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## **World Class Higher Education (for Whom?)**

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## 1. Introduction

Put the phrase - 'world-class education' - into any of the big search engines, and up it comes; a veritable mushrooming of the idea, but with a very particular slant. It *could*, we might imagine, have referred to more cosmopolitan ideals; of an education that was more open-minded about, and open to, learning that engaged with world issues, ideas and concerns. Or, what if the idea of world-class education was totally engaged by questions of the quality of learning experiences for learners *all* over the world. Here global excellence is simultaneously a benchmark and a right for all citizens. Yet, scan the web-pages and very quickly we see that world class education carries a highly instrumental reading of what it involves, how to get there, and who seems to be the main actors, and beneficiaries.

No-where is this more evident than in the global rankings of universities, and the claims that are *mobilised* (we 'want' to be world-class), *mediated* (we have 'a list of who is' world class), and *marketed* (we 'are' world-class), as institutions manage their images, resources and strategic engagements with investors, students and wider communities. And yet paradoxically, whilst world university rankers and rankings claim to be concerned with producing and rewarding world-class higher education, it seems to me that this is a highly flawed project that is anything but world-class in its own processes. In other words, there are major credibility gaps and democratic deficits in the processes involved, on the one hand, and in the dominant explanations circulating as to what is going on.

There is a great deal at stake for education in staying silent on these issues. Or, if not silent, our engagements are at the level of viewing these processes as short-term, technical matters to be resolved through tinkering with the instruments. The assumption implied in further tinkering is that greater precision of the ranking tools will overcome the credibility gaps and by implication, the democratic deficits. Yet, this would be to offer us a diminished view of democracy; as data accuracy rather than viewing this data, and the ways in which they are represented, as particular forms of power that operate in, and on, wider social and political fields. A key set of questions for us has to be, not the demand for world-class education, but to ask: who is advancing this claim, how; who stands to benefit; what uses—expected and unexpected are these rankings being put to; and, what are the implication of answers to these questions for university-produced knowledges, on the one hand, and the wider societies universities serve, on the other?

**Rewind 1: ‘... and the rest, as they say, is history...’**

As Ellen Hazelkorn remarks in the opening paragraph of her book – *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education* (2011: 1) “...the first global ranking of universities was developed in 2003 by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University – *and the rest, as they say, is history* [my italics]”. Yet this was no ordinary unravelling of history in the higher education world. Within months of the launch of the Shanghai Jiao Tong’s *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU), a major European meeting was told that Europe was not only behind the US, but other economies around the world. With only 10 European universities amongst the top 50 (the highest number being in the UK) compared with 35 for the United States, Europe’s policymakers released an avalanche of institutional pronouncements on the need to reform Europe’s higher education systems. One year later, in 2004, the Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (THE-QS) entered the making of history, to be followed by a spectacular rift between the two partners in 2009. Styling itself as “...the global authority on higher education performance” (Times Higher Education website), the THE launched a reinvention of itself. Now partnered and powered by Thompson-Reuters, Canada’s leading corporate brand specialising in information for professionals and businesses around the globe, the THE World University Rankings promised to bring this knowledge to advance both general global, and specialist regional, and subject, rankings. By early 2010, the European Commission had also announced its own challenge to the global rankings game with U-Multirank; a European-driven ranking system which invited stakeholders to participate in a system that might recognise the strengths of European universities who had, until now, been eclipsed by US private universities.

But why this ‘shotgun’ marriage between the publishing industry and the higher education sector? To be sure, big publishers have become key to the distribution of scientific knowledge, academic careers, and institutional busy-ness because of their capacity to monitor, and project, downloads, citations and hot topics. But rankings are something *more* than this. Not only do rankings sell copy in an ailing newspaper industry as new forms of publishing (blogs, Facebook, Twitter) have become part of the central nervous system of societies, but global rankings provide firms, such as the TH and Thompson Reuters, with an entry-point into the higher education quality assessment regimes through its knowledge about citations and impact factors.

