

THE RANKINGS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

The rankings of higher education institutions are an ordered and hierarchically organized listing of entities that are comparatively classified, after consideration and application of a set of criteria. The institutions are ordered from the one with the best relative performance according to the criteria employed to those with the lowest performance.

The choice of criteria and their relative weight differs for each ranking. The decision attempts to refer, generally, to concepts of quality and/or excellence considering the character or features that its designer wishes to emphasize. In this regard, rankings are a simplification of reality, modeled according to desirable performances, which serve to reduce the information asymmetry and contributes to decision-making at different levels and environments. They provide useful information for students and their families when they choose a higher education institution. They also provide background information to employers and to the labor market, as well as to those who design public policies.

An arrangement according to quality criteria established by an external organism, without created interests, is attractive and provides a synthesis to those who are to choose a higher education institution. To have the relative position of a tertiary education institution publicly available, through a simplified model, can radically diminish the information asymmetry and facilitate making decisions. To choose an institution that is well placed in a ranking generates security and provides reassurance of selecting a respectable institution with a reasonable level of quality and prestige.

In turn, for the labor market, in a context of higher education massification, it is progressively more difficult to distinguish the quality of the professionals from the different universities and higher education centers. It is for this reason that an abbreviated and ordered version of the relative position of each university becomes relevant and has an intrinsic value, as it can help and facilitate decisional processes.

From the perspective of public policy, academic rankings can give an alert to the countries about the relative performance of their higher education institutions in given indicators, favoring the allocation of funds to improve such measured aspects that are of interest or relevant to the development of the nation.

Rankings intend to compress the institutional activities in a selected set of dimensions that attempt to measure

institutional quality. The challenge is a major one, since their validity and trustworthiness, and finally their credibility will depend upon the internal and external consistency that is generated with the handling of the indicators used. Also, the definition of dimensions and indicators susceptible of being obtained by means of public official and available information represent an essential step in their construction. On the other hand, those that are elaborated with indicators established by the ranking authors, without available public information but based on surveys or other primary sources, generate severe doubts in relation to the objectivity employed. Rankings are not neutral in their effects and if they are not built with impartiality and on the basis of available public information they can lead to profound and harmful distortions.

It is precisely in this possibility of information self-generated, to then be used in the construction of a comparative ranking of institutions, where its main risk and limitation lie, as its lack of impartiality and its subjectivity are important enemies, not only of its validity and internal and external consistencies, but also of the quality of the subsequent decision making by different agents and at different levels.

The rankings of higher education institutions can have an homogenizing effect, inasmuch as the criteria to be evaluated are the same for all and, thus, the only way to progress in a given ranking is improving in those criteria, which leads all institutions to focus their efforts in the same sense and direction. In such manner, the institutional mission, the components of local or territorial development become relegated to a second order of importance, fundamentally because of the difficulty of their measurement.

After all, rankings constitute an important source to reduce the asymmetry of information in a massive market such as that of higher education, allowing comparison between institutions on a common basis, favoring in this way the decision making in different levels and environments.

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