Global University Rankings – Impacts and Applications

Contribution to the 5th International Conference on World-Class Universities, 3 to 6 November 2013 in Shanghai, China

Prof. Dr. Barbara M. Kehm
University of Glasgow
Barbara.Kehm@glasgow.ac.uk

Structure

1. Introduction
2. The Ranking Game
3. Examples of Resistance
4. Rankings as a Form of Transnational Policy Coordination
5. Conclusions
2. The Ranking Game

Saudi-Arabian Universities recruiting highly cited professors from around the world to boost their position in global rankings.
Australian Universities recruiting “managers for institutional rankings” to maximise or optimise their position.
US Universities manipulating the figures they submit for rankings.
In the UK 70% of university leaders want to see their university among the top 10% in national and among the top 25% in international rankings (Hazelkorn 2007).
All universities are judged on the basis of criteria only appropriate for 4 to 6 % of universities globally.
 Rankings create a “deficit model” (Locke 2011) which leads to a race to improve one’s position.

Impacts:

1. Good ranking positions lead to a Matthew effect
2. Rankings distribute reputation.
3. Rankings reduce complexity and are popular among political decision-makers.

Rankings do not provide information about the quality of a university as a whole.
There are only few universities globally who can play the ranking game.
3. Examples of Resistance

Rankings have multiplied at national and international levels. But also resistance has begun from the academic side.

- James Cook University in Australia is boycotting the ARWU Ranking.
- Some US universities (Annapolis Group) are boycotting the US News and World Report Ranking.
- Some Canadian universities have refused to participate in the Maclean’s Ranking.
- In Germany several learned societies (Sociologists, Historians, Chemists, Educationists) have recommended to boycott the CHE Ranking.

- 4 German universities (Hamburg, Leipzig, Cologne, Hagen) have announced not to submit any more data for purposes of rankings.
- 300 Economics professors have rebelled against a ranking of business studies and economics carried out by the *Handelsblatt*. 
4. Rankings as a Form of Transnational Policy Coordination

Erkkilä (2013) has framed rankings as a policy instrument of global university governance. Although they have no norm-giving authority, the outcomes of rankings constitute a policy problem linked to a global narrative of competitiveness and economic strength and provide a reference point for legitimizing reforms. Transnational policy coordination is using 4 mechanisms (Holzinger/Knill 2005):

- Lesson drawing
- Transnational problem solving
- Policy emulation
- International policy promotion

As an instrument of transnational policy coordination rankings consist of a mixture of transnational problem solving and international policy promotion. In Europe, the European Commission is an important actor in this.
5. Conclusions

History of rankings began from around 1870 onwards and was mostly carried out by active academics. The first ranking of the US News and World Report in 1983 triggered a ranking frenzy by other weeklies and dailies in order to boost their circulation. The ARWU Ranking was the beginning of a re-appropriation of rankings by academics.

But some things have changed!
(a) Ranking outcomes have become indicators (proxies) themselves for the economic competitiveness of a given nation (or region).
(b) Governments make decisions (about reforms, about funding) on the basis of the symbolic value of ranking scales.

(c) The positional hierarchy of universities created by rankings does not reflect the actual reality of what universities are about.
(d) The hierarchy is being shifted into the economic sphere where it constitutes a de-contextualised symbolic value.
(e) This value can itself be charged with new meaning thus creating a new material reality which is no longer related to its original.

This is a truly postmodern development!
Thank you for your attention!