**Rewind 2: ‘...If rankings are not a new phenomenon, why the commotion?’**

We could be forgiven for thinking that the dawn of this new higher education history began with the innocent enough launch of the Shanghai Jiao Tong in 2003. Yet, despite the commotion caused by the entry of these more recent ranking tools, HE rankings are not entirely a new phenomenon. Since the 1980, following the rolling out of neo-liberalism as a reorganising project, the idea that higher education students were consumers, and that their (consumer) choices depended upon information about the quality of an institution, gave rise to new players in the sector. This industry—made up of newspapers (such as the Times Higher), dedicated small education firms, and private foundations—began to publish best-university/college guides— from the *Good Universities Guide* (Australia) to the *Bertelsmann Stiftung* in Germany. Yet these were largely subject-based (e.g. chemistry, mathematics, education, sociology), and nationally-oriented (e.g. Germany, Netherlands, Australia, Canada), activities, even if their intended audience was a globally-located choosers.

These ways of representing the sector mirrored a longer standing view by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statistics division, the chief global education statistics outlet, that it was more helpful to countries national economic development strategies if they were provided with internationally comparable data. And whilst there was an assumption that the rest of the world would develop using a western model of education, emulation or lesson learning was the major mechanism through which change was to happen.

However, by the early 1980s, there was growing pressure from the World Bank (WB) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to publish indicators that could be globally-ranked and compared; in other words, to develop a means of vertical and horizontal comparison. By the early 1990s, bolstered by the preference given to neoliberalism's economic efficiency arguments, the OECD was able to expand its global statistical work. In 1992, *Education at a Glance* (OECD) was launched - followed by a series of annual extensions and refinements of data collection and display across all sectors of education. The OECD's *Programme in Student Assessment (PISA)*, launched in 1997 and first reporting in 2000, was only one of a range of now local, national, regional and global and regional systems that sought to direct education activity; from new sets of indicators to scorecards, barometers, and benchmarks. As mechanisms of governance of the sector, they aim to inscribe in institutional and sectoral strategies a new develop logic; one that unpicks the post-war state-planning logic, and certainly one that undoes, through untangling and disassembling, the dominance of Westphalian nation states in governing education systems.

As we will see, the emergence of global rankings therefore, has provided entry points and spaces for a range of new actors and projects to enter the higher education sector. They have, for instance,

provides a new round of ‘ammunition’ to advance other kinds of political projects - such as the creation of a European Higher Education Area. Rankings have also prioritised funding for research in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics areas because of the ways in which a notion of *progress* (science, law and technology putted against nature) continue to act as dominant ideas in the representations of a globally competitive institution, nation and region. Rankings have also unleashed a battle for brains, and lifted to even greater prominence and importance, the role of the university in advancing competitive knowledge-based economies.

Driving this wave has been an explosion of fora attended by local, national and transnational policymakers, industry experts, analysts and researchers, all with their own agendas, interests and explanations. Since then, heated debates have raged around questions such as the use, relevance, reliability and significance of these technologies. It was, and continues to be heady and deadly serious stuff. Institutions have vetoed contributing data; others have worn their rankings triumphantly. Rankings also have opponents and proponents. Yet what is clear is that despite one’s own views, it is impossible to ignore them.

How, then, if we are not to ignore them, are we to understand global university rankings? How are they different to earlier kinds of statistical representations of higher education activity? What explanations are out there? And what kind of account are we given of what, why, and whose interests are at play?

### **Rewind 3: ‘...how do we explain the rapid growth of world university rankings?’**

Stand back somewhat and look at world university rankings, and we can see they are discrete social and political projects. But rankings (world rankings, bibliometrics, national rankings, ‘hot papers’, and so on) are also a clustering or ensemble of projects with a programmatic dimension; a set of technologies (benchmarking, ranking, barometers etc) aimed at using systems of quantification and stratification to generate changes in the sector. Arguably, the rapid spread of rankings around the globe over the past decade, advanced by a range of private and public actors, is both the object and outcome of projects passing through, disturbing and transforming the higher education sector in visible, and yet to be made more visible, ways.

In rewinding the past eight years or so, and reviewing the burgeoning literature that has emerged to account for world university rankings, as tools for measuring world class higher education, we can see analyses and explanations falling into 1 of three categories; as a discrete social and political

project; as part of wider programme of social change; and as registering important changes taking place within wider social formations.

