

[draft: not for citation]

Excellence and diversification of higher education institutions' missions – Presentation and overview of the theme

Jan Sadlak (IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence)

Excellence

History of higher education confirms its standing concern for academic excellence. However if this preoccupation was foremost that of individual academic and given university, present situation in this area is being radically redefined in view of profound transformation inside and outside of higher education.

“Excellence” is not explicitly mentioned in official documents of the Bologna Process as one of its key objective. In other words, “excellence”, which should be understood as striving for the highest level of quality and performance, does not serve as common denominator in normative hierarchies of academic quality of the Bologna Process.

To some extent this reflects thinking that an idea of “excellence” is somewhat easier associated with a liberal approach to higher education than with its role in idealized vision of Europe representing the hope of achieving social and economic progress together in an atmosphere of collaboration, mutual understanding and friendship.

However, the absence of specific reference to “excellence” in official texts of the Bologna Process does not preclude understanding that higher education [and research] plays an important role in a global competition. Already the *Bologna Declaration* points out that:

“The vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal that its culture has for other countries. We need to ensure that the European higher education system acquires a worldwide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions.”
(text of the *Bologna Declaration 1998*).

Consequently, calls for enhancement of “attractiveness” of the European higher education, foremost by improving quality, has been a steady element of official communiqués of bi-annual ministerial conferences, which is a principle coordination and decision-making, by consensus, body of the Bologna Process. Even if formally addressed to member countries of the European Union, important policy argument for performant higher education has been the Lisbon Strategy. It was devised in 2000 to make the European Union by 2010; “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and more better jobs and greater social cohesion.” The more realistic “*Europe 2020*”, which replaced the over-ambitious Lisbon Strategy, retains its concern for competitive higher education.

It is evident that in order to achieve ambitious goals of high quality teaching and performant research higher implies going beyond minimal standards stipulated by established instruments of quality assurance such as accreditation. It is therefore not surprising to identify policy approaches and

measures related to “excellence” at the national and institutional levels among countries participating in the Bologna Process. Actually, it is hard to find a country that would openly admit a differing policy.

[additional analysis will reflect findings of the research paper to be written by I.D. Froumin and M. Lisyutkin]

Diversification

There is hardly a modern system of higher education, at least in the countries participating in the Bologna Process, which would be organized around one type of institution and monolithic manner of operation. It is therefore quite normal that Bologna communiqués emphasise that more attention should be paid to the potential benefits of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with institutions and programmes with different profiles and missions. It has been also argued that diversified higher education is a sign of the system’s alleged capacity to better respond to labour market and social fairness. Taking into consideration that one of characteristics of Europe is ethnical, linguistic and cultural diversity it quite evident that diversification of higher education has its additional policy and educational *raison-de-être*.

Higher education literature distinguishes the following three categories of diversification (CHEPS, *Mapping Diversity Report*, 2008):

- *institutional*, referring to differences in types of institution within higher education system;
- *programmatic*, relating to diversity of study programmes offered by higher education institution,
- *reputational*, which refers to prestige or status of higher education institution [or programme].

Discussing “diversification” of higher education in EHEA needs to be seen also in the context of consequences of strategies which resulted in massification as well as expectations towards greater role of higher education in responding to varied challenges often framed under a concept of “third mission” and its derivate “sustainable development”. There are important reasons to pay more attention to these dimensions of diversification.

[additional analysis will reflect findings of the research paper to be written by A. Paustis]

From the perspective of “excellence”, analysis of diversification needs to be looked at in the context of the tensions between the need to expand higher education to accommodate social demand [mass higher education] and quality considerations. The latter one implies the continuing need to develop some elite forms of institutional settings, funding mechanisms and legal provisions. The author of a study commissioned by the European University Association, points out that:

“Even Norway, which is most explicitly and consistently anti-elite in its academic and stakeholder values, shows an increased need for a high performing elite that can meet the most stringent demands of international competitiveness. While the idea of hereditary privilege offends dominant notions of equal opportunity and equal rights, the need to maintain elites in some form or another seems to persist and is usually met, obliquely rather than explicitly, with differentiated, often separate higher education provision (institutions or programmes).” (Reichert, 2009).

It is therefore quite obvious that diversification also imply existence, and acceptance, of hierarchy of status and prestige within the system of higher education. The latter one has a particular significance for university rankings.

