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**Higher Education Ranking and Its Ascending Impact
On Higher Education**

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Editorial

The current issue of Higher Education in Europe presents recent developments and trends in the ranking of higher education institutions and discusses the concept of “world-class universities”. It is the second time that our journal deals with this topic.

The previous one led up to the topic “Ranking Systems and Methodologies in Higher Education” (Vol. 30, no.2, 2005) and presented texts based on presentations at the meeting jointly organized by the Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington D.C., USA, and UNESCO-CEPES for the project “Higher Education Ranking Systems and Methodologies: How They Work, What They Do”, held in Washington D.C. in December 2004. It should also be mentioned that one of the main outcomes of that meeting was creation of the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG).

The presented papers were initially discussed in the context of the thematic debates at the 2nd Meeting of the International Rankings Expert Group (IREG) on the topic of “Methodology and Quality Standards of Rankings”. The meeting was held in Berlin in May 2006, and was jointly organized by CHE – Center for Higher Education Development, Göttingen, Germany, The Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington, and UNESCO-CEPES and was sponsored by the Deutsche Telekom Stiftung.

The landmark outcome of this international event was the launch of the “Berlin Principles on the Ranking of Higher Education Institutions”¹, which details essential guidelines and goals for bodies involved in the practice of ranking. The adoption of the Berlin Principles was a logical and quality self-assuring measure on behalf of IREG in view of the rapid developments in this area. As Salmi and Saroyan (2007) observed in their paper and presentations at the Berlin Meeting there has been an explosion of ranking endeavors world-wide in a relatively short space of time:

The systematic use of league tables as a widespread phenomenon has a history of less than a decade. Eleven of the 19 league tables included in Usher and Savino’s (2006) report have come into existence since the year 2000. Among the exceptions in the list are the US News and World Report, Canada’s Maclean’s University Rankings, Poland’s *Perspektywy/Rzeczpospolita*, the UK’s *The Times Good University Guide*, and China’s Guangdong Institute of Management Science Rankings which have had a more extended history. It would not be farfetched to associate the proliferation in league tables with the massification, or unprecedented increase in enrollments, in higher education around the world. In addition, the flood of cross-border private and distance providers, the trend towards internationalization of tertiary education, and the related increased stakeholders’ demands for greater accountability, transparency, and efficiency have all contributed to increased incentives for quantifying quality.

Further, Salmi and Saroyan attempt to explain such an unprecedented attraction and interest:

The world seems to be obsessed with rankings in every walk of life. Countries are ranked for their performance in every possible domain, from the Olympics to the quality of life. Even Mozart's musical pieces [were] being ranked as the planet celebrate[d] his 250th birth-year anniversary. It is not surprising, then, that, in the present tertiary education world characterized by increased global competition for students, the number of league tables of universities has grown rapidly in recent years, as governments and the public at large are ever more preoccupied with the relative performance of tertiary education institutions and getting the best perceived value as consumers of education. Just as scarcity, prestige, and having access to "the best" increasingly mark the purchase of goods such as cars, handbags, and blue jeans, so, too, are the consumers of tertiary education looking for indicators that enhance their capacity to know and access the best in tertiary education.

The Berlin IREG meeting, by adopting the Berlin Principles, attempted to make sense of the bludgeoning ranking providers and set out guidelines to protect users from attributing false assumptions or erroneous empiricism from the outcomes. In the ten years or so since higher education league tables and ranking began to grip the attention of institutional leaders, researchers and policy-makers, much has happened.

The continuum of reaction has moved from an almost universal derision or disdain of the practice, to a benign acceptance of having to 'put-up with' or 'live with' ranking, to finally arriving at a point of accepting their role and value – providing the methods employed to produce them are based on clear and transparent methodologies.

Again, Salmi and Saroyan (2007) succinctly identify how to distinguish an objective ranking process from a subjective one:

- Be clear about what the ranking actually measures.
- Use a range of indicators and multiple measures rather than a single, weighted ranking.
- Compare similar programs or institutions.
- At the institutional level, use rankings for strategic planning and quality improvement purposes..
- At the government level, use rankings to stimulate a culture of quality.
- Use rankings as one of the instruments available to inform students, families and employers and fuel public debate.

The Berlin Principles certainly serve as an essential reference point and tool in ensuring that this is indeed the case for future ranking endeavors, in particular those at the international level as these are closely linked to another phenomenon that of the "world-class university". This relatively new development was analysed a recent publication entitled *The World-Class University and Ranking: Aiming Beyond Status*, jointly published by UNESCO-CEPES, Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Cluj University Press. The volume provides the first academic analysis of its kind detailing the development of ranking in higher education, and the rising prominence of the so-called

“world-class university”.

The importance of the topics in the range of texts presented in this issue is confirmed by frequent discussions at various national and international meetings and for example, at the recent UNESCO Third Global Forum on Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, September 2007) Professor Kai-ming Cheng of the University of Hong Kong emphasised that “world-class universities” are not solely about indicators, illustrating his point at the example of Harvard University in the USA – the reputation of which stems essentially from the diversity of its knowledge and learning outputs: The Harvard Education Review, The Harvard Law Review, The Harvard China Review, The Harvard Crimson.

The present issue gives an overview of a wide range of approaches to the reality of rankings and league tables from a variety of both analytical and national perspectives. In much the same way as the practice of ranking often results in opposing camps of opinion, so can the concept of practice of higher education reform in general. A controversial topic analyzed in terms of “Reform and Anti-Reform” by Professor Oprean is this issue’s tribune section.

Regardless of what one perceives to be, or not to be “world-class” in higher learning, perhaps it might be timely for all actors involved in ranking, reform or regeneration of higher education, to recall that, just as learners are not judged simply by their achievement scores and grades, institutions comparing themselves to each other can overlook the fact that it is the spiritual value of learning that determines its quality. Valuing the opportunity of acquiring knowledge and learning the love of learning is itself ranked higher than anything.

References

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