An overview of major trends in higher education [with emphasis on Europe region] and corresponding to it policy challenges [role of quality assessment]

Jan Sadlak
President, IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence

Independent Kazakhstan Quality Assurance Agency for Education

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Characteristics of a current higher education

Higher education is a principal provider of qualified manpower, repository knowledge and originator of technological and social innovation. Nowadays it is subjected to the following trends and deriving from it challenges:

- **Massification** of student enrolment [1]**;**
- **Diversification** within the systems of higher education [combined with increasing number of institutions and study programmes];
- **Competition** for students, researchers and academics**;**
- **Internationalisation and mobility** of students and researchers [2];
- **Digital technologies** and **internet** [3]**;**
- **Role of research and enhanced intensity of relations with industry** [4]**;**
- **Tight public funding** and **changes in relations between the state and higher education** based “evidence based accountability”.

In this context countries are undertaking reforms and policy measures.

[ad.1 + slide] around 40-50 of young population [cohort 18-24 years old] is in HE at the same time there is an intensive debate on “what higher education is for” as there is an urgent problem with regard to “**employability**” of graduates. To this should be added a growing concern with regard to current financing model of higher education

[ad.2] **International mobility**: according to OECD estimates approximately 3.7 million tertiary level students studied outside their home country in 2009. This number may reach 7.3 million by 2025

[ad.3] **MOOC**s (Massive Open Online Courses)

[ad.4] **scientific research**: ***a global, highly competitive, costly and economically relevant enterprise*** [today there are over 7 million researchers around the world, reading and publishing in around 25,000 scientific journals].

The Economist
Development tips from Moses
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The whole world is going to university
Is it worth it? A SPECIAL REPORT

Main policy challenges

Current situation can be described as “massy one” around the following policy agendas:

-need for “diversification of funding”, cost sharing principles [e.g. France, England, Scotland, Poland, etc.];

-“presence” of research in the university [Humboldtian model, "research-university”, the world-class];

-QA and its effectiveness [accreditation, certification, peer-review, benchmarking, rankings].

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A belated triumph for GE's Immelt
JUNE 28TH - JULY 4TH 2014
Economist.com
Creative destruction
Reinventing the university

“Quality” concern and need of comparative information

- Europe has some 4,000 universities and colleges that enroll more than 19 million students and employs 1.5 million staff.
- Choosing right institutions and study program are as important as complex decisions. Students and parents as well as other stakeholders [are seeking structured and **easily interpretable**, **comparative information** about the **cost** as well as **reputation** of the respective institutions.

Accreditation

“Accreditation” is a process during which HE institution or programme is a subject of review by competent body or organization in order to establish if the given institution or programme can meet a particular set of standards in order to undertake or continue to function as the “accredited institution”.

The process is undertaken on the basis of a set of standards, criteria and procedures and it can have the following organizational form:

-state accreditation;

-self-accreditation [by academic and professional organizations]

-independent and specialized national accreditation;

-iinternationally-based accreditation [e.g. business schools].

Peer review

Peer review is strongly embedded in academic culture. It represents an assessment of quality of the academic work by academic experts (in most cases not associated with a given institution). For institutional and program evaluation such procedure implies self-evaluation combined with on-site visits.

Benchmarking

It is a standard [a kind of reference point] reflecting the best practice in a given domain. It can be established externally or internally selected. It can serve as:

- a diagnostic instrument to better understand the process;
- measure and compare to competition, i.e. how well are other performing and why;
- learn from other members of the “benchmarking circle” [learning from peers];
- a self-assessment and self-improvement tool by strengthening of institutional identity.
- It is heavily relying on performance indicators but it does not result in ranking.

Taxonomy of academic rankings

Taking into consideration:

1. Methodological approach:

- **One-dimensional:** assessment according to one set of indicators and weight attached to a given indicator;
- **Multi-dimensional**: construction of the list of assessed institutions [or programs] according to one set of indicators with a possibility of further assessment according to own set of **preferences** [ranking *a la carte*].

2. Geographical coverage: **international/global**, **international/regional**, **national.**
3. Object of ranking: **systems**/countries, **institutions**, **programmes**, **journals**.

Time of "evidence-based information" and performance indices

- Rankings can be powerful tools of both branding and influence as their use by governments, institutions, and other public bodies are growingly using them to shape new laws and influence public opinion.
- As such "performance indexes can be one of the tools of "soft power".
- The use of rankings in some areas "spread like wildfire" therefore it is particularly important to pay attention when constructing and using rankings [simplistic methodology, use of shaky data, organization of surveys, making subjective judgments, etc.].

"Rankings have become an inevitable part of public life because universities have moved to centre stage in all modern societies."

Simon Marginson, Professor of Higher Education, University of Melbourne

IREG Observatory

In October 2009, informal network become the **IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence as** non-profit membership organization to:

- enhance public awareness and understanding of academic ranking and academic excellence [*Guidelines for Stakeholders of University Rankings*];
- set-up standards and promotion of good practices with regard to elaboration and use of national, regional and international rankings [*IREG Audit*];
- undertake analysis and provide assistance deriving from the impact of ranking on institutions of higher education, stakeholders and policy making;
- undertake analysis of expressions of academic esteem and excellence [*IREG List of International Academic Awards*].