Typology and Rankings

Typology is a tool that groups higher education institutions according to selected characteristics, describing them 'horizontally'; this means that it does not compare the institutions 'vertically' in the sense of being better or worse. The two most common horizontal typologies are the Carnegie Classification , designed for the United States, and the U-Map , developed with the support of the European Commission.

Rankings were first used in the United States in the beginning of the 20th century. Especially in recent years there has been a major expansion of ranking systems, and they are no longer exclusively an American phenomenon. The purpose of rankings is to measure the performance of an institution and provide students, higher education institutions, employers and all other stakeholders with information on which institutions offer the best quality. There are two types of ranking. The first sums up the activities of an institution into one figure and compiles a kind of league table (the best-known rankings of this type are ARWU , QS , Taiwan Ranking and THE). The second type of ranking system is based on a multidimensional approach (one example is the emerging U-Multirank) system.

The problematic relationship between league tables and quality has been discussed in many articles and books. One of the best-known critics of league tables is Ellen Hazelkorn of the *Dublin Institute of Technology*, and some interesting studiesof the issue have also been published by the *European University Association* (EUA). The main objection is that rankings do not adequately reflect the existence of a broad spectrum of institutions with very different missions, incommensurable resources, and of varying sizes: multidisciplinary universities with tens of thousands of students are thus placed under the same umbrella as the more narrowly specialized higher education institutions, such as those which teach art and music. The criteria applied in rankings allow only a fraction of the total number of institutions to be included in global ranking comparisons – usually, only the results of the world's 400-500 "best" institutions are published (i.e. only about three per cent of all higher education institutions in the world). Moreover, the league tables frequently change their methodology, which makes it impossible to compare results from different years; the tables are skewed towards results in natural science disciplines at the expense of other fields; some rankings reflect a university's reputation instead of being based solely on its results; and a major role is played by language, with English-language institutions enjoying a degree of advantage. Given all these factors, it is clear that the results of rankings must be interpreted with caution.

Despite this problematic methodology – a fact sometimes acknowledged even by the people who create the ranking systems – league tables often distort national higher education systems and interfere with the development of national policies. This is reflected in higher education funding strategies, which may be affected by the unsatisfactory standing of institutions in global rankings. Some countries (e.g. France) have resorted to merging institutions in the hope of achieving better rankings; various "excellence" initiatives have emerged to support selected institutions with additional resources and improve their standing; rankings affect cross-border cooperation among higher education institutions; government scholarships are awarded only for stays at institutions with satisfactory rankings - e.g. among the first two hundred (Russia); diplomas of immigrants are recognized only when awarded by one of the top two hundred institutions (The Netherlands). The issue of the value of league tables has been addressed (among others) by IREG (*International Ranking Expert Group, Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence*).

Rankings have triggered a Europe-wide debate on the quality of higher education, and there can be no dispute that this impulse has been useful. Nonetheless, while rankings are capable of stimulating such a debate, they are much less able to provide answers.