EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION
UNDER THE SPELL OF UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

Philippe Van Parijs

Université catholique de Louvain, Chaire Hoover d'éthique économique et sociale
& Harvard University, Department of philosophy

"The evaluation and ranking of our universities and their departments is there to stay. Should we oppose them, denounce them, sabotage them as much as we can? Or can and should we use them, refashion them, expand them, in such a way that our universities end up fulfilling their various functions better than before, without worsening our lives or those of our students in the process?" These were the questions put to the keynote speakers and the over one hundred participants of the 7th Ethical Forum of the University Foundation. As usual, the speakers presented contrasting viewpoints and the discussion was lively. The text below is a much expanded version of the personal conclusions formulated at the end of the Forum by its coordinator.[1]

---

[1] "University Rankings: From curse to blessing ?", University Foundation, Brussels, November 20th, 2008. The first session was introduced by Ben Sowter (head of Research at Quacquarelli Symonds, London), Richard Yelland (head of Education Management and Infrastructure, Directorate for Education, OECD, Paris) and Patrick Loobuyck (professor of philosophy at the Universities of Ghent and Antwerp, co-author of *Welke universiteit willen we (niet)?*) In addition four prepared "interpellations" were volunteered by participants: Nicolas Standaert (professor of sinology, K.U.Leuven), Hendrik Ferdinande (professor of subatomic physics, UGent), Josephine Pabst (director of Indexicals, Centre of cognitive sciences, Graz) and Tanguy De Jaegere and Hélène Haug (students in economic and social ethics, U.C.Louvain). The second session was introduced by Benoit Frydman (director of the Centre de philosophie du droit, Université libre de Bruxelles) and a panel consisting of Peter van der Hijden (European Commission, DG Education and Culture), Bernard Rentier (Rector of the University of Liège) and Frank Vandenbroucke (Education Minister, Flemish government). I learned a great deal from all speakers and other participants. Only some of what I owe them could be acknowledged in the footnotes below.

Irreversibly present, unavoidably messy

In June 2003, the Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University published for the first time its *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (*ARWU*). The aim was modest and local: to provide some guidance to Chinese students who wanted to pursue advanced studies abroad. But the impact was massive and global: made available in English, it quickly spread around the world, and every university with any pretence of being good was anxious to verify how much or how little this goodness showed up in the Shanghai tables. In November 2004, the British weekly *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (*THES*) and the London-based higher education consultancy firm Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) joined the fray. They had been pondering about doing something analogous for a while. The resounding impact of the Shanghai initiative, combined with its blatant shortcomings, prompted them to launch their own ranking and to turn it into an annual event.

Both rankings elicited countless criticisms[2], many of them frankly acknowledged by their authors. Thus, the website of Shanghai's *ARWU*, as displayed in November 2008, candidly recognizes that its way of ranking universities suffers from "many methodological and technical problems" and announces that "the ranking team is working hard to study the problems and improve *ARWU*". Similarly, Ben Sowter, head of research at QS, bluntly confessed that the first QS-*THES* ranking was, in his own judgement, a pretty lousy rushed job, but nonetheless justified by the fact that the only other ranking available was even lousier.

In both rankings, many universities have been jumping happily up and sadly down, sometimes quite spectacularly, from one year to the next, without this having anything whatever to do with any improvement or deterioration of their real-life performance. Such leaps are simply the reflection of changes in the choice of criteria, in the weights assigned to them or in the method used for measuring how well they are satisfied. Wisely, no doubt, the search for a less unsatisfactory way of ranking universities prevailed over the usefulness of keeping the scores comparable from one year

---

[2] Some of them elaborated at great length. See for example Florian (2007), quoted by Nicolas Standaert and invoked in the discussion from the floor.

to the next. Inconsistency is less stupid than consistency with stupidity. Consequently, anyone tempted to compare ranks from one year to the next is best advised to pay close attention to the methodological details. And intellectual honesty requires that rankers should provide these details intelligibly and with due emphasis.[3]

Will this process of gradual improvement gradually converge to a perfectly accurate ranking? Let us be under no illusion. A fully fair and precise assessment of our research performance — and even more of our teaching performance or of our so-called services to society — would require academics, researchers and university administrators to devote so much time and energy to data recording, reporting and monitoring that we would end up being prevented from actually doing what the whole process is meant to measure. Perfect measurement would measure the measured out of existence.

