Excellence and diversification of higher education institutions' missions

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One of generic characteristics of higher education systems is their slow evolution. Governments are not happy with this fact as they understand the role universities could play in the development of innovation-based economies or in the global political and cultural competition. More and more governments choose to push public and private universities to achieve the so-called world class status that brings additional legitimization for the state policies and allegedly facilitates the natioanl economic development.

There are different approaches to establish a group of globally competitive universities in different countries. The paper examines the excellence-driven policies and initiatives. The paper includes the analysis of more than 20 excellence initiatives based on policy documents, ranking data and interviews. The paper shows that the there are two rationales for these initiatives. First, they are based on the belief that the world class universities help countries to become more competitive. Second, the international rankings put enormous pressure on the governments to demonstrate global competitiveness of their universities.

The paper shows that in the most cases the design of such initiatives is based on clear indicators of universities performance. There are many words that the aim of "pushing" universities for excellence is not only to achieve specific indicators but to develop within-the-university culture of self-development and change management. However the majority of the initiatives do not have specific elements of the design to achieve this goal.

The paper examines the implementation process of such initiatives. The main deficiencies of the implementation include tight control, insufficient time and financial resources. At the same time in many cases the implementation process relies on the increasing internationalization and modernization of the university management.

The discussion of the outcomes of such initiatives is limited by the data available. Usually the changes in the ranking position are considered as the main outcome. The authors discuss other approaches to evaluate the excellence initiatives. Lessons for future excellence-driven policies development judged from the analysis are presented in the paper.

The Knowledge Society and Diversification of Higher Education: From the Social Contract to the Mission of Universities, *Attila Pausits (Danube University Krems, Krems, Austria)*

A further opening of universities towards social stakeholder groups is a part of the modernization agenda in the European Higher Education Area. This ambition is often overwritten with the concept of 'Third Mission'. The third mission bundles all activities outside the academic environment and promotes interaction with other target groups. Typical areas of the third mission are continuing education, technology transfer and innovation, and the social engagement of the university as an institution. This article considers the third mission as a widening of teaching and research, introduces possible activities and calls for a systematic and strategic examination of the subject as well as for an integration into

rankings. Furthermore, the article aims to stimulate critical reflection on the third mission indicators, so that the third mission becomes a more relevant part of the social contract.

New rankings on the scene: Are they really new?, *Gergely Ferenc Kováts (Institute of Management and the Center for International Higher Education Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary)*

In the last ten years rankings of higher education institutions has been proliferating. Although there are many international rankings available, the major ones – such as those provided by ARWU, QS and THE – share several similar characteristics. Even if there are many beneficial effects of rankings on policy development, on the management of institutions and despite of being a "transparency tool" for other stakeholders, there is a widespread literature of criticism of (global) rankings. Based on these criticisms, however, new rankings have been developed in the last couple of years: U-Multirank and U21 Ranking of national higher education systems. In the paper it will be explored to what extent these new rankings are able to overcome the problems of previous rankings and also what strengths and shortcomings they have on methodological and conceptual level. Finally, I reflect on how rankings, ratings and classifications are embedded in the European Higher Education Area, and how the peculiarity of the European region influences the impact of the old and new rankings.

Excellence and diversification of higher education institutions' missions, Marco Porzionato, Federica De Marco *(Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy)*

Since forever colleges and universities compete with each other for students, teachers, donors and social support. For a long time, the competition has been evaluated by implicit reputation without any data to back up perceptions.

With the heightened competition between universities since the 1990s and the dramatic growth of the international higher education market, survey have emerged in many country as a means of evaluating and ranking universities.

Recently the competition has been accelerated in many countries as governments develop initiatives to build world-class universities that can compete more effectively with other leading institutions across the globe. Although there are concerns with using rankings as tool for measuring the quality of a university, many institutional leaders and policymakers still often rely on rankings to inform their policymaking.

Global rankings, have major impacts on higher education systems, higher education institutions, academics, and consumers (students, parents, employers).

For this reason university rankings should encourage universities around the world to carry out a self-assessment in relation to several quality issues, including sustainability. None of the main global rankings have so far addressed the issue, both in terms of good practice assessments, and as an important signal to society as a whole.

The introduction of sustainability in global rankings could be an important addition to the existing metrics, and a significant dimension of comparison, with multiple and far reaching benefits not only for single universities as well as for the entire higher educational system.

It is important introducing sustainability in global rankings not simply as a criterion for identifying the best universities, but as a general underlying best practice principle in university activities, in the same way they have been recognized in all other institutions, such as companies and households.

From highschool to university. Coping with students' indecision in choosing their studies, *Simona Sava, Mădălin Bunoiu, Laura Malita, Adriana Isvoran (West University of Timisoara)*

One of the main challenges for Romanian universities is to attract and to retain students, as the student population graduating high school is continuing decreasing. However, it is generally well known that the future students just graduating highschool are quite unclear in their option for university studies and a certain career path, registering at several specializations, faculties, universities. Also, quite a lot of them drop out after first year of study or later, noticing that it is not what they have expected.

The study done in the pilot way at West University of Timisoara (WUT) on the candidates registering for the academic year 2014-2015 highlights the difficulties the students have in choosing their academic studies, and the suggestions they have for an easier and clearer option. The empiric data collected from about 900 respondents is ground for tailored policy measures within our university and beyond. The initial evaluation on the new students is a basis for a better tailored interaction with them during their studies, and also the preliminary data suggests possible specific measures to improve retention rates, such as: diversified student services, covering academic guidance services, not only career guidance services; possibility for students with indecision specialization to attend courses of different departments, collecting their credits (see examples from Western Europe and South Korea). Such attempt is meant to improve the BA graduation rate (of 49.94% in 2014), an item within the "teaching and learning" category of the U-Multirank system.