

Integrated University Governance and Rankings. Exploring the Interplay of Accountability, Competition and Autonomy

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- **Empirical Exploration and Selected Results:
University Rankings and the Interplay of Accountability, Competition
and Autonomy**
- **Conclusions and Outlook**

Theoretical Approach: Accountability, Competition and Autonomy of HEIs

- **Institutional autonomy/Organisational identity** should be based on **Integrated Performance Governance (IPG)**
 - IPG core features: **mission-based**; **performance-based**; **information-based**; **comprehensive** (including all performance areas)
 - High degree of agreement on **objectives**; powerful **reporting** system; trusting **communication** structures; options for **participation** in performance assessments; adjustment of assessment procedures on specific information needs of addressees
 - Desideratum: funds for significant redistribution
 - IPG oriented at balancing out **accountability**, **competitiveness** and **autonomy**



Methodology and Research Questions

- In which ways **do (global) rankings influence decision-making and strategy of HEIs**? Do HEIs respond to (global) rankings by strategic measures and actions?
- **Do HEIs' reactions to rankings challenge their organisational identities**, i.e., are key values, norms and ideals (such as freedom of research and teaching; scientific quality criteria and discipline-oriented quality culture) affected by (global) rankings?



Empirical Exploration and Key Results

- HEIs use rankings for the fulfillment of **ACCOUNTABILITY** (documentation of results)
 - Against **HE politics**, *nolens volens*, **regularly**, always in **fear of threat of over-/misinterpretation**
 - Against **international** (usually Asian) **cooperation partners**, **reactively**, i.e., usually only **upon request** of (possible) partners
 - Against **society**, **occasionally**, insofar ranking results are communicated to a broader public via websites, press releases etc. (*accountability meets self-promotion*)

Empirical Exploration and Key Results

- (Sample) HEIs use rankings primarily for **COMPETITION** purposes in a global knowledge arena
 - **Marketing and advertisement** (e.g., attracting international staff and students)
 - **Enhancement of organisational image** (“how others see the organisation”; external reputation)
 - (Selective) **benchmarking**
 - Initial **screening of possible partner HEIs, (cooperation) requests, incoming guests** on the **international level** only (in particular Asia)

Empirical Exploration and Key Results

- Influence of HEIs' rankings on **AUTONOMY** (institutional identity/self-understanding; decision-making and strategy building) **is very modest and indirect**
 - “**Methodological shortcomings make it impossible to use rankings as the basis of strategic decisions**”: rankings are not a reliable quality “check” and therefore no basis for substantial, quality-improving “act”
 - “**It is quality improvement that really counts, not rankings**” – “Any improvement in ranking positions should only be a side-effect of quality improvement”
 - For HEI strategy & development, subject-oriented **profiles** related to tradition, **developmental goals**, client/customer demands; **funding programs** (for excellence); third party funding; public financial constraints; **HE policy** decisions and regulations are the **important** factors, **not rankings**
 - Rankings are usually not explicitly mentioned in S&D plans, but in HEIs with more promising ranking positions (on the rectorate level) there are sometimes explicitly formulated **goals for achieving certain ranking areas** (e.g., “be among the top 100” in the world; “be among the top 7 in the country”)
 - Moderate strategic decision to work on rankings: **managerial positions are created** (gathering data for rankings; assuring quality data)

Empirical Exploration and Key Results

Governance dimensions and methods (IPG) Integrative, shared and amalgamated, academic-corporate-stakeholder self-governance including government supervision / mixed model comprising hierarchy, market and collegiality		Main addressees	Contribution
Accountability	(Global) Rankings	HE politics	+/o Make knowledge about organisation available; Generate external pressure to act
	Other: Performance management; Quality assurance (e.g., accreditations); ...	HE politics; Academics (self-accountability)	+ Support strategy building; Generate external pressure to act
Competition	(Global) Rankings	Students; Academics; Cooperation partners; Parents	+/o Make knowledge about organisation available
	Other: Performance management; Ratings; Competition-focused heteronomy (e.g., managerial HE laws; managerial leadership; market-focused management); ...	Students; Academics	+ Support strategy building; Generate external pressure to act
Autonomy	(Global) Rankings	Part of academics	-/o Make knowledge about organisation available
	Other: Academic autonomy (freedom of research & teaching; self-governance & collegial deliberation; freedom of governmental regulation); Strategic/ institutional autonomy; Staffing autonomy; Financial autonomy; Quality assurance and development (e.g. audits; evaluations); Benchmarking; ...	Academics; Students	+ Support strategy building; Facilitate intrinsic motivation; Generate recommendations to act; Enable participation; Make knowledge about organisation available

+ = effective; o = inconclusive; – = ineffective

(also cf. Oberschelp, A. & Jaeger, M., 2015)

Conclusions and Outlook

- Sample HEIs usually **“use” only a small number (3-5)** of “available” rankings, among them those which are **most problematic** from a social science analysis perspective (**QS; THE; ARWU**)
 - Main reason: external (HEI politics; funders; international cooperation partners) stakeholders ask for those rankings
- **Methodologically preferable rankings** such as **CWTS Leiden, Scimago** and **U-Multirank** are **rarely used**, ignored or even unknown
 - Main reasons: rankings **not requested** by stakeholders; (too) **complex** to handle (no single score!); data provision **too costly**
- **Open question** whether **CWTS Leiden, Scimago** and **U-Multirank** (because of **stronger performance alignment**) would/could have **more influence on strategy building** and **institutional identity**

Conclusions and Outlook

- **(Global) rankings influence decision-making and strategy of HEIs only in moderate and indirect ways**
 - (Sample) HEIs do not usually directly respond to (global) rankings by strategic measures and actions but by legitimate adjustments of data processing and provision (“**professionalisation of data supply for the ranking organisations**”)
 - Though HEIs welcome “good” ranking positions they take them as a **by-product** and see other and more concrete activities as **much more important** which are transparently related to **quality development**
- **HEIs’ reactions to rankings do not usually challenge in any sense their organisational identities**

In view of numerous methodological problems and faults of rankings, these results are welcome!



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