

Chapter 20

Building a World-Class University and the Role of University Ranking: A Russian Case

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ABSTRACT

The chapter is devoted to the analysis of the impact of the global academic rankings and the concept of world-class university upon the system of high education both globally and in contemporary Russia. The author analyses the use of the rankings in benchmarking and strategy planning, and demonstrates negative influence of the obsession with the rankings in some countries. The chapter considers the case of the strategy of Ural Federal University (Russia) as one of the examples of both use and abuse of the rankings in large regional Russian university. The author argues for the necessity of organizing transnational associations and consortia of the universities, especially in emerging countries (BRICS nations, for example), to resist neo-Imperial features of today's global Academia. One of the remedies the chapter proposes is to adopt the idea of plural modernities from sociology and to treat global education environment as kind of a multi-polar world. Then, the author argues, the rankings should be supplemented with qualitative comparative analysis of educational systems.

RANKING THE POWERS AND THE POWER OF THE RANKINGS

Ranking Game

If one treats seriously a seemingly (and deceptively) playful slogan of the two last annual releases of the QS World University Ranking – “Who Rules?” - the answer is pretty much evident. In contemporary Academia, the ruling powers are the US, the UK and those parts of continental Western Europe, which in higher education are better suited to the Anglo-Saxon model of the research-intensive World-Class

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University. Some territories of Asia also seem to be catching up with. Eastern Europe, South-East Asia, Latin America and Africa lag behind. The race is shaped by neo-liberal language of the worldwide competition and power. As noted by Hazelkorn (2011, p. 81), “Rankings are not just a manifestation of the geo-political battle for excellence, they are a driver of it.”

Some rather serious players play this game. The national states compete for the academic reputation, for their attractiveness to international students, for the channels of exercising soft power, that is, for resources and power in neo-liberal post-colonial world of XXI century (Hazelkorn, 2011; pp. 4-28). It is just too natural that the rankings increasingly influence not only national and global academia, but also politics of the states, immigration flows and international division of labor (Rauhvargers 2013, p. 25; Mei Li et al. 2011, p. 924; Luxbacher 2013). Naturally, then, “rankings are here to stay. Even if academics are aware that the results of rankings are biased and cannot satisfactory measure institutional quality, on more pragmatic level they also recognize that an impressive position in the rankings can be a key factor in securing additional resources, recruiting more students and attracting strong partner institutions” (Rauhvargers 2013, p. 25; Merisotis & Sadlak 2005, p. 98; Altbach 2006, p. 78).

E. Hazelkorn (XXXX) noted that while the majority of the leaders of the higher education institutions believe that the university rankings favor old universities (89%), establish hierarchy of HEIs (82%), are open to distortion and inaccuracies (81%), at the same time they are also inclined to use the results of the rankings in setting goals for strategic planning (63%) and to consider them as providing important comparative information (73%). Only 40% of these leaders, however, believe that the rankings provide valid assessment of the higher education quality (Hazelkorn 2011, p. 94). This seemingly paradoxical use in strategic planning which is believed to be a poor tool of assessing real quality is best explained by the external pressure of the larger society.

Logic of Inequality

The very logic of the rankings is exclusivist. It is therefore, connected with power relations both domestically and globally. Now, what impact the rankings have upon national systems of higher education and upon individual institutions? Or if the ranking is a “disciplinary practice” (Sauder & Espeland, 2009; E. Hazelkorn 2011, p. 15-16), in which particular way does it discipline educational institutions? Arguably, the impact of the rankings is increasing when one goes from the “centre”, represented by the top universities, to the “periphery” of the institutions and countries, which still lag behind, but which at the same time aspire to better performance in the major league tables. It is relatively easy for Alison Richard, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge to say that although “rankings have many faults and do not adequately describe universities and cannot show whether one institution is better than another”, she is “very happy when Cambridge is rated as the top university in the world” (quoted by Sowter, 2013). Any ranking system would probably confirm power position of Oxbridge and of a handful of other universities situated mostly in the US and the UK. They do not have to be shaped by the rankings since the rankings themselves are shaped according to the model they represent best of all. The influence of the ranking becomes dramatic, however, when it comes to the universities, aspiring to radically improve their positions.

The very logic of the world university rankings seems to imply favoring those institutions, which are already very powerful. Indeed, the concept of World-Class University (WCU) as it has been developed by a number of scholars, is based upon understanding WCU as institution, which attracts talents and resources globally and is effectively led towards this aim by a team of good professionals (Salmi, 2009).

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