By no means does it follow, however, that there is no room for improvement. Indeed, improvement is possible and urgently needed. But what counts as an improvement? Obviously, it depends of what purpose the ranking is meant to serve. There are three main answers to this question.[4] Depending on which is chosen, the model the ranking should endeavour to approximate will be profoundly different, and hence also what will count as an improvement of its methodology.

My-rankings for consumers: the market model

Firstly, university rankings can be understood as an attempt to improve the working of the market for higher education as it is becoming more global: they provide the consumers of university services with better information about options available to them worldwide. This information is no doubt very tenuous, but it is a useful complement

---

[3] Needless to say, whatever the criterion used, the meaning of one institution being ranked above another needs to be properly relativized. It is of course absurd to say that one institution is better than another because its aggregate score is higher by a decimal. But we constantly face analogous problems when marking the exams of our students. Each mark embodies a multi-dimensional assessment with a dose of arbitrariness in the weights assigned to the various dimensions that is seldom insignificant. Yet these are the marks that will decide, sometimes by a decimal, whether a student gets "distinction" or "great distinction". Publishing "grades" rather than precise "scores" would not be better but worse. It is the interpretation that must be made with more than a grain of salt.
[4] The trilogy used below reformulates and develops the illuminating distinction presented by Tanguy De Jaegere and Hélène Haug in their "interpellation".

to, and for many much better than, whatever can be gathered in a more haphazard, more unequal, less reliable, less comparable and above all less wide-ranging way from random encounters, biased adverts and uncheckable hearsay. This was the driving motive behind the Shanghai ranking: to provide relevant information to potential Chinese consumers of Western university services, especially in science subjects and at advanced levels. These services are not cheap. They might as well be good value for yuans.

In this perspective, universities are being ranked for the informational benefit of their potential students, the primary consumers of the educational services they provide, or of whoever else decides where they are going to study, their parents for example or some grant-giving government or organization. But the notion of "consumer" of university services can be understood more widely to include, for example, potential employers of the highly skilled workforce that universities are meant to produce, or high-tech investors on the lookout for possible synergies created by cutting-edge academic research.

Rankings geared to the consumers are meant to fill an information gap. Whenever there is some choice, but especially when, owing to mobility, there is a huge range of options, many of them completely unknown to the chooser, rankings help potential users of institutions of higher education make optimal choices, or at least choices that can be expected to better satisfy their preferences than would otherwise be the case.[5] In this model, rankings can be regarded as market improvers, as instruments for achieving a better match between supply and demand.

However, it does not require much imagination to realize that a single, one-size-fits-all ranking of universities makes no sense whatever in this perspective. The needs and desiderata of the millions of potential consumers of university services are endlessly differentiated. They are most unlikely to all be adequately approximated by those of the advanced Chinese science students whom the Shanghai rankings were primarily meant to

---

[5] As suggested in one of his interventions by Richard Yelland, university rankings help create by their very existence the demand they are meant to satisfy. By drawing attention to the plurality of options, they make people aware of the possibility of going elsewhere than where people around them tend to go. More specifically, by using the degree of internationalization of a university as one of their criteria (as the QS ranking does), they provide incentives to boost trans-national mobility. As greater mobility entails an increase in the range of options worth considering, it also increases the demand for systematic information about them, some of it conveniently provided by the rankings.

guide. The weight to be given to the variables that should enter the score of each university for the purposes of particular users crucially depends on their specific needs and desiderata. For example, whatever its quality, a university that teaches only in a language that I do not understand and do not have the slightest intention of learning should be given a zero score in my assessment of universities as a potential student. Similarly, the level of the tuition fees should be ascribed a negative weight in the ranking that will guide my choice, but how heavily it should weigh will vary greatly according to my wealth.

Consequently, the ideal, in this market model, is an "interactive ranking" of the sort QS intends to develop, where each consumer of university services can ascribe their own weights to the various indicators, possibly even assign lexical priorities to some considerations over others. What we should end up with is not a single ranking, but a million *my-rankings*[6], each expressing the particular preferences and budget constraints of one particular student (or employer or investor).

