

U-21 Symposium – National Systems of Higher Education: Criteria for Evaluation

Shanghai, China
November 6-7, 2013

Abstract

Rankings of Higher Education Systems: The Challenge of Change

by

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić^{1,2} & Sir John Daniel²

(¹ Senior Advisor International Affairs, US Council for Higher Education Accreditation;
² Education Master, Knowledge Media Institute, DeTao Masters Academy, China)

Abstract

Ranking higher education systems as well as individual institutions is an important step forward. Institutional rankings skew government support towards universities on the lists, whose internal development priorities then focus on the parameters used in the rankings. The longevity and consistency of ranking systems depends on the continued relevance of the parameters they use. Yet during these turbulent times in higher education, the ability of systems to adapt to change is a key measure of strength. The paper suggests how we might measure the adaptive ability of systems, using online learning and new types of qualifications as examples.

Introduction

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

It is a pleasure to speak at this conference and to share this presentation with Sir John Daniel.

My own involvement in rankings goes back to my UNESCO days. In fact the last event I organised in the capacity of Head of Higher Education was a Global Forum on “*Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses*” as part of UNESCO’s mission to follow global trends. Since then, I have also had the honour of serving on the International Advisory Board of the Academic Rankings of World Universities (ARWU).

What a good idea to hold this U21 conference on the ranking of higher education systems right after the ARWU conference on the ranking of institutions that some of us have just attended!

We have long believed that the focus on ranking individual universities can have a damaging effect on the development of higher education systems if they lead governments to skew their funding and political support to a small sub-set of institutions.

From his perspective as a 40-year veteran of open universities and distance education, Sir John considers that conventional rankings encourage universities to treat all forms of teaching as an inferior activity.

Encouraging the emergence of excellent higher education systems seems a more worthwhile policy than focussing on getting one or two universities into international rankings that embrace less than 5% of the world's higher education space. These rankings are also contested on various methodological and political grounds.

The idea of ranking entire higher education systems is therefore very appealing, even if the methodological challenges of such rankings would appear even greater than the ranking of individual institutions. This is the conclusion of the EUA'S 2nd Report on Global Rankings, which commented on the attempt by Universitas 21 to rank Higher Education Systems (Rauhvargers, 2013).

Our presentation is entitled *Rankings of Higher Education Systems: The Challenge of Change*. These are turbulent times for higher education in many countries, a turbulence that is often a reflection of an on-going global economic slowdown. In these circumstances the ability of higher education systems to adapt to changing circumstances and goals is an important element of their intrinsic quality – but how might this ability be measured. If they are to be useful rankings need to work with relatively stable criteria, but how can this be applied to the measurement of change? We shall make some tentative suggestions.

Our talk will be in four brief sections and we shall alternate in presenting them. I shall set the stage by examining the greatest challenge of change to universities in today's world, which is the unacceptably high level of youth and graduate unemployment. Sir John will make this real by describing the challenges facing the public university system in the US. He will continue, in section three, to explore the opportunities and threats that MOOCs pose to HE systems. Finally, I will ask how we can ensure the quality of these recent developments in higher education: new curricula, new types of awards and new delivery systems. I shall conclude by suggesting how we might measure the ability of HE systems to adapt to change along various dimensions.

Part 1: Young people who are not in education, employment or training

I begin by stating that the worst aspect of the economic crisis is the lack of work for young people. This is devastating the lives of millions.

Earlier this year *The Economist* newspaper devoted a major article to this topic. It gave some figures. This chart shows the number of millions of youth who are neither employed nor in education or training. The world total is nearly 300 million – or one quarter of the world's youth. The situation is bad enough in Europe but, even in percentage terms, South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa fare much worse.

This chart confirms what you already know. The countries around the Mediterranean, notably Greece, Italy and Spain, have some of the highest rates of joblessness in the rich world. You will note that only Germany has reduced the number of youth not in employment, education or training in the last five years. Yet at the same time employers complain that they cannot find graduates with the right skills and competences. There is a serious gap between education and the job market.

The article concluded: “Policymakers know what to do to diminish the problem – ignite growth, break down cartels and build bridges between education and work. New technology gives them powerful tools too.”

