arms race’; and rankings contribute to a narrow representation of the role of universities in society and economy.

*Setting the standards: The bias of international ranking*

Methodological critique of some aspects of rankings has been wide-spread. Take for example the QS and Times Higher rankings. The most important indicator is peer appraisal which involves in this case an international survey among senior academics. In fact, this has been little more than an opinion poll that measures recognition of research-based reputation among peers. As we are well aware, reputation is by no means identical to performance. Response rates have also been suspiciously low. We know that at least in one case, pro-active mobilization of academics for participation had astounding effects on the standing of the country’s universities in the ranking. Such methodological problems
can, of course, be resolved. It takes, however, concerted and continuous action to put pressure on ranking organizations.

The more important issue seems to me that rankings set quite uniform, narrow and biased standards in the definition of “world class”. They unify and de-contextualise their objects of observation – diversity and fragmentation get suppressed except for vertical variation. They measure what is measurable in quantities that signal quality; what they exclude appears to have less value. They organize a ‘beauty contest’ in which someone has to be the winner; however small the difference to number two might be. Quite frequently differences between groups of ten or twenty institutions are statistically insignificant. They favor research over all other contributions of universities. They focus on a certain type of research output and recognize certain fields of research. They tend to rank universities as a whole and neglect important internal differences. They also favor older and larger comprehensive universities.

_Playing the ranking game: Policy initiatives and institutional strategies_

Competition for international rankings is, however, an important trigger for a growing number of countries implementing policies for supporting ‘world class’ in their national higher education system. Notions of excellence have implicitly or explicitly been based on self-governance within a semi-autonomous academic field. As regulatory governance becomes more risk-concerned, information systems become a useful tool for identifying funding opportunities and risks, and eventually become incorporated into regulatory procedures by public agencies as a form of risk management. The rise of audits, evaluations and accreditations has been one remarkable development. International rankings provide another prominent example for the rapid diffusion of ‘transparency tools of excellence’ around the globe. Global competition for positional advantage in league tables has in turn been one trigger for a growing number of governments implementing policies for establishing ‘world class’ in their national higher education and science systems. And vertical stratification has also become an issue in systems with a prevailing view on universities being equal in status and performance.
I would thus assume that a study of the political process would identify empirical traces of two different, though not necessarily mutually exclusive schools of thinking on international policy diffusion. Constructivists trace policy norms to expert epistemic communities and international organisations, who define ‘modernity’. The ‘world polity’ approach depicts an increasingly global political culture comprising broad consensus on the set of appropriate social actors, appropriate societal goals, and means for achieving those goals. Both legitimate ends and appropriate means are shared social constructs. Competition theorists offer another theory of diffusion that also points to changes in incentives. In this case, the changes are wrought by direct competitors. Governments or organizations have little choice but to choose certain policies and practices, the thinking goes, when their direct competitors have done so. At the same time, we should not be surprised that the programs actually implemented did not mean a clear cut break with all elements of the traditional regulatory arena and order. Traditional norms and values as well as local political preferences shape the policy formulation and implementation to some extent.

The work of Espeland and Sauders has shown that universities have little chance to escape the ranking game. Buffering universities from rankings is difficult if not impossible – depending on the regulatory environment and the position of the university. They get internalized, a source for internal discipline as well as for strategic responses. And international research rankings play out in the very heartland of the academic system – the struggle for reputation as a symbolic capital and related economic capital of research money.

Rankings and branding have a mutually re-enforcing effect. Rankings provide signals to universities to engage in reputation management and branding. In the most general – and frequently unaddressed - sense rankings make universities think about themselves as an organization. By comparing and ranking universities as a whole they contribute to the idea that the organization matters, that strategic actorhood of universities as organisations has to be developed, that reputation management and organizational branding are needed.
In a more specific sense, some rankings use indicators that invite universities to actively engage in influencing their image in the eyes of relevant others. Prestige and reputation surveys offering halo-susceptible opinions are most obvious examples of where universities can try to manage their perception by others. On the other hand, more and more universities use rankings to brand themselves, to market themselves by using the over-simplistic representation of their success in rankings. Some are even courageous enough to announce their future ambitions in climbing the rankings as part of their image projects. And success and failure of university leaders, sometimes also their salaries, might get tied to organizational success measured by ranking positions. Obviously, such practices provide additional legitimacy to the rankings. When universities put their rankings on their Web sites, brochures, or press releases, they are complicit in producing and disseminating identities that align with rankings, which in turn might shape internal processes of identification. Positional competition partly plays out in an image game, a process that works at the edges but seems to become more edgy. In a domain of intangibles, the greater the uncertainty and ambiguity of a product the stronger the potential effect of skillfully managed activities aiming at their perception by relevant others. In consequence, it becomes a real question to what extent branding and the co-production of images in the ranking game reflects or deviates from reality.