Thus, the potential students' my-rankings should differ considerably from each other. But all of them should diverge in one major way from the QS ranking and even more from the Shanghai ranking: they require a greater and better account of the primary function of institutions of higher education, namely education. The QS ranking makes a timid step in this direction, by incorporating a teacher/student ratio. But the data set is very problematic, in particular owing to great variation across countries, institutions and departments in the role played by teaching assistants, part-timers, guest professors or researchers with some teaching responsibilities, and in the extent to which these various categories are taken into account by the rankings.[7]

It should be obvious that major improvements in this dimension cannot be achieved on the cheap, through universities voluntarily contributing reliable information to cost-conscious for-profit organizations. The remuneration of the work performed by an organization like QS currently consists in a fee from the *THES* the level of which has not

---

[6] I borrow the expression from the "interpellation" by Tanguy De Jaegere and Hélène Haug, themselves inspired by Patrick Loobuyck.

[7] This point was persuasively emphasized by Catherine Dehon (Université libre de Bruxelles) in an intervention from the floor.

increased since the first "rushed" job it did in 2004, combined with the brand recognition effect of the ranking and the advertising revenues generated thanks to the traffic induced on their web site. In order to move significantly beyond the narrow and superficial evaluation compatible with such a business model, the enforcement power of governments will need to be enlisted and indicators far more expensive to implement will need to be designed. The OECD is currently taking steps towards developing something analogous to the PISA scores as a way of assessing the quality of the higher education offered by OECD universities: the so-called AHELO project, short for "Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes"[8]. This would be far more satisfactory, but would need to be differentiated by discipline, would raise far more serious problems of cross-country comparison than in the case of secondary education, and would involve a cost massively higher than the indicators used by existing rankings. But as most consumers of university services are students in search of worthwhile education, this is the only way for my-rankings to live up to their promises.

Mega-rankings for boasters: the podium model

However useful for the sake of enlightening the consumers of university services, such a million of my-rankings would be of precious little use for the sake of a second, fundamentally distinct, role which the Shanghai ranking was quickly made to play, whether intentionally or not, and which accounts for most of the impact it had. Ranking high in terms of the scores constructed by Shanghai's and later QS's exercise was immediately interpreted as belonging to the "top", "best", "greatest" universities in the world.

This points to a use of the rankings very different from the use it has for consumers. Even if students and other consumers of university services had no choice between universities, even if therefore there was no "market" for higher education worth mentioning, rankings could still function as a podium onto which universities and their leaders would try hard to be admitted. If the rank they are awarded is flattering, it will be hard for them to resist the temptation to boast about it. If the rank is modest, it will be

---

[8] As described by Richard Yelland and Peter van der Hijden. See Thompson (2008).

hard for them to repress envy towards those ranking higher, especially those playing in the same ball park. The podium creates incentives through emulation, irrespective of whether the latter combines with competition as a result of staff and student mobility. University leaders will want their university to do well in the eyes of the world, not just as an ego trip for themselves, but also as a cheap way of boosting the morale of all categories of their work force. If in addition students, researchers and teachers enjoy a real choice between institutions, as is increasingly the case, and if, as is likely, this choice is sensitive to how high the institutions are perched on the podium, then there is a further incentive for universities to care about their place in the hit parade. For as the pool of keen applicants for their student places and job vacancies swells, their capacity to achieve greater quality and/or better funding increases.

Consequently, university rankings understood in terms of a podium logic, i.e. mega-rankings for boasters, is something no university leader can afford to ignore. It is, surely, essential that we should "master the rankings before they are allowed to master us".[9] But to a large extent, they master us already. For however lousy the rankings are as indicators of the current quality of universities, they are powerful predictors of future quality, owing to the mutually reinforcing interaction of the mechanisms just sketched — morale boosting and attraction power. Nor is gaining control over the rankings an easy matter for the academic world. For either your university does well in the rankings as they are, and it is not in your interest to challenge them seriously. Or it does not, and then your critique of the criteria used will sound like a self-serving manoeuvre to disparage your competitors.