What is higher education doing – and what should it be doing – about this huge problem?

UNESCO organizes world conferences on higher education every ten years. The last one was held in 2009 and I had the privilege of being its Executive Secretary. The conference participants identified the new dynamics impacting on higher education.

The predominant trend is increasing demand, much of it unmet, especially in the developing world. To address the challenge the range of providers is diversifying. They range from so-called ‘world-class’ universities in an elite tradition focused on research to vibrant new and different providers more focused on developing skills and competencies. The private for-profit sector is playing an increasing role and nearly all providers are making use of ICTs and eLearning, some of them to teach across borders. At the same time we see the emergence of what we shall call ‘post-traditional’ higher education. New curricula and shorter qualifications attempt to address the crisis in the relationship between higher education and the labour market.

At last year’s conference of the European Association for International Education, Allan Pall, then president of the European Students Union, talked about the death of long degree courses. The foundation degree is a good example of a shorter qualification. We shall return to this later.

Meanwhile I hand you over to Sir John to give you some figures from the US to illustrate the crisis in relation to universities.

Sir John Daniel

Part 2: Higher Education in Economic Crisis: the example of the United States

We shall describe the impact of the economic crisis on public universities in the United States. If this great national system faces serious challenges the situation in other parts of the world must be bleak. We summarise the issue in the US state universities in 13 points. This compilation is from our colleagues at Academic Partnerships, a company that helps universities go online to increase the scale and quality of their programmes.

1: Enrolment declined last year for the first time in 15 years – down by 2.3%. That means a quarter of a million fewer students.

2: Tuition fees have increased at more than five times the inflation rate for 30 years. This has been an accelerating process.

3: Adjusted for inflation, the average middle-class family earns \$400 less than it did in 1988. But:

4: In 2012 universities raised fees by a record 8.3% making a 46% increase over the last ten years. Of course, one reason for this is that:

5: State funding declined a record 9% in 2012, down 30% per student since 2000. For that reason:

6: Tuition fees as a share of total public university revenue rose 62% over the last decade. Increasing fees is the easy way to try to balance the books.

7: In June 2013, the total of discounts given for tuition fees exceeded the total amount paid by parents. This is a 50% reduction from posted rates. Nevertheless:

8: Student debt has doubled since 2007. This is a now huge factor in the US economy because:

9: Student loans have topped one trillion dollars, more than all the credit card debt, total car loans or total household debt in America. Furthermore:

10: This year default rates on student loans reached a high of 17%. In the US a student loan is one form of debt that you cannot wipe out by declaring bankruptcy. Some students will drag this debt to their graves. Because:

11: A record percentage of recent college graduates are unemployed, 53.6%. Therefore to save money:

12: 45% of recent college graduates are now living at home with their parents. For graduates aged 18 to 34 the numbers living at home have grown from 13% to 21% in the last decade. And to cap it all:

13: 46% of U.S. college students do not graduate, although the extra income you get by having a degree is higher in the US than in almost any other country.

In summary, these are turbulent times, not only for US public universities but also for much of higher education globally.

Part 3: MOOCs and online learning

As well as being pressured by an economic downturn, higher education is being challenged by a technological upturn. Its clearest expression, which has captivated politicians and the news media in the last two years, is MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses. There is, of course, some history.

Open Educational Resources, or OER, were the long fuse that detonated the MOOCs explosion. OER go back over 10 years to MIT's Open Courseware

project. Most MOOCs are basically OER with some computerised assessment questions. The University of Manitoba, Canada, first used the term MOOC for a course *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* in 2008. Two thousand members of the public took the course free online. But MOOCs really made news last year when elite American universities like Harvard, Stanford and MIT joined in.

That was last year. Since then there has been a stampede to join the mooing MOOC herd. This is a copycat phenomenon. Few universities have a clear idea of why they are offering MOOCs. Professor Tony Bates, the respected blogger on educational technology, predicts a shake out in MOOCs next year as evaluation results come in and financial officers start to ask harder questions about cost and benefit.