The category 'project' refers to a (social/political/cultural) focus on a discrete strategy (such as a policy) advanced by particular actors (such as a Ministry of Education, a university) to effect social change. A project is at once discursive and material; ideational and representational. Projects are promoted, read, interpreted and enacted, by key actors in the field, though we can differentiate between those who advance the project because of their role in policy and implementation, and those whose roles are to explain, such as academic researchers, researchers in think tanks, the research divisions of national and international agencies, and so on.

Explanations that focus on rankings of world universities at the level of a 'project' tend to view them as the outcome of discrete policy instruments to understand and generate changes in governance practices in universities, such as responding to the need for accountability and transparency (as proxies for 'quality' in New Public Management). Writers in this tradition view international ranking schemes as playing basically a quality assurance role for they provide what they describe as 'transparent' information to the public. What they mean by transparent here is that some proxy of the educational experience (whether the proxy is good or not at indicating this).

In this view, too, demands for accountability are argued to have come from students as well as other stakeholders, such as governments, wary of rising costs, employers in need of competent graduates, and the public at large eager for information about the quality of education and labour market prospects. Institutional rankings by league tables are offered as one example in a wider array of accountability instruments that have emerged to assess and govern university life (for example, accreditation, cyclical reviews, external evaluation by peers, inspection, audits, benchmarking and research assessments). The ARWU and *Times Higher Education* rankings are identified as 2 amongst more than 30 variably known ranking systems – all with rather different scales of reach and scope.

There is also a heavy focus on the need for better practices in the collection of data to ensure accuracy, relevance and usefulness, and therefore greater quality and accountability. More importantly, rankings in this framework are seen in apolitical terms; as a technical-cum-methodological challenge that can be fixed with sufficient discussion, methodological innovation, and best practice sharing, rather than a highly political--and likely contentious--representation of reality that should be discussed, debated, challenged, and perhaps rejected. The purpose of their analysis is to ensure the project generates better quality data to ensure institutional accountability, rather than one that opens up the project to questions of bias, the nature, scale and temporal

horizons of the rankings project (every year for the ARWU and *Times Higher Education*). The wider commercial interests of some of the actors who might be involved are rarely, if ever, considered.

A second explanation is focused on what we might call ‘programmatically changes’ within the sector, such as the idea of ‘global competitiveness’ or a ‘quality higher education sector’. Critiquing the limitations of ‘technical’ explanations, more programmatically-focused explanations try to make sense of what is clearly evident; the instantaneous obsession with world university rankings. Programmatic explanations of rankings also tend to viewing them as a policy instruments and management tool deployed within the sector to transform universities into more strategic corporations for the purposes of the economy. Their success has in large measure been shaped because world university rankings in a globalising higher education market deliver on series of changes that are being put to the sector: a particular kind of information to enable student choice (such as success in later job placement – even if those jobs are not relevant to the degree the student is planning to enrol in); as a tool for strategic thinking and planning within the institutions management structure; as a tool for reshaping institutional priorities (such as who gets extra time for research; how is the teaching programme to respond to student satisfaction surveys); as a recruiting device for the talented academic performers (generating significant salary differentials); and as information to particular stakeholders who view rankings as a proxy for the return on their investment in the institution, or rating agencies who wrap rankings into calculations around the financial viability of the institution).

Yet let me state here too that global rankings may not be, indeed are not, being embraced all higher education institutions, or systems, though institutional exception is likely to be more common than system exception. Much depends on how deeply universities are immersed in the global higher education market, on where they rank if they are, and which wider political strings are being pulled in terms of economic competitiveness and institutional performance.

Nevertheless, what is missing from these two explanations on why university rankings have become the key means for talking about world class higher education is the burgeoning media interest in higher education, and the ways in which this kind of ‘work’—sorting the lists and circulating them—have become big business. In other words, what we also need to understand is the role of new actors—especially those from the publishing world—who see a new means and market for making profits, and ways in which a value chain of niches and returns can be inserted into the value being created in the sector. The creation of ‘reputational capital’, and its engine, telos and ethos – ‘reputational risk’—also creates a virtual circle of production and consumption.