Yet, the mega-ranking is there to stay. It is therefore urgent that it should be improved. How? Not by aggregating all my-rankings, but by spelling out our ideal of a university. And the latter does not reduce to the former, because the university that best plays the role it needs to play in today's society and today's world is not simply the university that best serves the aggregate demand for services by individuals and firms, as reflected in their my-rankings.

---

[9] A neat formula borrowed from Simon Marginson (2007) in Hendrik Ferdinande's "interpellation".

Rather, the ideal underlying the mega-ranking needs to incorporate the essential roles universities need to fulfil in providing the political and civil societies of our democracies with the highly educated elite their sound functioning requires, in training political, social, economic, and cultural leaders with a wide-ranging understanding of the world, in providing independent expertise and critical analysis, in nurturing a lively spirit of imagination and debate.

In this light, the ideal university is arguably not a narrow professional school, but an institution large and varied enough to include a wide range of disciplines, one that achieves a reasonable gender and ethnic balance, one that contributes efficiently to both the growth and the transmission of knowledge, one that provides expert advice to decision-makers and lucid insights to opinion makers, indeed one that irrigates and enriches other institutions in its environment — instead of trying to hold them down so as to look better in the rankings[10] —, perhaps also one that militates actively in favour of making knowledge freely accessible to all, one that dares to engage overtly in the moral education of its students and one whose members are not afraid to speak out in the service of truth and justice, especially when it goes again the interests of the powerful or the prejudices of the populace.[11]

People may of course disagree about the selection of the components of this mega-ranking, and about the weights to be ascribed to the components selected. This may lead to a diversity of rankings, though one that will bear little resemblance to the diversity of my-rankings. The fact that we may reasonably disagree about the importance to be given to those various components should not make us cynical about the construction of a mega-ranking of this sort. It may be true that with any sufficiently large set of indicators, a software can generate, for the benefit of any rector, a vector of weights that will propel his university to the top of the podium: the number of parking lots, pubs or pets per

---

[10] In this way, cooperation itself should be inserted into the emulation process. Otherwise, as emphasized by Nicolas Standaert, the spirit of competition inherent in the development of rankings can end up extinguishing the spirit of cooperation, which is no less essential to an efficient system of higher education.

[11] These last three features have been the focus of some of some of our earlier Ethical Forums: *Free Access to Truth. Scientific publication in the internet era* (2002), *Free to speak out? On the rights and responsibilities of academics in the public debate* (2004), *Cash for knowledge? Ethical Implications of Patenting Academic Research* (2005) and *Is it wrong to teach what is right and wrong? Is it part of a university's job to teach its students moral standards and social responsibility?* (2007).

hundred students, for example, could be made to count positively or negatively, as best suits each rector's aspiration, in the total score. But there should be enough common ground for identifying a number of key functions reasonably ascribed to universities and rough indicators for each of them. Weights can then be assigned, or other methods used, for turning scores along many dimensions into a single mega-ranking.[12]

How well a university will do in this ranking can then tell us how "good" a university is in a far more acceptable sense than the one we implicitly accept when reluctantly lured, for lack of more sensible alternatives, into letting Shanghai or QS define the mega-ranking. Correlatively, university leaders and other boasters will face incentives far better targeted for the sake of genuinely improving the quality of their institutions. The podium will not vanish. It must be redefined. This is no doubt what the EU's Directorate-General for Education is intending to do with the "poly-dimensional global university ranking" the feasibility of which it is in the process of investigating.[13] Let us hope it heeds the remarks above — and succeeds. As long as the proposed mega-rankings make no serious effort to incorporate the various dimensions listed above, any attempt to present them as identifying the world's "top" or "best" universities must be denounced as a despicable imposture.

Multi-rankings for policy makers: the input-output model

A suitable mega-ranking of the sort just sketched, one might think, will also satisfy the needs of a further category of potential users, namely those who have to decide how many resources to devote to institutions of higher education, and under what conditions. One effect of the emergence of the rankings has certainly been, in the United Kingdom and Germany for example[14], that governments have focused more resources on institutions they are hoping to push into a visible place on the podium, as a country's higher education policy is felt to look better if some of its institutions make it to the top 10, or top 100, or top 500.

---

[12] Henry Tulkens 2007), for example, has proposed an interesting alternative to rankings relying on arbitrary weights: a partial ordering based on the dominance relationship.