Meanwhile, with so many providers piling in to offer them, the definition of a MOOC has become much more fuzzy. One joker remarked that every letter in the acronym MOOC is now negotiable. But in terms of the global economic crisis, this diversification is good. As MOOCs multiply and diversify they may help higher education respond to some of the needs that Stamenka identified at the beginning.

Many of those taking the first MOOCs already had university degrees, so they provided informal professional development for well-qualified people. Two things are needed to make MOOCs more useful. First, we need MOOCs in employment related topics at all levels. Second, people need credible qualifications for successful study. Both are happening. The range of topics is diversifying fast and, various bodies are giving recognition for MOOCs, even where they did not offer the course themselves.

Last week I presided at the launch of the Open Education Resource university, worldwide consortium of over twenty public universities that creates pathways for OER learners to gain academic credit through the formal education system. This is just one aspect of the ‘unbundling’ of higher education, with different organisations handling different parts of the process.

Even more importantly, MOOCs are giving tremendous impetus to the spread of online learning in regular programmes.

I hand you back to Stamenka to conclude our remarks

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

Part 4: Quality assurance and measurement

I shall conclude by first making some remarks about quality assurance and then by suggesting some ways in which we might measure the ability of higher education system to respond to the challenge of change.

To take quality assurance first, I am the senior advisor on international affairs to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the US. To address the quality issue I have helped CHEA to set up an International Quality Group, with membership open to institutions worldwide. As one of its first projects it has given itself the task of exploring the creation of a 'Quality Platform' for the quality assurance of new developments on higher education. For want of a better term we are calling this 'post-traditional' higher education. These offerings, often online, do not fit easily into our traditional frameworks, either in the way they are offered or the way they are recognised.

The International Quality Group is eager to have more members participating in its work. Please talk to me and take a brochure if your institution is interested.

Also on the topic of quality I draw your attention to Guide to Quality in Online Learning that was published by Academic Partnerships earlier this year as an Open Educational Resource in English and Chinese. Sir John and I were involved in editing this 20-page document and we commend it to you.

I end with some brief and tentative comments on how, if we are ranking higher education systems, we might measure their capacity to adapt to change. As we noted earlier, the 2nd EUA report on Global Rankings commented on the difficulty of ranking higher education systems, even on fairly stable measures. Ranking them on their capacity for change is an even greater challenge.

But let us suggest three dimensions that we have mentioned earlier.

Online Learning

The first change is the move to online learning, undoubtedly the most significant change in higher education in this decade. MOOCs have made 'online' respectable. Previously most universities were timid about moving online and did not do it well. Now it is serious business. Unfortunately most universities do not declare their enrolments for online course separately. But the evidence suggests that the numbers of students taking regular credit courses online is already greater than the numbers taking non-credit MOOCs, although MOOCs get all the publicity. Tracking the proportion of student-course enrolments in online offerings would be a good measure of system adaptation in this area.

New Qualifications

New types of awards, such as Open Badges, are emerging. These badges, which are placed on the Web, carry more information about what was studied and how it was assessed than the usual university transcript. They allow learners to get recognition for short-cycle studies on economically relevant topics and to aggregate a series of badges into a conventional qualification such as a degree or a

diploma. More generally, higher learning is being recognised in new ways. Another measure of the capacity to change could be the evolution of the profile of qualifications awarded by an HE system.

Quality Assurance

Finally, and no doubt you can imagine many additional measures of a system's capacity to change, there is the issue of quality assurance. Are the new 'post-traditional' offerings being brought into quality assurance frameworks so that the public can have confidence in them? Too often new ventures like MOOCs by-pass the usual institutional processes for academic approval because they are 'non-credit'. This is a shortsighted policy that is already creating pushback from faculty in MOOCs universities. It should be possible to determine, at a system level, whether there are appropriate approval and quality assurance processes in place. I have mentioned an initiative at the international level, the CIQG 'quality platform' that could be helpful.

Conclusion

We hope that these examples of the drivers of change in higher education and our suggestions as to how system responses to some of them might be captured in rankings have stimulated your thinking about these issues.

Thank you

Reference

Andrejs Rauhvargers (2013) *Global University Rankings and Their Impact: Report II*, European University Association.