

University Rankings and the Competition for Prestige, Excellence, and Funding (in the Context of Central Europe and Its Reform Agendas)

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Introduction

Major themes:

- Various roles of **(different) university rankings** in **(different) national contexts**: whichever more **useful** for current political concerns.
- Rankings' specific roles in **policy discourses and political statements** on research universities.
- Global rankings in **Central and Eastern Europe** (CEE, new European Union member states since 2004 and 2007): **global invisibility. Humboldtian traditions, low entrepreneurialism, very low research funding, HE often unreformed sector.**
- **Attitudes** to (different) rankings: policymakers, university leaders, and academics.
- Global rankings as **drivers of change** at national or institutional levels?
- **Role of rankings in international or intra-national competition** - for prestige, (research-only) excellence, and research funding?
- **Case study: a national flagship university**, perceptions of global rankings at various levels.
- Conclusions.

New Knowledge World Order

- **Different countries** (and world regions) need global university rankings **for different reasons** – and use rankings for different **purposes**.
- Purposes: **national and international; academic and non-academic**.
- Rankings intensify the „**arms race**” – with targets far beyond the „**academic arms race**”. Nations compete, and universities are a part of this competition. The new „**knowledge world order**” (Ellen Hazelkorn) emerges, based on national research performance.
- Rankings as a part of **the global movement towards quantification**: universities an important part of the national competitiveness indices. **Simplicity** rather than peer-review (and traditional) quality assurance. And a big business (with consulting etc.).
- Measuring universities as a part of a larger process of **global measurements**: measuring and quantifying everything (through indicators). The world – politics, media – today loves numbers!
- The end results are **predictable: we know the winners and the losers (in all measurable areas)**.
- My region – CEE – is **always a loser**. Are we **really** global (or European) losers?

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Rankings' Message to CEE

- What is the **message** global rankings send to CEE universities: globally, you are total losers (as Latin America)! Are we?
- And we in CEE have **oldest universities in Europe** (Prague 1348, Jagiellonian University in Cracow 1364, Ljubljana 1595, Szeged 1581 etc). Low in rankings, or **absent (invisible)**.
- Rankings **define the value** of each university (or an apparent lack of it). Hierarchies are firm, knowledge production – measured.
- Are our universities **valueless**, and our knowledge production – **useless or non-existent**?
- **Partly reputation-based** rankings are more threatenig to CEE that solely **research-based rankings**. **Single**-indicator rankings are viewed as fairer than **multi**-indicator rankings; reputation is far too subjective.
- **Leiden Ranking** and **Academic Ranking of World Universities**: viewed as valuable at least in selected areas of research in CEE, with clear **research-only metrics**.

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Local / global relevance

- Our CEE **languages, cultures, histories** – as our **humanities and social sciences, professional sciences** – emerge as irrelevant. Are they irrelevant?
- Is **teaching in local languages local cultures** irrelevant (Simon Marginson)?
- The **globalized answer is yes**: global citation ranking comes from papers in English within the global science.
- We do not have **large comprehensive research universities focused on publications in English**. We want them – but changes take time...
- The power of cross-national comparative data emerges especially in **research** (only failing datasets in **teaching effects**, only disappointing datasets in **third mission/service**).

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Limitations, real changes

- **Major question**: what to do in CEE, if anything at all, and why? (Jan Sadlak: 10 Polish universities in ARWU 1,000; two in 500).
- What about universities **outside of the Anglo-Saxon (and Western European) core, wealthy nations**?
- How to compete, if at all, in **a zero-sum game in which there are 100, 200 or 500 winners only**?
- **A positional race** – the number of prestigious places **strictly limited**. There can be only 100 universities globally in the first 100 places...
- And **the winning countries are very wealthy nations** – which still have about a **thousand universities** not in major rankings; mobilizing to be there; and located in **research-friendly, high income countries**? How to compete?
- For most countries (and CEEs), decent places - **beyond reach**.
- Perceptions of rankings vary by **country/region** – and by **level**: **macro-level** of states, **meso-level** of institutions, **micro-level** of academics. Perceptions rarely coincide (a case study below – a Polish flagship university)