[13] http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/calls/tenders_en.html

[14] As illustrated by Richard Yelland in an intervention from the floor.

For the managers and funders of a higher education system, however, rankings inspired by even the best version of the podium model cannot provide appropriate guidance, at any rate not in this simple-minded way. For what they should be concerned with is not, as such, how high particular universities score on some overall scale of achievement, but rather how efficient they are in transforming into relevant achievements the resources at their disposal. Some universities operate with far less administrative and teaching staff per student than others, or in buildings in a worse state or in a worse location, and above all with students less well prepared by secondary school, or recruited far more broadly in social or academic terms.[15]

Thus, policy makers can usefully be guided by university rankings, but only if the guiding idea is neither the market model nor the podium model, but some sort of input-output model. What should matter to them is not its overall output, however measured, but rather how good it is at transforming inputs into relevant outputs, human and material resources into learning, new knowledge and services to society. The best allocation will generally consist in concentrating resource not on those higher on the podium, but rather on the best transformers of inputs into outputs. By steering additional funding to the best performers, such multi-rankings provide incentives to institutions that correspond to the overall objectives pursued by the educational authorities. Moreover, they enable the latter, and individual institutions, to learn more from each other. If one university does significantly better than another with the same or less resources, there must be some interesting difference to detect, and perhaps some practice to imitate or adapt.

Can we not expect some convergence between the most useful rankings for policy makers and the most useful ones for consumers and boasters? Will the most efficient universities not also be those it is in my best interest to join and those that come closest to the ideal university? This will generally not be the case for one fundamental reason: efficiency is to be measured with given inputs — the level of funding, how pretty or ugly

---

[15] See, for example, the research conducted under the direction of Bea Cantillon (UA) and referred to by Nicolas Standaert (Rombaut 2006): teaching performance (as measured by student success rates) varies considerably from one Flemish university to another, but differences are explained by inequalities in the socio-economic composition of their first-year student population. See also the contributions to our 2006 Ethical Forum: *The end of free entry? Can university admission tests and numerus clausus provisions make higher education more cost-efficient and more socially responsible?*

the location is, the quality of the students admitted, etc. — and the fewer the resources and the poorer the raw materials for a given result, the better the university from the manager's viewpoint. For consumers or boasters, on the other hand, more generous funding and a better stock of students are unambiguously a plus.[16] Nonetheless, there is a connection with the other two ranking models. Indeed, the input-output model is a non-starter without some version of the podium model in the back of one's mind, a version which may diverge more or less from an exclusive concern with the satisfaction of consumer's demand. For efficiency needs to be defined in terms of specific objectives, and these must make sense within the framework of the conception of the ideal university which is at the core of the podium model.

It is therefore true that rankings can and must be used to make the allocation of resources more transparent.[17] But what has just be said clarifies why this must not lead to focusing resources on the centres of excellence, the country's Olympic champions that stand a chance of reaching the podium. It also clarifies why national, sub-national or supra-national higher education policy guided by university rankings need not be turned into a servile instrument of the market. [18] To best suit the purposes of policy makers, the rankings must rely on a comprehensively defined ideal of the university and help make salient how efficiently different universities use their limited resources in the service of the various components of that ideal.

Can the linguistic bias be overcome ?

On the background of this trilogy, let us turn to two issues that produced some heat at the forum: the extent to which university rankings are affected by a linguistic bias and the extent to which they boost inequalities.

---

[16] This need to relate performance to resources or the "quality" of inputs was stressed by Anne-Lise Sibony (ULg) in her intervention from the floor and by Peter van der Hijden (EC) in his response. As the latter put it, what sense does it make to rank hospitals according to their death rates if no account is taken of the age of the patients admitted? This point is also central in the "merit model" sketched by Tanguy De Jaegere and Hélène Haug in their "interpellation" and partly inspired by Hindriks (2007).

[17] The central point in Josephine Pabst's "interpellation".

[18] In his intervention from the floor, Bart Pattyn (K.U.Leuven) raised the question of how much the use of rankings predetermined the policy objectives. In his response, Frank Vandenbroucke asserted the autonomy of policy.