Rankings

The European higher education has a relatively brief history of cohabitation with “university rankings”. It has been intertwined with three characteristics – *rejection*, *opposition*, and *approval*. An important marking point of this cohabitation was publication in 2003 of the Academic Ranking of World-Class Universities (AWRU), compiled by the team at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and generally referred to as “Shanghai ranking”. The other rankings which gained an international notoriety and recognition are; the World University Rankings produced by QS Intelligence Unit, the World University Rankings of the *Times Higher Education*, the Webometrics Rankings of World Universities from the Cybermetrics Lab, a research group belonging to the Spanish *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas* (CSIC). To this list should be added *U21 Ranking of National Higher Education Systems*, which is a project of the global network of research-intensive universities and produced by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.

Rankings in a way are speaking directly to wider audience over the head of corporative-oriented academe [faculty and students alike]. University rankings are an entrenched phenomenon around the world and it is one of methods of quality assessment in the context of “new landscape of higher education”. University rankings reflect a departure from dealing with “quality” of higher education dominated by a self-conducted peer-assessment to more an externalized approach.

A dominant narrative to propel the criticisms of rankings, particularly in countries which higher education and research have been organized in different fashion that along non-Anglo-Saxon model, has been their methodological shortcomings. It is this argument which has been behind the EU initiative to come out with European-model-friendly ranking – *U-Multirank*, which would also be an alternative to the Shanghai ranking.

Ján Figel, at the time the EU Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, justified this decision by arguing that:

“There are not many ranking systems of universities of the type we are interested in. At present most rankings are typically mono-dimensional. But while they may have some merit, we are more interested in developing a ranking system that goes beyond the research performance of universities, to include elements such as teaching quality and community outreach. What we are looking at is multi-dimensional, because we want to take account of the rich diversity of our universities, so that potential students, researchers and staff can get better picture about the respective university.” (Figel, 2008).

It looks that discussing university ranking among the Bologna countries has degree of acceptance in the context of development of transparency policies keeping in mind that; “Rankings appeal to the public demonstrates that there is interest for such tools. Currently, there are no indications that public propensity for rankings would decrease. In this context, one key challenge for Bologna tools is to increase their understandability while maintaining comprehensibility.”
(*Working Group on Transparency Tools of the Bologna Process*, 2011)

The proliferation and popularity of university rankings is also reflection of the increasing need for information about European higher education. Therefore, it has been important to develop a methodology fitting better for assessing performance of the European universities. Its characteristic features are; multidimensionality, independence, transparency, and global coverage. It should respond to interests and informational needs of some 11 target groups identified by EU as potential users of this ranking. It is still too early to assess if such comprehensive coverage is actually being met (Sadlak, 2014).

[additional analysis will reflect findings of the research paper to be written by G.F. Kovats]

Sustainable development

[additional analysis will reflect findings of the research paper to be written by Ch. Mio]

Concluding remarks

It is a growing acceptance that we are witnessing “the emergence of a strong and economically oriented approach to the university, where terms like excellence, quality-control, evaluation, efficiency, out put funding, accountability, performance indicators, rankings, competition, bibliometrics have become part of the idiom of any university” [Standaert, 2009].

It is right to say that prevailing number countries of the Bologna Process have some form of national ranking systems or are covered by various international rankings. Their presence and role in contemporary higher education have been confirmed by international independent surveys concluding that:

“Rankings are used for specific and different purposes. Politicians regularly refer to them as a measurement of their nation’s economic strength and aspirations. Universities use them to define performance targets and implement marketing activities, while academics use rankings to support their own professional reputation and status. Students use rankings to choose their potential place of study and research. Public and private stakeholders use rankings to guide their decisions about funding allocations. What started out as a consumer product aimed at undergraduate domestic students have now become both a manifestation and a driver of global competition and a battle for excellence in itself. (Expert Group, 2010)

In today’s higher education ensuring appropriate standards needs to be supplemented by the public interest in sound information about how such standards are reflected in their activities. University rankings, with all due shortcomings, are responding to such needs. When couple of years ago when influential French daily *Le Monde* has discussed position of the French universities in “Shanghai rankings” its lead title said; “Une palmares qui irrite mai qui a su s’imposer” [in translation “Ranking which irritates but cannot be ignored”]. It is a valid description of the role of university ranking in the permanent quest for excellence in higher education.

It needs to be reiterated that university rankings should be used in order to supplement - not substitute - careful thought and your own inquiries. The rankings should only be used as one tool to help you choose the right graduate school or program, not as the only factor driving your choice.

University rankings will continue to be one of the most passionately argued issues in higher education. This is to great extent due to a lack of consensus on how to define “excellence” in higher education, national sensibilities and academic culture and traditions.

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