

Universities challenged: achieving better results through better accountability (0255)

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General considerations

Policymakers expect colleges and universities to attain more, costly, sometimes competing goals: enrolling a more diverse student population, ensuring high academic standards, adequate job market preparation, production of relevant knowledge with a real impact, providing more opportunities for lifelong learning, cooperating more with the local and regional communities, being a global partner, .. Citizens expect all publicly supported institutions to meet increased demands: education, health care, public transport, public administrations are called to be transparent and to account for processes, expenditures and results and outcomes. More and more policymakers therefore will advance proposals to ensure efficiency and effectiveness and quality from higher education for its spending and its outcomes.

Higher education is a public good. That is one of the main reasons put forward by higher education to claim public funding. But more and more those same communities, facing complex social, economical and technological problems, are asking the question What are the universities really doing for us? Are the HEI making good use of our tax euros? Are they producing the knowledge needed for a better understanding of those complex problems by carrying out research and by producing graduates.

It goes without saying that higher education is a public responsibility. Public institutions will no longer be excused from explaining what they do and what they don't do. Responsible performance requires continuing accumulation of evidence of the extent to which purposes and objectives are achieved.

Responsible performance also requires consideration of the relevance, the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes used to achieve those goals.

Bologna and rankings

My starting point is the Leuven Communiqué. In paragraph 22 the ministers note that there are several current initiatives designed to develop mechanisms for providing more detailed information about higher education institutions across the EHEA to make their diversity more transparent.

We are all valuing highly the richness of a diversified higher education landscape and only such a diversified landscape can respond to the diverse knowledge needs of the society. But we need also instruments to enhance transparency and comparability for users about what they can expect from a higher education system.

Barbara Kehm and Bjorn Stensaker have identified five different interpretations or perspectives of what rankings mean for higher education and how rankings might contribute to change the sector.

- Rankings as market regulation
- Rankings as globalisation
- Rankings are a symptom
- Rankings as institutional identity creation
- Rankings as a symptom of the knowledge society

Diversity

With the creation of the EHEA and the implementation of the Bologna Process we can observe trends towards convergence and to diversification at the same time. In the literature many arguments have been developed regarding the positive impact of diversity: diversified higher education systems are more responsive to the diverse needs of the students and the society, have positive impact on social mobility (by developing associate degrees), contribute to a greater flexibility and effectiveness at system level. But transparency of the diversity is lacking. We are lacking indicators that may make the diversity transparent and readable.

Diversity without evidence-based transparency will lead to unrestrained and harmful competition and hence to market failure.

Accountability

The rankings and classification debate demonstrates that performance measurement – in particular the quantification of the measurement through defining performance indicators – is now a critical issue for higher education. We need to broaden the rankings debate to the following issues: accountability, transparency, diversity and quality. Therefore we need fresh approaches to performance measurement and a more sophisticated approach to quality and accountability.

We need to develop an accountability framework on the basis of robust, trustworthy and scientifically generated knowledge. The higher education sector as the producer of scientific knowledge should be capable to defining and measuring trustworthy indicators measuring its own performance.

It is time for higher education to get serious about accountability.

Continuous improvement of teaching and learning outcomes and effectiveness will depend greatly on the capacity of the higher education sector to develop evidence-based approaches and hence to develop relevant indicators. All higher education institutions will have the responsibility to explain their purposes and objectives and to report publicly on how they have performed against their own goals and targets and the expected performance standards. But we can not leave the entire measurement of performance to the institutions themselves. There is a need to compare institutional performance and to judge the performance as a sector as a whole. There is need to develop core common performance indicators and to establish a framework that does justice to the institutional diversity regarding mission and profile.

The challenge is to develop agreed sector-wide indicators, based on common definitions, for measuring the performance in the three main areas of performance: teaching and learning, research and knowledge transfer and community engagement. At the end of the day we will have core performance indicators for all higher education institutions regardless their missions or profile and additional indicators to be used as appropriate on the basis of specific institutional missions.

Accountability is very much connected to trust and confidence. At the same time a better accountability could enhance trust and confidence and at the same time developing a balanced accountability framework requires trust and confidence among all stakeholders. Accountability is different from an evaluation of performance according established standards. Accountability implies a kind of evaluation against some expectations or preset targets and goals.

Each accountability framework should provide sufficient resources to encourage improvements on agreed outcomes and to stimulate innovation and change avoiding the danger of stultifying innovation.

We can distinguish two forms of accountability:

- a formal vertical bureaucratic way of accountability
- a more informal democratic way of accountability.

A dialogue of accountability seems to me the best means of achieving a democratic accountability.

Democratic accountability is not a summons to compliance but rather it provides understanding of what has happened and why it has taken place. Democratic accountability is more about explaining than providing naked/bare information and data.

Public authorities and the academic community must propose together sensible balanced indicators of efficiency, quality, relevance, equity, responsiveness as accountability measures for higher education and research.

If we succeed in developing a new framework, then an institution that admits students coming from non-traditional educational backgrounds and graduating them well prepared would get the same prestige and recognition as a research university in the existing rankings.