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From policymakers to academics

- **Rankings drive change at different levels:** in some regions at national levels, in other regions at institutional levels.
- **Rankings are behind real changes in real time:** CEE – at a national level only. Who dreams about them – ministries...
- **Rankings invite policymakers to take vertical stratification in HE systems seriously.**
 - Potential **winners and losers** emerge.
 - Increases in **research funding** emerge.
 - Focus on **research productivity** intensifies.
- Changing **national** policies drive changes at **institutional** levels.
- Changing **institutions** begin to think differently about their **academics**.
- **Finally, academics are in the middle of the storm. As always!**
- **Rankings rank what is more easily internationally comparable:** research **performance** which stands for **value** of universities (as a proxy).
- Most world regions excluded from the race, CEE included.
- What is **included** and what is **omitted** in rankings?

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Simplicity

- **Global rankings make (complicated) academic hierarchies simple:** we know where we are (if they say we are **nowhere** in CEEs – are we nowhere indeed?).
- What matters: **only globally standard disciplines - in a globally standard language - in a globally standardized university type...** vs. national socio-economic status. Clear financial limits!
- There are **numerous questions** that need to be asked about national university systems – and **which are not asked at all (or not answered properly):** questions from students and parents, faculty, the business sector, national, regional and local governments.
- Different **parties** seek different **answers** to different **questions** - and for different **purposes**. Most rankings are useless for them, focusing on prestige in **the global context of (quasi-market) competition**.

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Different roles of rankings – a positive note

- Rankings **make politicians think more about universities**, or about some of them (mostly from **top tiers**).
- And more about **research** and how to fund it in massified systems, with mass academic professions.
- **Universities are higher up** on national political and policy **agendas**.
- **Possible impact: higher public research investments (in selected places) = concentration** of research and research funding.
- **A vertical system stratification**, with (a few?) winners at the top. Haves and have-nots. **Incentives** for reforms, **blueprints** for policy thinking.
- The core of the current debates about (2017) HE reform agenda in **Poland**
- Rankings **challenge the local self-perceptions of greatness in research**. Local scientific heroes survive only in a new global context (of research excellence).
- **Concentration policies**: research-intensive universities in non-research intensive national systems. **National „flagship” universities needed?**
- Still, there are **clear limits to the impact** of rankings on reforms: total public funding, infrastructure, legal and institutional environment, inter-generational conflicts about resources (as well as academic cultures).

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European dreams

- Global rankings and reform agendas in European HE („**modernization of European universities**”): a close link in time. Compete with the USA!
- European Commission and **U-Multirank: users’ purpose matters**, no **holistic** ambitions (HEInnovate (EC/OECD): measuring innovativeness and entrepreneurialism of HEIs – with no purpose of ranking them; not a chance to even collect data!).
- But global rankings do rule across Europe! and dictate **mergers** (France, Finland), **excellence funding** initiatives (Germany, Russia, Denmark), and underlie policymakers’ thinking about national **reforms** (Poland).

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The Polish Case, a flagship university (1)

- A study for Philip G. Altbach, Maria Yudkevich and Laura Rumbley: *The Global Academic Rankings Game* (Routledge 2016).
- Global rankings according to most my interviewees are believed to be **important locally**, mostly because they are **widely commented on by the national media and politicians**:

*„for public opinion it is **one the most fundamental pieces of information**. An intermediary role is played by the media. On the basis of such pieces of information a public perception of the weakness of Polish universities is being built. **For most journalists it is a good opportunity to complain how poor we are faring**” (Interview 1/administrator/female).*
- *„Such global rankings as the AWRU and others are publicized, but **they are mostly important to the rector himself**. As far as particular academics and faculties are concerned, **internal rankings at the level of faculties and the University are much more important. On a national scale, national rankings are more important, they are the source of good and bad feelings**”.*
- *„Whether the University is the top three or four hundred institutions in the AWRU does not matter much. (...) **There are no more important global rankings or less important global rankings at an individual level because nobody cares too much about them**” (Interview 4/faculty/female).*