The former issue will enable us to highlight the difference between the market model and the other two[19] As mentioned above, there is no problem at all about the language in which a university operates affecting the position the latter is given in anyone's my-ranking: I would be crazy if I took no account of it in assessing its relevance to my needs. But if the question addressed is how *good* a university is, i.e. how close it is to the ideal university, then the language bias must be identified and systematically corrected. The most obvious part of the task consists in finding a way of measuring the number of scientific publications and their quality in a way that treats in a fair way those published in English and in other languages. But this is only a fraction of the job to be done to correct the language bias.

To illustrate, consider QS's meritorious attempt to take account of a broad range of desirable features difficult to measure one by one and possibly also to give some weight to the academic's community's own implicit conception of the ideal university: the greatest weight (40%) in its rankings is given to an evaluation of other universities by a large sample of academics. If members of Anglophone universities are over-represented, as they are, no wonder, one might say, that Anglophone universities come out on top. But suppose their share is ruthlessly shrunk in the sample so as to match scrupulously their share in the global academia. The bias would remain massive for a simple reason: the survey, so far, has been conducted exclusively in English, and exposure to Anglophone universities is therefore bound to be significantly over-represented also among respondents from non-Anglophone universities.

The next edition of the QS survey, we are told, will use seven additional languages besides English. Will this fix the linguistic bias? By no means, for two reasons. Firstly, the overwhelming majority of the languages in which the world's universities operate will still not be included. Secondly and more importantly, the worldwide spread of English as a second language, especially among the highly educated, will keep boosting the relative notoriety of Anglophone institutions far beyond their relative quality. This linguistic bias alone makes it hopeless to rely on worldwide peer assessment and any

---

[19] The relevance of the language bias was emphatically pointed out by José Lambert (K.U.Leuven) in an intervention from the floor.

analogously cheap methodology in order to construct a fair and sensible mega-ranking — and hence also the correlative multi-rankings.

Do rankings generate inequalities?

A second question that was hotly debated is whether university rankings can be said to have an inegalitarian impact. If we are talking about inequalities between institutions, the answer seems obvious. The salience given to the "best" universities both in the market's my-rankings and in the podium's mega-ranking will increase their attractiveness to students. This will put them in a position to be choosier as to whom they admit and/or more ambitious as to how much they charge. This in turn will suck them into an upward spiral which will bring them better staff, more sponsors, better students still, and so on. Conversely, of course, the universities that score more poorly than others fishing in the same pool will be caught in a downward spiral, as they will be stuck with worse students, worse teachers, scarcer sponsoring, and so on.

This market pressure towards greater inequality between institutions is likely to be further strengthened by the impact on the morale of winners and losers. It may be further exacerbated if national authorities react to rankings by focusing resources more narrowly, as mentioned above, on the their best universities in order to get more of them into the world's or Europe's top. They may of course also choose to counteract the process by providing better funding to institutions that rank less well. But investing less in their champions for the sake of greater equality between institutions is unlikely to be wise, as it may generate damaging losses to the country in an era of trans-national mobility.

The reduction of inequality between institutions can hardly be regarded as an aim in itself, however. What about inequalities between individuals? Can one also expect the development of university rankings to deepen them?

One admittedly tiny aspect of this question concerns income inequality between academics. How much inegalitarian pressure one can expect in this area will depend on the fine print of the indicators used to determine a university's score. Suppose first that

this score is significantly affected by whether or not it has a Nobel laureate among its members. The rent that can be extracted by the small number of actual and potential Nobel laureates is then likely to be huge. The same holds, far more generally, for academics with a high citation index score if the citation records of the academics currently employed by a university strongly affect the latter's score. However, the bargaining power of highly distinguished or cited academics is reduced if their work or honours are made to swell the score of the institution to which they were affiliated at the time they published or earned them (as they are in the QS ranking) rather than the score of the institution to which they are currently affiliated. Even so, this bargaining power will be boosted as a result of rankings gaining more importance, at least if the academics concerned are young enough for past performance to justify the expectation of future achievements. The more the scores ascribed to universities are sensitive to the achievements of their mobile high performers — rather than by features sticking less closely to them, such as their location, their curriculum or their atmosphere—, the more they will be driven into competing with one another (and impoverishing themselves) in an attempt to attract high-profile academics, thereby boosting income inequality between the members of their personnel.