But it is also evident that private sector firms (such as Elsevier - producer of Scopus; Thomson Reuters - producer of the ISI Web of Knowledge; Google - producer of Google Scholar), and their inter-firm relations, are driving bibliometrics and global rankings. The point is that there is a disjuncture between the volume of research conducted on bibliometrics versus research on these firms (the bibliometricians), and how these technologies are brought to life and to market. For example, a search of Thomson Reuter's ISI Web of Knowledge for terms like Scopus, Thomson Reuters, Web of Science and bibliometrics generates a nearly endless list of articles comparing the main data-bases, the innovations associated with them, but amazingly little research on Elsevier or Thomson Reuters (that is, the firms). Yet firms, such as [Elsevier](#) and [Thomson Reuters](#), not to mention [QS Quacquarelli Symonds Ltd](#), and [TSL Education Ltd](#), in fuelling the global rankings phenomenon, have received remarkably little attention in contrast to vigorous debates about methodologies. For example, the four main global ranking schemes, past and present (the Shanghai Jiao Tong University's [Academic Ranking of World Universities](#) (2003 -); the [Times Higher Education/QS World University Rankings](#) (2004-2009); [Times Higher Education/Thomson Reuters World University Rankings](#) (2010-); [QS World University Rankings](#) (2010 -)), all draw from the databases provided by Thomson Reuters and Elsevier.

One of the interesting aspects of the involvement of these firms with the rankings phenomenon is that they have helped create a normalized expectation that rankings happen once per year, even though there is no clear (and certainly not stated) logic for such a frequency. From a firm perspective, the annual cycle arguably needs to become normalized, for it is a mechanism to extract freely-provided data out of universities, whilst also keeping the cycle on the institutional radar.

This data is clearly used to rank but is also used to feed into the development of ancillary services and benchmarking capabilities that can be sold back to universities, funding councils, foundations, regional organizations (e.g., the European Commission which is intensely involved in benchmarking and now [bankrolling a European ranking scheme](#)), and the like. QS Quacquarelli Symonds Ltd, for example, was marketing such services at their stand at the 2010 NAFSA conference in Kansas City, whilst Thomson Reuters has been busy developing what they deem the [Global Institutional Profiles Project](#). This latter project was spearheaded by a private firm ([Evidence Ltd](#)) which emerged in the early 1990, and which rode the UK's Research Assessment Excellence (RAE) and European Research Area waves, before being acquired by Thomson Reuters in January 2009.

Sophisticated on-line data entry portals are also being created. These portals build a free-flow (at least one one-way) pipeline between the administrative offices of thousands of universities around



the world and the firms doing the ranking. Data demands are also becoming very resource consuming for universities. These kinds of developments suggest that there are major changes taking place within the wider political economy, of which higher education is increasingly a part. These changes, and explanations of such changes, also raise fundamental questions around the governance of higher education, the relationship between knowledge and democracy, and how these emerging developments should and could be regulated.

**Fast Forward: ‘...how have world university rankings managed to have the effects they do?’**

One argument is that rankings operate rather like what sociologist, Knorr-Cetina, calls ‘scopic systems’; that is, as a way of seeing complex, multiply presented information and reflecting it back as a single idea, or value globally. Knorr-Cetina’s research has been on the finance sector, and what she has come to describe as architectural flows of knowledge. In viewing how multiple screens of information are monitoring, capturing, distilling and reflecting indexes of movements of investment flows, Knorr-Cetina is arguing that we need new ways of viewing these practices.

I would argue that this is also the case of global rankings and notions of world-class education. In other words, rankings are one of a number of instruments that make up the ‘scopic systems’ that are being deployed in the education system more generally—from the OECD’s Programme in International Student Assessment (PISA), or their Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), to global university rankings (Shanghai Jiao Tong, Times Higher, U-Multi-Rank), the World Bank’s Knowledge Assessment Methodology (KAM), and the recently launched SABER system to assess and rank school and teacher performance globally.

