

Peer Review

Review of: "Influence of International Rankings on Public Universities: Exploratory Research"

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This is an important paper that fits well into an ongoing discussion on the nature of the university and the influence of current reforms to change a university into a “cognitive enterprise. The research is methodologically very well designed, and the methodology (including limitations) is very well described. What I especially value is: (a) the choice of universities with different positions in rankings and the choice of respondents with different positions at a university; (b) using both interviews and policy documents to draw conclusions; (c) undertaking research on three levels: national, organisational, and individual; (d) very careful explanation of each step in the research; (e) clear structure of analysis, especially the “five dimensions”: ranking as a reason for academic profession modification; ranking as a university communication tool; ranking as a strategy guideline for universities; ranking as a public policy vector; and ranking as a source of competition.

The conclusions are carefully stated and not overestimated. The literature review and bibliography are very good, as they justify the topic of research and give a good background for the research. The editor should check whether the style of the bibliography agrees with the style of the journal, as for a reader the form with (a, b, c) marks is not quite obvious. The language is clear and easy to understand, so a reader may concentrate on the content. I think that the paper has universal importance: it should be read by academics, policy-makers, administration, university managers, and STUDENTS. The latter group is important, for showing the source of changes in teaching (deterioration!) may contribute to building a better student-professor relationship and mutual understanding. Moreover, it refers to France, but the conclusions are broadly important. The authors are right that “the influence of international rankings needs to be studied within a national context” (p. 2), but the conclusions allow a comparison with other countries. The “five dimensions” mentioned earlier might be a very good tool for such comparisons. For

example, analyzing and comparing official documents of universities (even those accessible on webpages) should show whether rankings in those cases work as strategy guidelines, communication tools, and sources of competition. The same refers to analysing policy documents. This would allow us to draw (inductively) some universal conclusions. And this would allow us to build a more comprehensive evaluation of those changes. Here is an important remark that deserves further elaboration (in another paper, as it is very broad): rankings are criticized for “lacking sufficient theoretical clarity and methodological precision” but nevertheless “studies show institutional and systemic answers aiming at respecting the evaluation criteria promoted by the rankings” (p. 3), which indicates that the academic world and academic policy-makers yield to something unclear and unfounded. The paper, in fact, shows that the university rankings and competition as the fundamental academic mechanism change the academic culture and threaten the fundamental academic values, even if the authors do not explicitly draw such radical consequences but only point to changes. The question of which academic values are at risk when rankings become the main instrument to organize academic life and state policies emerges from the paper. This question might be put as sociological—such as investigating values in fact accepted in a given research community and then finding changes that occur by giving power to rankings—but the question may also be philosophical—whether the threatened values constitute the essence of academia or are just accidental and may be replaced by the values imposed by rankings. For example, one may address the question of whether “searching for the truths on the structure and workings of the world” (a traditional view on the goal of research) is threatened by the aim of “improving the position in rankings” as the main research goal (or competes with the former).

The paper may be a good starting point (and an exemplar) for designing similar research for other countries, as well as a source of further research questions, not only sociological or psychological but even philosophical. In fact, there is here a potential to formulate a transdisciplinary research project. The paper certainly deserves to be published.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.