

SRHE Conference 2014: paper proposal

Title: Global University Rankings: Impacts on Universities Worldwide

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Abstract (150 words)

University rankings are becoming an instrument of political, administrative and personal decision-making as well as a mechanism for universities to signal their quality to various actors within HE markets. Universities transform themselves under rankings pressure. Some changes are beneficial and allow universities to use their resources in a more effective way, while others may be harmful since they can distort missions and create perverse incentives.

This paper draws on an international research study that endeavors to answer the question: *How do university rankings challenge and affect institutions of higher education in different countries?* The study covers research universities in 11 countries in different regions of the world and is being undertaken by a team of experts from each country. The author of this paper is the UK member of the research team. Empirical data consists of interviews with key university managers and academics, analysis of additional documentation and observational evidence.

Paper (947 words excluding references)

Higher education is undergoing important structural changes. During a time of globalisation, universities are trying to integrate into an international system of educational services. They compete with each other for the most talented students and staff as well as for funding and government support. University rankings are becoming an instrument of political, administrative and personal decision-making as well as a mechanism for universities to signal their quality to various actors within higher education markets (Kehm, 2014).

At the same time, evaluation criteria force universities to adapt to measurable indicators and in some cases to change their strategies. So, universities transform themselves under rankings pressure (Hazelkorn, 2011). Some changes are beneficial and allow universities to use their resources in a more effective way, while others may be harmful since they can distort university missions and create perverse incentives (Locke, 2011). In some cases, rankings come to 'determine and even codify which kinds of organizational behavior and practices are legitimate' (Morphew and Swanson, 2011: 190). In certain countries, there is even what could be called *rankings fever*, when concern about rankings dominates many other important sources of information and signs of university quality.

This paper draws on an international research project that endeavors to answer the question: *How do university rankings challenge and affect institutions of higher education in different countries?* The project aims to develop a better understanding of the nature and consequences of national and global university rankings on universities through a comparative analysis. The approach is to focus on illustrative case studies to analyse how rankings influence thinking, action and policy at the university level—in other words, it seeks to illustrate how rankings actually affect the academic enterprise and the lives of the academic community. It is particularly

concerned with the impact on the work of universities, the effects on the academic community and related issues. In the UK context, the research is seeking to further investigate the processes of internalisation and institutionalisation of the logic of rankings systems within individual behaviour and organisational practice (Locke, 2014). It is also exploring the emerging impact of online databases which allow users to compare universities on specific indicators, such as *Unistats* and *U-Multirank*.

The focus of attention is on universities that are important and recognisable players in the academic market in their respective countries but are not yet widely visible and important from an international perspective. The research team is interested in the role that rankings – particularly world rankings – play in their struggle for better recognition. The study covers research universities in 11 countries in different regions of the world and is being undertaken by a team of experts from each country. It is led by the Centre for International Higher Education at Boston College in the US, together with the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. The author of this paper is the UK member of the research team.

The study is grounded in qualitative social science methodology. Empirical data consists of interviews with key university managers and academics, analysis of additional documentation and observational evidence. The fieldwork is being carried out in each of the participating countries in late summer/early Autumn 2014. A workshop is organised for the research team for mid-October in Moscow to share emerging findings and consider their implications for institutional management and national policy making.

This paper focuses on the UK case study and will draw comparisons with the case studies from the other countries in the study (Australia, Chile, China, Germany, Ireland, Malaysia, Poland, Russia, Turkey and the USA).

It provides:

- ◆ basic facts about national realities relating to university rankings, such as government policies and approaches to rankings;
- ◆ a short, anonymised, description of the case study university, along with its mission and goals;
- ◆ the university's strategy for adapting to the emerging international higher education market and, particularly, how it relates to rankings;
- ◆ observed effects on the university's strategic planning and, if evidenced, its mission;
- ◆ evidence of structural transformation at the university (within administrative and/or academic units such as faculties, schools and departments);
- ◆ analysis of the influence of rankings at the institutional level as well as at faculty/school and department levels, and among academics and professional and support staff;
- ◆ observed changes in approach to the research and/or teaching functions of the institution;
- ◆ personal perceptions and evaluations of these developments by academics, professional support staff and management;
- ◆ emerging findings from the other case study institutions and key comparisons with these.

The paper will address such questions as:

- ◆ Do the case study universities care about their positions in the global rankings? If so, why?

- ◆ How does this opinion with regard to the perceived importance of the rankings manifest itself in the universities?
- ◆ How do the universities use the information from global rankings to elaborate their collaboration activities and their marketing/branding strategies? Is there any focus on changing the universities' image on the basis of the global rankings?
- ◆ Have the missions of the universities changed under "rankings pressure" and, if so, how?
- ◆ How is the work of the academic community in each institution, including professional and support staff, affected by rankings?
- ◆ Are there structural changes or alterations in staff responsibilities/contracts as a result of rankings?
- ◆ How do academics and professional and support staff feel about the related changes in their universities?
- ◆ What do they think about the role of rankings in the universities' development? What challenges and opportunities do they see?
- ◆ Are academics guided by the global rankings in their career decisions and collaborative activities?

Ultimately, this paper will form part of a book, including the set of case studies, which it is hoped will yield useful insights and help inform academic and government leaders' responses to the opportunities and challenges that rankings present.

References

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