What is significant about these scopic systems is that they take *fragments* (or *partial* understandings) of knowledge and experience about complex education processes, yet present them as a *fractal* (a smaller versions of a whole). Their power as levers of education policies and practices resides in their capacity to project a *singular* solution to an imagined system problem (competition, efficiency, world class, quality), and in doing so, invite observers into reacting to the features of the reflected, represented reality rather than to the embodied, pre-reflexive occurrences. Scopic systems in higher education are also forms of power in that they simultaneously *frame* education problems, offer a *desired re/solution*, project *outward* with considerable global spatial extension, reinforce new social practices over time because of further rounds of data

gathering and projection, and tap into *emotions* (shame, pride) that change behaviour – deep inside national territorial states and institutions.

But there is also something *more* going on global university rankings. They are hierarchical in character, and use comparison as an engine for determining the direction of flow, or change. There are at least four ways in which this competitive comparison works. First, as a powerful *spatial* framer and lever for allocating status; it pitches one discipline/ institution/country/region against another in terms of a global hierarchical ordering of performers and underperformers. Second, it also works in powerful ways when there is also a strong *temporal* dimension to comparison, such as ongoing cycles of data collection, where the new reporting deadlines are always on the close horizon of the actors. This provides space for learning to improve, to do better the next time, and the time after (or not) whilst keeping sufficient tension and alertness within the system. Third, an evaluative/moral/emotional dynamic provides the basis of judging where an institution, region or discipline is placed in relation to others. Those actors whose life-worlds it enters are to learn from this evaluative/emotional/affective element; about how to strive to act in ways that are specified by this framing of world-class education, and thus how to avoid disgrace and dishonour. Finally, the capacity for these scopic systems, aided by the capacities of digital technology, on the one hand, and the multiple reflecting windows on the other (university webpage, recruiters institutional lists, and so on) means that they are able to rapidly and multiply extend up and down, and across scales—from the global to the regional and local, in turn producing significant opportunity for its amplification, and therefore power, because of breadth and reach.

### **Rewind/ Fast Forward: For Whom?**

In the title to this viewpoint article I bracketed the question ('for whom?'). This is not because I wanted to consider it out of the conversation, or off the radar, but to signal that currently this question is being bracketed in much of the analysis. Asking the 'for whom' question, and anticipating in the fullest of senses what an explanation might involve, insists we move toward explanations that consider the sector, and not just the tool or institution. The issue here, of course, is that these are not competing accounts; rather they are partial accounts that need to be brought together. Only then might we have a set of vantage points that will generate a robust answers to the question of 'for whom'?

Second, it is increasingly evident that rankings are taking on a life of their own, well beyond the purposes imagined by their originators. The increasingly private and promiscuous life of world university rankings, such as when folded into the ratings of the fiscal probity of institutions that are coyly given by rating agencies—such as Moody’s, or Standards and Poors, or when the world university ranking is used to determine the value of a degree and therefore whether a skilled migrant has sufficient academic capital, suggests world university rankings are being used in ways that go well beyond the ‘instructions-for-use’ label on the packet. Rankers can hardly be blamed for this. But it does suggest that world university rankings as a practice, need to be accompanied by a high level of critical public literacy, if they are to be used in these unexpected ways. After all, it is essential we remind ourselves of quite what a ranking is; a fragment of knowledge about what university knowledge and experiences mean, rather than some essential understanding, or distilled essence of the whole.

Third, we might rightly ask questions about how it is that some actors and their new bag of technological tricks, whose logics are tied to generating profits, have so much say over what counts as world class education – yet are not asked to account to a wider public for the what and how of rankings (aside to shareholders and the bottom-line). And whilst we do have regulators of rankers - the *Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence (IREG)* - this body is itself dominated by the ranking industry. This is not just a cynical act; it also raises questions about democracy, authority and legitimacy and publicness.

What needs to be asked about loudly, and placed in full view, are the values, and ways of seeing world-class education that are being projected and performed, instituted and embedded. We can take Ellen Hazelkorn’s phrase - ‘the rest is history’ – further; we can shape the path of history in important ways if we learn to engage with this unfolding world in critical and reflexive ways. Now that would be world-class education in practice!

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