

## Book Review

Meng-Hsuan Chou, *Nanyang Technological University*

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### GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS: CHALLENGES FOR EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Editor: Tero Erkkilä**

What effects have the global university rankings had on European higher education institutions? And why should academics and European policymakers care? In *Global University Rankings*, Tero Erkkilä brings together thirteen contributors to address these very questions. By examining 'rankings as policy instruments of global governance', these contributors tease out 'the institutional outcomes of the use of rankings in Europe, both at the EU level and at the national level' (p. 3). Specifically, each of the chapters speaks to the 'political challenges, policy shifts and institutional results that the rankings precipitate' (p. 3). The main message is: global university rankings *matter*.

Global university rankings matter, they tell us, for at least the following reasons. Firstly, the use and production of rankings are on the rise and they generally construe the 'falling behind' of European universities as a 'policy problem' that must be urgently solved. This may be especially problematic given its origins as an informal assessment comparing higher education institutions *vis-à-vis* one another. Erkkilä thus suggests that the global university rankings can be conceptualised as a 'transnational policy script' that has now diffused worldwide and permeated through the national institutional ranks. Secondly, global university rankings have power implications in many ways: in language use (English vs. local language), across world regions (promoting the dominance of one region and its guiding economic principle over others) and between national higher education institutions (flagship universities vs. the rest). Thirdly, they negatively impact both the hosting society and its higher education institutions; for instance, they lead to the stratification of university systems, growing inequality between disciplines and across universities, as well as failing to actually provide students with the requisite information about where to study. Lastly, and somewhat ominously, Erkkilä concludes, 'The global university rankings are here to stay' (p. 245).

So why read on?

I argue that the value-added of this edited volume, beyond its rich contents, is how the contributors prompt and enable the readers to engage critically with the global university rankings and to reflect on the potential ways to "resist" its encroaching presence – both academically and politically.

Organised into four parts, Part I paves the historical and conceptual foundation for discussing global university rankings. Following the introduction (Chapter 1, Tero Erkkilä), Barbara M. Kehm's chapter on 'The Impact of Rankings on the European Higher Education Landscape' addresses three questions at the heart of this phenomenon: What do rankings really measure? 'Whom do they serve? And to whom are they important?' (p. 22). After revealing the many negative effects the global university rankings unleashed and their failure to achieve the very mission they supposedly set out to do, Kehm concludes that not every university should play the 'rankings game'. Instead, she argues that the focus should be on establishing the 'normative form of trust together with a new social contract between higher education institutions and its stakeholder' (p. 34). Bob Reinalda continues the historical overview of global university rankings in Chapter 3, 'Global, Asian and European Backgrounds of Global

University Rankings'. He explains that the rise of the rankings is a recent phenomenon and must be understood against the dual context of Asian countries heavily investing in higher education and the international drive towards the 'knowledge-based economy'. The speed with which such developments unfolded suggests that the global higher education landscape may very well undergo transformation – again – within a short period of time; a bastion of hope for those who are interested in mitigating the rankings' negative effects.

Part II consists of five chapters, all focussed on delineating the institutional responses of European governments and universities towards the global university rankings. Chapter 4 opens with a comparative analysis of nine European countries: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, the UK, Ireland, France and Switzerland. Antti Pelkonen and Tuula Teräväinen-Litardo zoom in on how these countries addressed two dominant themes that have emerged in the higher education domain in the last decade: 'prioritisation of research' and 'human resources in research'. They find that these countries converged at the discursive level (all offer 'similar rationales of change and formulated national policy objectives broadly along the lines of the EU framework', p. 69), while diverging in the concrete policy and measures adopted. Specifying the institutional mechanisms through which this pattern of convergence-divergence comes about, Åse Gornitzka proposes three mechanisms in Chapter 5: channelling, filtering and buffering. For Gornitzka, national institutions are not passive recipients; instead, they are structured by legacies that 'affect the way in which national policymakers respond to global rankings' (p. 76). Together, these two chapters tell us that national institutions are important because they are at the forefront of the global university rankings exchange. As "first responders", they may re-direct, reject or receive (only some or all of) the messages that rankings purport.

The remaining three chapters of Part II amount to a "cautionary tale" about global university rankings. Taking the case of the UK and its Research Assessment Exercise (now the Research Excellence Framework, REF) in Chapter 6 ('The Drift to Conformity: The Myth of Institutional Diversity'), Jon Nixon shows that these research assessment exercises have 'both stratified and homogenized the higher education sector'. Even though British institutions are generally high on the global league tables, Nixon concludes that the UK 'provides a salutary lesson in how *not* to develop a system of mass higher education' (p. 102). Turning East, in Chapter 7 ('Polish Higher Education and the Global Academic Competition: University Rankings in the Reform Debates'), Dorota Dakowska shows that Polish policymakers have embraced the results of the global rankings as a trumpet call for reform. Similar to Nixon, Dakowska is sceptical about the positive effects that such legislative reforms may bring. Continuing with the case of Finland, in Chapter 8 ('Reforming Higher Education Institutions in Finland: Competitiveness and Global University Rankings'), Tero Erkkilä and Ossi Piironen interviewed university deans and department heads to find that they question the overall likely efficacy of the reforms associated with rankings and global "competitiveness".

Containing four chapters, Part III shows that, while the global university rankings may be challenging for most European higher education systems in general, they are especially problematic for the social sciences and humanities. Indeed, in Chapter 9 ('Measuring Excellence in Social Sciences and Humanities: Limitations and Opportunities'), Arto Mustajoki demonstrates that the very tools used to assess disciplinary research performance are inadequate for a variety of reasons, starting with their basic assumption that all disciplines could be measured and compared across the same indicators (e.g. publication practices). At the same time and using the discipline of political science in Europe as an example, Niilo Kauppi shows in Chapter 10 that the 'social carriers [of rankings] participate in the relatively successful practical realization of the academic standards they seek to codify, of the shaping of reality according to the criteria they promote' (p. 166). Revealing the flaws of the global rankings of political science departments through a comparative analysis of Simon Hix's 2004 study and QS's 2011 and 2012 listings (Chapter 11), Erkki Berndtson emphasises the importance of self-reflection through historical analyses. Finally, in Chapter 12, Richard Münch argues that the way in which

rankings provide the information flows for its intended audience ‘distorts both research and teaching so profoundly that they are no longer in a position to fulfil their genuine function for society’ (p. 196). Together, these four chapters constitute the harshest criticism, and perhaps rightly so, of the global university rankings.

Part IV concludes the volume with two contributions. In Chapter 13 (‘Global Rankings as a Marker of Revaluing the University’), James H. Mittelman contends ‘that the rise of global rankings signifies that the university’s time-honored priorities are contested and being devalued’ (p. 223). Academics worldwide and regional and national policymakers interested in the civic functions of universities should be especially concerned. Indeed, as Tero Erkkilä urges the reader in the final chapter, for this and other reasons, ‘higher education policies in Europe, and elsewhere, should remain highly critical of the simplistic policy feed of global university rankings’ (p. 245).

To sum up, these fourteen chapters offer a deep analysis of how European higher education institutions have navigated the changing higher education landscape since the launch of the global university rankings only about a decade ago. Given how ‘rankings’ have permeated the public imagination as well as academic lives throughout the world, this volume is a needed contribution for students and scholars of public policy, European knowledge policy and European integration, as well as research managers and higher education policymakers who are keen to understand the role of rankings in Europe.

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#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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