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The Polish Case, a flagship university (2)

- The **senior management is believed to have a well-balanced attitude to global rankings**: it is good to have stable or higher positions in global rankings but **there is no direct link, and none is expected in the future, between global rankings and any organizational changes at the University**:

*„The University does not ignore rankings but also does not attach to much importance to them. **The attitude of rectors is cold, balanced. The University is the best in Poland and ambitions are higher. It wants to look good in global rankings. All is well if there are good results in the rankings** but there will be no organizational **changes** (and especially dramatic changes) **because of them**” (Interview 7/faculty/female).*

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The Polish Case, a flagship university (3)

- At the level of deans of faculties, directors of departments, and academics, the ongoing increased **national competition in research output seems more important than international competition.**
- **The reference point** for academics, departments and faculties at this flagship University **is other Polish academics, departments and faculties.**
- The role of **global rankings is therefore much lower than the role of national output-based research assessment exercises,** increasingly linked to the allocation of funding.
- **Faculties of physics compete for funding and prestige with faculties of physics, as do faculties of chemistry or mathematics.**
- Global rankings are not directly linked to funding levels; and **Polish universities do not compete among themselves globally:**

*„It is more important how the University looks in the context of other Polish universities than how it looks in the context of international universities. The pressure linked to the existence of global rankings is **unfelt**” (Interview 4/faculty/female).*

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The Polish Case, a flagship university (4)

*„The success in winning research funding matters but **funding “is rather loosely related to the University’s position in global rankings. In seeking national research funds, global rankings are not a parameter”.** (Interview 2/administrator/male).*

*“**We do not think we are participating in this competition at all. We close our eyes as if there is no such thing as global rankings”** (Interview 3/faculty/male).*

*„**There is no will to change anything. (...)** When ranking results are publicized in the press, we grumble a bit by saying that again we are low in the rankings, but apart from this, **nothing happens”** (Interview 3/faculty/male).*

- **In particular, a position in global rankings is not an institutional priority:**

For the University, it is not a goal to be high in the AWRU ranking. (...) Were the University in the first dozen, we would be boasting about it. When we are winning the Perspektywy or Wprost national rankings, this is on the main page of the University’s website (Interview 3/faculty/male).

- Global rankings are rarely discussed while national rankings are discussed quite often: *“they are discussed in the University’s Senate; they are also discussed in the academic community. **Global rankings are not”** (Interview 8/faculty/male).*
- *“**The University is concerned about both national and global rankings, but it is more concerned with national rankings because it is the leader in them”** (Interview 10/administrator/female).*

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Conclusions

- Rankings induce **international prestige-seeking** – but **national funding-seeking seems unaffected**. The prestige-(research) funding **link is loose** (in CEEs).
- There is a limited number of top universities in CEEs – and they are **(almost) all national flagships located in capital cities**. Rankings are **welcome** there – but do not change their top positions in the country anyway.
- **Policymakers more interested** in global rankings than **university administrators**: universities viewed as part of the **national competitiveness game**; and research productivity viewed more as part of **international „arms race” for prestige**, of competition between nations.
- Visible changes in reform directions: **rankings strengthen vertical stratification** and **concentration policies**: talents and funding in selected places only (flagships generally).
- Excellence sought is **excellence in research**; teaching viewed as good or decent.
- Attitudes to rankings differs also between politicians and the academic profession: **basically not a reference point**.
- The **global invisibility** of universities from CEE may be a **constant feature**, rooted in history, politics, economy, and culture. Despite efforts.
- If interested at all, **CEEs view research-based rankings** (ARWU, Leiden) as **fairer than partially reputation based ones** (QS, THE).
- But overall, **research grants** from the **European Research Council (ERC)**, 23 billion EUR in a decade, seem a more direct reference point in reform designs, public debates, and media coverage...