_The costs involved: waste, isomorphism, and neglect of diversity_

International competition and vertical stratification have thus become visible including systems where universities have traditionally enjoyed broad parity of status and where there is now a marked shift to engage with international rankings. Governments are privileging a core of universities to represent the country in this race. Institutions develop strategic responses to adapt to the performance criteria and standards created by international rankings. Investments made in this international arms race are not necessarily wasted but there is a real challenge due to the competitive dynamics that govern such expenditures. The arms race is already costly and is likely to become even more costly in the future when more and more countries and institutions engage in this competition. And when everybody invests very few will gain a competitive advantage, if
at all. The competition continues on a higher level of performance which is likely to set incentives for further investment.

Playing the ranking game may also have perverse effects on national and institutional strategies. Actions might be taken that are not aligned with public policy goals but that have the sole aim of moving up the list(s). Allotted public funds then risk being wasted as well.

International rankings contribute to deliberate stratification by constructing new boundaries and defining a heartland and a periphery. How these boundaries are constructed is to a large extent dictated by the international reputational hierarchies that already prevail, which are centered on research output. The world-class research university thus becomes the ultimate template for success. It becomes the Holy Grail which many universities are striving for, even if only a few of them will be successful. However, competition will lead to the imitation of the best and thus to a further standardization of research universities internationally.

In this context, concern for the wider purposes of higher education seems to have few effective champions. The public mission of higher education, which Craig Calhoun has written about, is challenged by these developments. What seems likely to happen is a loss of reputation attached to other purposes of universities. The privileging of academic research outputs leads to the consequent reduction in the diversity of institutional missions; or, at least, the subordination of those other missions to research. Issues of access and equity, the role of higher education for social mobility, the quality of teaching and learning, the contribution of a university to the community and regional development, to name but a few examples, do not play a role in international rankings. This risks reducing the diversity, adaptability and resilience of the higher education system as a whole; something of central concern for public policy and the governance of higher education and research.

A forward look
In the light of what has been said above: how do we look forward? One question to be asked is whether we can turn back from rankings? I guess that this is unlikely to happen for a number of reasons: they tap into a strong desire for ordering and ranking; they can build on what I have called ‘the competitive turn’ in international education that goes along with monitoring, benchmarking, ‘naming, faming and blaming’. They appeal to traditional informal reputational hierarchies in science as well as deeply institutionalized struggles for research-based academic capital as the gold standard.

And what if we assume that rankings are here to stay? Public policies are needed that appreciate and actively support the multiple roles of contemporary universities and the varieties of excellences that they comprise. I believe that the study of higher education and research has to play a public role in this struggle in counter-balancing the ranking hype. Distinctions that limit competition for world class research excellence need to be made. Such distinctions should, of course, be well informed.

The growing number and influence of international rankings call for quality assurance and transparency as regards their own procedures and outcomes. First steps are undertaken in this direction. In order to assure that rankings meet high standards, the Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence plans to carry out an audit of the main international and national academic rankings. This process will, however, only gain credibility if it is used by the majority of the main ranking compilers and if can show some independence from these.

Finally, classifications and rankings are needed that pay respect to the diversity or roles and missions of universities within different contexts and conditions. We have built an international Consortium that conceptualizes and tests the feasibility of an alternative multi-dimensional global ranking. The basic approach is to compare only institutions which are similar and comparable in terms of their missions and structures. Field-based rankings will focus on a particular type of institution and develop and test a set of
indicators appropriate to these institutions by using a grouping approach rather than a league table approach. The design will compare not only the research performance of institutions but will include teaching and learning as well as other aspects of university performance. This is a real challenge in terms of methodological feasibility as well as in terms of political support and public understanding. The challenge is worth the effort in order to raise awareness of the multiple roles and excellences of our universities in international classifications and rankings.

Selected References


