

Peer Review

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

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I will begin with a thank you for the opportunity to read and evaluate this well-developed research article. The article proposes to look critically at university rankings, which is a worthwhile endeavour for critical higher education and social science research. The authors show they are well familiar with the relevant literature, but I offer a few recommendations nonetheless, which are recent and also delve deeper into the history, logic, and resilience of rankings, and possible conflicts of interest involved, which could further anchor the article in extant literature.

Recommendations:

- Brankovic, J., Ringel, L. & Werron, T. 2018. How rankings produce competition: The case of global university rankings. *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie* 47(4), 270–288. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2018-0118>
- Chirikov, I. 2023. Does conflict of interest distort global university rankings? *Higher Education* 86, 791–808. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00942-5>
- Hamann, J. & Ringel, L. 2023. The discursive resilience of university rankings. *Higher Education* 86, 845–863 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00990-x>
- Ringel, L. & Werron, T. 2020. Where do rankings come from? A historical-sociological perspective on the history of modern rankings. *Practices of comparing: Ordering and changing the worlds*, A. Epple, W. Erhart, & J. Grave (Eds.). Bielefeld University Press. pp. 137–170. DOI: 10.14361/9783839451663-006

The main prediction of the article seems quite plausible given the paradigm of constant competition between HEIs (and the vested interest in national higher education policy to likewise have prestigious rankings report the success of national HEIs). However, the authors should note that individual universities have recently also opted out of ranking systems, as was the case with Sorbonne

(<https://sciencebusiness.net/news/universities/why-sorbonne-pulled-out-university-ranking>), so the authority of these systems is still not absolute. Perhaps the authors could reflect on this – is Sorbonne perhaps an “elite institution” with sufficient reputation that it can “afford” to withdraw from “the ranking game”?

The core question is, I feel, who do the rankings serve? Policymakers, academic managers, academics, or students, or all of the above? The authors should note that accountability and public transparency as goals are more relevant to public universities. For private universities, rankings are more of a PR tool, though they also serve as proxies for quality accountability to their stakeholders and customers, i.e., students; for students in tuition-fee-based HE systems, rankings also serve a purpose. It seems that academics are the most negatively affected by competitive evaluative culture (Espeland & Sauder 2016). Evaluations such as rankings are also part and parcel of audit culture (Shore & Wright 2015), but I fully understand the authors cannot explore every potential avenue. This strain of literature merely points out that these are tools of control – discursively reshaped as tools of accountability (see Hamann & Ringel 2023).

- Espeland, W.N. & Sauder, M. 2016. *Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputation, and Accountability*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Shore, C. & Wright, S. 2015. Audit culture revisited: Rankings, ratings and the reassembling of society.” *Current anthropology* 56(3): 421-444.

I would appreciate, however, a clearer research question set out in the introduction. An exploration is all well and good, but there should be direction staked out: what is the hypothesis or purpose of the exploration? It can be, when stated openly, critical. The article’s core contribution is a deeper dive into a specific national context, which is also welcome and worthwhile (as the authors well note), but drawing on the previous comment, is there something in the French system specifically that warrants a closer look, other than the relative lack of previous academic investigations? The development, as the authors describe it, seems rather similar to other international contexts. And what does this study do differently than the cited literature at the beginning of p. 6 (references 30, 32, 34, 35)? Is it that those debates have been mostly conducted in French, and this article wants to make the debate visible to more international audiences? I want to stress none of these issues are real problems, but points of clarification handled with a sentence or a sub-clause to better nail down the contribution of the article.

The authors should also briefly, with 1-2 sentences, outline the empirical material of their article – interview data and context and method of analysis.

A question perhaps to be answered in the introduction: Has French policy aimed to increase the intake of (tuition-fee paying) international students to finance HEIs, like the UK and Australian HE systems? This would be important for readers to better understand the national policy and organizational motivations.

In their literature review, the authors well point to the usual mismatch of critical academic response to rankings, which does little to lessen their attractiveness to decision-makers at the level of policy or universities (though, as noted previously, there have been instances of withdrawal from the system). This again reveals the nature of rankings as a managerial tool. This perhaps could be made more explicit. The authors also point to academic capitalism, which I think is a good and relevant reference. The authors might be interested, if they are not already familiar, with how Richard Münch (2020) has combined striving for elusive “excellence” with academic capitalism through public funding in the German HE system (note the way UA describes itself). Otherwise, offering the background in the French system is quite good and informative – at least for me.

- Münch, R. 2020. *Academic Capitalism. Universities in the Global Struggle for Excellence*. Abingdon: Routledge.

The selection of the cases is good, and anonymization is well done. The interview total is sufficient for a research article, and academics' points of view are welcome, though because most previous articles have focused on academics, I think the opinions of academic managers are more interesting, since they can be expected to have internalized the logic of rankings.