Less parochial than the impact on inequality between academics is the question of whether university rankings also tend to boost inequality between students. At first sight, it seems that the answer must be negative. For people with a more advantaged background may have all sorts of connections that provide them with appropriate information and advice as to where it is best for them to study. The less advantaged, by contrast, tend to depend more on unreliable rumours and are more vulnerable to misleading marketing strategies. Suitably differentiated "my-rankings" will make a greater difference for them, by providing them cheaply with admittedly rough but controllable information about a wide variety of options. It is true that those economically less advantaged will be less able to take advantage of this information because of the cost of mobility. But this inequality in the ability to bear the cost of attending a more suitable university is currently aggravated by a great inequality in the knowledge of which

university is most suitable. Especially if appropriately differentiated and improved, a battery of my-rankings will reduce this inequality.[20]

It does not follow that the overall effect of university rankings on individuals' life prospects will be egalitarian. For the greater inequality between institutions, arguably an inescapable consequence of the rankings for the reasons sketched above, may well generate, all things considered, greater inequality between individuals. Even if the cheap availability of better information enables more people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get access to institutions that better suit their needs, the growing inequality between the quality of the different institutions may far more than offset the effect this may have on global inequality. Because of so-called peer effects, cooptation of the brightest from poor backgrounds into the best institutions in which people from rich backgrounds are overrepresented will further improve prospects for the latter, while worsening the prospects of those who remain relegated in the worst institutions.

The relevance of such speculations about what might be the net effect should not be overstated, however. The key factor in the long-term impact of rankings lies in how the ideal of a university incorporated in both the boasters' mega-ranking and the policy-makers' multi-rankings is filled in. Some may want to shrink the ideal of a university to providing the best return on human capital investment in terms of individual expected lifetime income and wealth accumulation. But that ideal can and must also be made to include weighty ingredients of an altogether different nature. In particular, it can and must incorporate the notion that no institution of higher education can claim to be a decent university if the best it can do is produce skilled but greedy professionals. It is a central part of any decent university to train an elite, whether local or global, that sees it as its responsibility to serve, not just their own self-interest and that of their families, but the general interest of their society and indeed the good of mankind as a whole. If one way or another this is the sort of ideal that ends up shaping the rankings, there is no reason to expect their ultimate steady-state impact to be inegalitarian. This is miles away from Shanghai, though, and for the foreseeable future, greater inequality both between people and between institutions is bound to remain the most likely outcome.

---

[20] This position was persuasively defended by Frank Vandenbroucke and Peter van der Hijden in reply to an interesting intervention from the floor by Aude Vidal (Ecorev).

To conclude

Some of those understandably incensed by the sudden and clamorous irruption of university rankings in our academic landscape will be disappointed: we cannot, must not and shall never get rid of the rankings. But we can and must reorient them in an ambitious way, one that aims at more than improving, in "my-ranking" fashion, the working of the higher education market. We can and must redesign them so that they provide both institutions and policy makers with powerful incentives to honour the highest intellectual and social values associated with the best of our university tradition. If we fail to do so, rankings will catch our universities in a downward spiral. By claiming to measure and compare the value of universities, they may end up destroying what is so invaluable about them.

References

Florian, Razvan V. "Irreproducibility of the results of the Shanghai academic ranking of world universities". *Scientometrics* 72 (1), 2007, 25–32.

Hindriks, Jean. "Les universités belges sont-elles menacées?", Itinera Institute, 2007, http://www.itinerainstitute.org/upl/1/default/doc/memo2007_6_fr.pdf.

Marginson, Simon. "Global university rankings: where to from here?", Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Ranking Systems Clearinghouse, website by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), http://www.ihep.org/Research/rankingsystemsclearinghouse.cfm

Rombaut, Kristel. Determinanten van de differentiële slaagkansen in het Hoger onderwijs, Universiteit Antwerpen: Centrum voor sociaal beleid, mei 2006, 62p.

Thompson, Lyndon. "Breaking Ranls", *OECD Observer* 269, October 2008, 12-13.

Tulkens, Henry. "Ranking universities. How to take better account of diversity", U.C.Louvain: CORE discussion paper 2007/42.