

The Academic Arms Race: International Rankings, Branding and Global Competition

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International university rankings developed in times of global educational expansion and inter-connectedness of higher education (Enders 2004). They contribute to the creation of social order in the bewildering world of contemporary mass higher education and provide input for the construction of a global institutional field of world-class universities (Wedlin 2011). 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. Rankings provide rhetorical devices by doing Aristotelian science (Focault 1971): Things get classified and vertically ordered. Rankings 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.

Methodological critique of some aspects of rankings has thus been wide-spread. The more important issue is that rankings set quite uniform, narrow and biased standards in the social construction of 'world class'. They de-contextualise their objects of observation – diversity and fragmentation get suppressed except for vertical stratification. 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

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differences between groups of ten or twenty institutions are statistically insignificant. They favour 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 favour older and larger comprehensive universities.

Playing the ranking game

‘Winners and losers’ of the ranking game are thus pre-defined by the very construction of the criteria of ‘excellence’ used in international rankings. Universities have, however, little chance to escape the ranking game, and the eagerness to participate in the game is growing. Buffering universities from rankings is difficult if not impossible (Sauder & Espeland 2009): 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 resources. In a growing number of countries, rankings also provide incentives for national policies favouring universities participating in the ranking game.

Rankings thus provide important signals to universities to engage in performance management and branding (Naidoo & Beverland 2012). 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 performance management and organizational branding are needed (Enders et al. 2012). 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. More universities also use rankings to brand themselves, to market themselves by using the over-simplistic representation of their success in rankings. Some are even brave enough to announce their future ambitions in climbing the rankings as part of their image projects. Obviously, such practices provide additional legitimacy to the rankings. When universities put their rankings on their Web sites or link leadership salaries to ranking results, they are complicit in producing and disseminating identities that align with rankings, which in turn might shape internal processes of

identification. Positional competition also 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 skilfully managed activities aiming at their perception by relevant others.

The costs involved: waste, isomorphism, and neglect of diversity

International competition and vertical stratification have thus become more 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. Investments made in this international arms race (Frank\$) 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 are 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 when the world-class research university becomes the ultimate template for success. Competition will lead to the imitation of the best and 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 (Calhoun 2006, Enders & Jongbloed 2007) 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.

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