Could you perhaps give a slightly thicker description of the respondents, based on age and gender, while maintaining anonymity? Could you also list a few examples of the core questions you asked the interviewees to make the data collection slightly more transparent? These come a bit later among the discussion but could be lifted to this earlier section, too. Did you have different emphasis in questions for each of the interviewees based on their position? Are French university presidents also academics – *primus inter pares* – or selected based on some other system? How available were the respondents; what was the average interview duration? Again, these are likely small additions for the authors to add, but they would greatly enrich the sample description.

I also think the addition of the annual reports, budgets, and other documents is a plus for the article, but please offer a more detailed description of the sources, per university, in a table. This will help the reader

evaluate the richness of your supplementary materials. Were these also used in the interviews, or only as secondary, supporting sources for analysis?

The discussion section of the article is well-informed and well-written. Policy documents followed by interview data work well and are linked together with theory. However, some nuances could be further teased out in the data based on the findings. I feel especially that Figure 2 could serve as a way to organise the discussion of the findings, and how the reaction to and emphasis on specific ranking systems resonated with the respondents. For example, the authors should discuss more explicitly that rankings operate on different levels: HEI rankings vs. journal rankings determining research “excellence”; both might be relevant to all respondents, but not necessarily so.

Given that this is a qualitative work, I would like to see a few more quotes from respondents in discussing the results. For example, there is no respondent quotation for ranking as a communication tool. There are also no sources attributed to the quotes given in Figure 1; it would be interesting to see in what positions the respondents who said what acted.

The authors also refer to university mergers and economies of scale being leveraged as tools of reform; there is also quite a lot of literature on university mergers being specifically used for those policy goals. This suggests transnational policy trends affecting France much like they impact, e.g., the Nordics (Aarrevaara & Dobson 2016).

- Aarrevaara, T. & Dobson, I.R. 2016. Merger Mania? The Finnish Higher Education Experience. *Mergers in Higher Education*, R. Pinheiro, L. Geschwind, & T. Aarrevaara (eds.), Higher Education Dynamics, vol 46. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21918-9_4

The finding that academics find the ranking interfering with their work is the least interesting finding; it would be, for example, more interesting to hear how academic managers – especially if they are academics themselves and somewhat critical of rankings – legitimise their use. Do they express a sense of TINA (There Is No Alternative) or some other sort of shorthand for acquiescing to NPM?

The authors do make an important note about an approximate third of academics accepting the competitive rationale and logic embedded in rankings. Here, again, French academics seem to reshape their subjectivities much like in other countries (see Kallio et al. 2021 on Finland). Internalising a more competitive Foucauldian subjectivity has been discussed in extant literature critical of performance steering and audit culture (Ball 2012; Morrissey 2013). Again, I am not expecting the authors to fit in every

reference here. Rather, I am pointing out that some of the findings they make have been reflected in previous research; internalising a more competitive subjectivity is not surprising.

- Ball, S.J. 2012. Performativity, commodification and commitment: An I-Spy guide to the neoliberal university. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 60(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2011.650940>
- Kallio, T.J., Kallio, K-M. & Blomberg, A. 2020. “From professional bureaucracy to competitive bureaucracy – Redefining universities’ organizational principles, performance measurement criteria, and reason for being.” *Qualitative Research in Accounting and Management* 17(1): 82–108.
- Morrissey, J. 2013. Governing the academic subject: Foucault, governmentality and the performing university. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39(6), 797–810. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2013.860891>

Consequently, the concluding remarks could be tightened up a bit more and explicitly answer the research question. The findings largely complement existing analyses and seem relatively unsurprising. Given the previous discussion, I would like to see the authors reflect briefly in their conclusion about their findings: were they as expected? Did nothing surprise the authors? The withdrawal of Sorbonne (link above) from the rankings probably confirms the authors’ hypothesis about more prestigious HEIs having more of a choice in the matter.

I credit the authors for openly reflecting on the limitations of their study. I think the article has definite merit, and an interview method is a good way of investigating the experiences of academics under such external evaluation, and the competitive culture involved, especially when juxtaposed with policy and organizational strategy documents. Indeed, the impact of the paradigm of knowledge economies in global competition is reflected in the rankings. The findings are not really surprising, but there is no real fault in the approach the authors have selected, and they offer contemporary analysis of the French HE system, which is quite welcome.

My comments here do not rise to the level of major revisions required, but rather reconsidering their contribution, given that this is relatively well-trodden analytical ground. Rankings cross over analytical terrain extremely rich in concepts, so it is understandable that some limitations must be made, but perhaps acknowledging the breadth of the field could address this. Maybe also a more defined research question and answering it could sharpen the focus and the contribution of the article.

The article doesn’t need large revisions or rewriting, and it is, in fact, very well written in terms of structure and language, but a richer description of the data would improve the transparency of the data.

The methodology section is sufficient, and the discussion presents the data in a constructive way, though more excerpts from interviews (and attributing the quotes in Figure 1) would give more weight to the interviews. My recommendation would be for *minor revisions* (3½ stars in the *Qeios* system, rounded up to 4). I agree with the authors that a comparative case would be an extremely interesting future direction of research.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.